Annie Simpson
FIRE
2007

I: FIRE, FORM [1]

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"The youth gets together his materials to build a bridge to the moon, or, perchance, a palace or temple on the earth, and at length the middle-aged man concludes to build a wood-shed with them."[2]

In March 1845, Thoreau borrowed an axe and began chopping down trees for his house on Walden Pond. By mid-April, the house was framed, ten feet wide by fifteen feet long, in timber, studs and rafters garnered from the white pine and hickory surrounding the site. He'd bought a nearby wooden shanty from a departing neighbor and dismantled it to reuse the boards (and nails, staples and spikes, but these were stolen by another neighbor) for his house. While digging the cellar, a former woodchuck burrow, he "took particular pleasure in the breaking of the ground, for in almost all latitudes men dig into the earth for an equable temperature…. The house is still but a sort of porch at the entrance of a burrow."[3] In June the house was boarded and roofed, and a foundation of pond stones was laid for a chimney. Thoreau moved in on July 4th. A chimney was in place by wintertime, as were the "sappy" shingles along the boarding, to provide additional protection from the New England weather. The finished "tight-shingled and plastered house" consisted of the main room, the sandy cellar, "a garret and a closet, a

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[1] This is the first of two sections on fire and architecture.
[2] From unpublished writings by Thoreau, read by Emerson during his eulogy at Thoreau's funeral. Eulogy text reprinted as "Thoreau" in: *The Atlantic Monthly*. Volume 10, Issue 58, August 1862.
[3] http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext95/waldn10.txt. All other unattributed quotes are taken from Walden by Henry David Thoreau.

large window on each side, two trap-doors, one door at the end, and a brick fireplace opposite.” Additionally, there was a small woodshed beside the house, “made chiefly of the stuff which was left after building the house.” If the house were ever to burn down, as wooden houses tend to do, the chimney stones and bricks would become the only traces of the burnt ground’s former life.

For a reader who tries to take the long view of the history of human dwelling, the immaterial status in the annals of modern architectural history of the record left by Henry David Thoreau of the time he spent in a house, in a forest on the periphery of a town in the middle of the 19th century, appears regrettable. Walden, upon careful reading, reveals itself to be a locus of the most elemental discursive points in the field; of import to the discussion at hand are the points of fire and wood, site and society, and the relational forms they take in his project and his text. At present, these points have been scattered, are scattering. In this consideration of Thoreau’s project, they will be treated as though the scattering, for an instant, had seized. Since the time of the writing of Walden, these points have become increasingly discrete: this phenomenon will only be touched upon here, but will be examined more thoroughly in a subsequent section. As the origin of the overarching argument, the reader may recall Thoreau’s bygone observation, from the opening pages of Walden, that “at last, we know not what it is to live in the open air, and our lives are domestic in more senses than we think. From the hearth the field is a great distance.”

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The total cost for materials for Thoreau's house and hearth, including, among other items, a thousand old bricks ($4.00), two second-hand glass windows ($2.43) and two casks of lime ($1.40), was $28.12½. This was much less than the $800 Thoreau estimated an average house in Concord cost at the time, and also less than the annual rent of $25 to $100 which he estimated a man might pay so as to benefit from "the improvements of centuries, spacious apartments, clean paint and paper, Rumford fireplace, black plastering, Venetian blinds, copper pump, spring lock, a commodious cellar, and many other things." Thoreau's hut at Walden Pond, of course, possessed none of these improvements—or, rather, as many citizens of Concord observed, it lacked all. To these men Thoreau would point out,

"What of architectural beauty I now see, I know has gradually grown from within outward, out of the necessities and character of the indweller, who is the only builder,—out of some unconscious truthfulness, and nobleness, without ever a thought for the appearance and whatever additional beauty of this kind is destined to be produced will be proceeded by a like unconscious beauty of life."

The timber, stone and sand he claimed by "squatter's rights," although the land was in fact part of a thirteen and a half acre plot Ralph Waldo Emerson bought in September 1844. The acreage was considered a wasteland4 on the fringe of the town of Concord, the land "good for

[4] A more bucolic assessment of the site, supporting an alternative, but presently germane, reading of Walden, is proffered by W. Barksdale Maynard in "Thoreau's House at Walden," in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 81, No. 2. (Jun., 1999), pp. 304-325. Mayden's article, originally a chapter in his doctoral dissertation on the picturesque in American architecture, considers Thoreau's retreat at Walden in light of early-

nothing but to raise cheaping squirrels on." Thoreau lived at Walden Pond for a little over two years, almost totally self-sustained. He planted beans, potatoes, corn, peas and turnips and bartered them for other provisions in town, earning additional money by surveying, carpentry and day labor on some afternoons. Content in his subsistence, and finding himself intellectually and spiritually productive ("A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers" was published during this time, among other works) he comments that "any student who wishes for shelter can obtain one for a lifetime at an expense not greater than the rent which he now pays annually." In a typical poke at Harvard (from which he graduated in 1837), he writes

"As with our colleges, so with a hundred 'modern improvements,' there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance. The

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to mid-19th century architectural settlement and building trends. He focuses on domestic precedents in the work of James Malton, William Fuller Peacock, John Claudius London and Andrew Jackson Downing, whose popular books on "humble" cottage living "[provided] the philosophical underpinnings for the early suburbanization of the landscape… a phenomenon in full swing outside Boston during Thoreau's young adulthood." Maynard argues that "far from abandoning societal conventions, Thoreau in moving to the pond instead participated enthusiastically in the general cultural conversation regarding retirement and the villa." He reads Walden as Thoreau's creative translation of "wilderness values to a suburban location… an ambitious attempt to engage in current dialogues on the villa, the rustic, and the reform of domestic architecture, as Thoreau sought to participate in a popular new kind of lifestyle, suburban retirement."

The article reconciles what certain readers consider the insincerity of Thoreau's purposefulness at Walden, his failure to totally self-sustain and his regular interactions with townsfolk—charges which often stem from comments originally made by those very townsfolk, who thought Thoreau "weird." Of course, none of these townsfolk put themselves out to write the "Plea for Captain John Brown" read by Thoreau to the citizens of Concord on October 30, 1859. Hypocrisy hunting aside, we should consider Maynard's innocuous researches into early popular architectural and philosophical antecedents of modern suburbia (and, by extension, suburban attitudes in comfortable homes everywhere, especially big cities and their media) an obscure but vital irony in the story of Thoreauvian radicalism.

devil goes on exacting compound interest to the last for his early share and numerous succeeding investments in them. Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at: as railroads lead to Boston or New York."

Thoreau's experiment at Walden was conducted in defiance of industrialization, and the increased mechanization of agriculture, all made possible by the harnessed miracle of combustion. His condemnation of those who would take up these "modern improvements," those who would thoughtlessly adopt these "improved means to an unimproved end" in the process, was general: he meant to serve as an example, a beacon, and had no wish to impose his subsistence lifestyle on his fellow men. Unlike the works of his friend Emerson, Thoreau's texts are documentary, and not sermons. He presents the first and longest chapter of "Walden" under the Puritan[5] legend of "Economy;" he does not yet rail against the coming commercial age and its depletion of human relations ("The thoughtful man becomes a hermit in the thorough-fares of the marketplace," 1859[6]), but rather concedes its inevitability, and offers his text as a document of possibility, a public record. He recognizes and records, however, that "men have become the tools of their tools," and though "the best works of art are the expression of man's struggle

[5] Both Emerson and Thoreau criticized Puritanism for its bigotry in their anti-slavery writings, but both praised John Brown, with correspondingly ironic high color, for being "the last Puritan." See: Lawrence Buell, Emerson. Belknap Press: Cambridge, MA, 2003. p. 266. Also, Thoreau frequently cites his Puritan ancestry throughout his works.

[6] Henry David Thoreau, "Plea for Captain John Brown," read to the citizens of Concord, MA, Sunday evening, October 30, 1859.

to free himself from this condition, …the effect of our art is merely to make this low state comfortable and that higher state to be forgotten." Man's mastery of nature, his building up of an artificial (ornamented) world which was fast displacing the natural world, was profoundly unedifying. As Sigfried Giedion wrote a century later, "mechanization is the outcome of a mechanistic conception of the world."[7]

Thoreau's position was aesthetically, but not politically, opposed to that of John Ruskin, his contemporary. Although Ruskin shared many criticisms of the industrial age with Thoreau, as enumerated in Ruskin's The Stones of Venice (1853), his attention to ornament revolved around the question, "Was it done with enjoyment?" He objected not to the idea of ornament itself, but rather to the "industrialist 'division of labor' and the 'degradation of the operative into a machine….' 'It is not, truly speaking, the labor that is divided; but the men…so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin or the head of a nail.'"[8] Whereas Ruskin's putative socialism was masked in his writing by his Romantic aesthetic attachments—his reverence for craft, among other stylistic trappings—Thoreau's aesthetics, honed by "Yankee shrewdness," were precisely in line with his openly radical politics:[9]

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[7] Sigfried Giedion, Mechanization Takes Command. New York: Norton, 1969. p.717

[8] Quoted by Kenneth Frampton in Modern Architecture: A Critical History. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992. pp.42-3

[9] Thoreau was, in actuality, *much* more radical than how he is commonly perceived today. His work, generally, is not widely read, and what is read is either read lightly or has been co-opted by environmental activists, who tend to cherry-pick. Thoreau originally presented and published "Civil Disobedience" under the title of "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849) but the text was published posthumously as "Civil

"There is some of the same fitness in a man's building his own house as there is in a bird's building its own nest. Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and their families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged? …Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter? What does architecture amount to in the experience of the mass of men?"

Thoreau's 19th century approbation of minimalist "aesthetics"—seemingly as exotic, at the time, as Buddhist asceticism or, to his fellow New Englanders, Puritanical austerity—was not simply a relegation of architecture to the skid row of material culture, as most urbane critics (and other reductive readers) since the late 1960's would have it[10]. Thoreau's "primitive hut" was redemptive, not regressive. Though he suggests that "after a partial cessation of his sensuous life, the soul of man, or its organs rather, are reinvigorated each day, … his Genius tries again what noble life it can make," his sojourn in the woods was not, for him, a cessation of sensual life, in terms of his

Disobedience" in "A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers," (1866) and the title stuck, especially once his text was picked up (and significantly tempered) by Martin Luther King, Ghandi, and, notably, their American (white, middle class) constituencies in the 1960's. Funny that the American generation who'd experienced such extreme material comfort would be the one to deplete Thoreau's message from the stirrings of the material age.

[10] In the past ten years or so, many of these critics have disavowed, to varying degrees, this mode of thinking, since increased terrorism in the United States—both domestic and foreign terrorism—has revealed the *speed* of progress to be the pathological agent of modernity. Whether terrorism is a symptom or a sickness remains to be seen, and may in fact not even matter in the end. This will be discussed in the subsequent paper along with barbarism.

body and the senses; his engagement with nature was absolutely sensual, whereas his engagements with humans and their inventions—even a borrowed axe—were political. For Thoreau, as Emerson wrote, in his 1862 eulogy for his friend, "the material world [was] a means and symbol:"[11]

"His senses were acute, and he remarked that by night every dwelling-house gives out bad air, like a slaughter-house. He liked the pure fragrance of melilot…. He thought the scent a more oracular inquisition than the sight, more oracular and trustworthy. The scent, of course, reveals what is concealed from the other senses. By it he detected earthiness. He delighted in echoes, and said they were almost the only kind of kindred voices that he heard. He loved Nature so well, was so happy in her solitude, that he became very jealous of cities, and the sad work which their refinements and artifices made with man and his dwelling. The axe was always destroying his forest."

Thoreau's experiment was not a retreat from civilization—indeed, he was fully engaged with the townsfolk during the planning and raising of his house, during his working afternoons, through his bartering activities, and he frequently hosted visitors (less so in October when "the wasps came by thousands to [his] lodge … as to winter quarters, and settled on [his] windows within and on the walls overhead," and in the proceeding winter). In the opening pages of Walden, he observes that "the inhabitants [of Concord] have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways," labors more taxing than Hercules' twelve, though Thoreau "could never see that these men slew or captured

[11] Emerson's Eulogy for Thoreau, reprinted as "Thoreau." In: *The Atlantic Monthly*. Volume 10, Issue 58, August 1862.

any monster or finished any labor…" He goes on to examine the basic human requirements of food, clothing, shelter, and what he perceives as contemporary man's excessive pursuit of these things. By way of shifting the discussion from constricting fashion trends to shelter, he points out that "man was not made so large limbed and robust but that he must seek to narrow his world, and wall in a space such as fitted him.… Adam and Eve, according to the fable, wore the bower before other clothes. Man wanted a home, a place of warmth, or comfort, first of physical warmth, then the warmth of the affections."

A man's house, he believed, is the outward manifestation of his character and soul. The form this house might take, including its site on the earth, is nothing less than a representation of the liberty of the souls within. He recalls seeing

"a large box by the railroad, six feet long by three feet wide, in which the laborers locked up their tools at night; and it suggested to [him] that every man who was hard pushed might get such a one for a dollar, and having bored a few augur holes in it, to admit the air at least, get into it when it rained and at night, and hook down the lid, and so have freedom in his love, and in his soul be free. This did not appear the worst, not by any means a despicable alternative."

In delineating his contemporaries' material excesses in the opening quarter of "Economy" Thoreau shows how free men enslave themselves, time and again and probably forever. In defining the political aspect of Thoreau's project, the space of his hut being a space of

metamorphosis, it may be useful for the architectural historian to consider his aesthetic minimalism in terms of Gottfried Semper's discussion of huts and temples. Semper identifies the hut as the antecedent to the temple, the temple being a human monument to the sacred. "The basic form of the temple," he writes,

"was a rectilinear house with a pitched roof…. In an unsurpassed and never before attained harmony the four elements of architecture worked together as one toward a great goal…. Clever priests no longer held the deity in a cage hidden away; no longer did he serve despotic arrogance high in the clouds as a powerful and menacing symbol. He served no one, was a purpose unto himself, a representative of his own perfection and of Greek humanity deified in him. Only a free people sustained by a national feeling could understand and create such works."[12]

In much the same way Thoreau would have nature, and our experience of it, brought into his hut. Thoreau's hut was erected by him, and constructed in history, as a monument to the sacred in nature. In view of humankind's historical trajectory from the early point Semper was referencing here, onward to the point of his writing (and Thoreau's writing, as they published within the same decade), the reader must note that Thoreau's experiment at Walden marks one full revolution in architectural intent, in formal, functional and political terms. Semper pointedly defends the interiority of Greek temple architecture, highlighting the architectural features of the building which "[exclude] the exterior world from something sacred, something inward-

[12] Gottfried Semper, The Four Elements of Architecture. (1851) p.123.

looking."[13] The forest surrounding Thoreau's thoughtfully situated hut—Thoreau considered the forest to be an additional room of his hut: his "'best' room," his "withdrawing room, always ready for company, on whose carpet the sun rarely fell, was the pine wood behind [his] house"—functions in a similar way. On living inside his unplastered and chimney-less house, that first summer at Walden, Thoreau wrote:

"To my imagination it retained throughout the day more or less of this auroral character, reminding me of a certain house on a mountain which I had visited a year before. This was an airy and unplastered cabin, fit to entertain a travelling god, and where a goddess might trail her garments. The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains, or celestial parts only, of terrestrial music. The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. Olympus is but the outside of the earth everywhere."

The walls, the roof, the windows, the door—all mediate between the life within and the natural phenomena without. The house has been erected in service of that mediation[14], which mediation, it becomes clear over the course of Thoreau's record of his inhabitance, is the moral determinant of his minimalist aesthetic. Unfortunately the significance of Thoreau's experiment, though it may have anticipated grander organic theories of form (Horatio Greenough, Semper and Viollet-le-Duc via

[13] Ibid, fn. †
[14] In fact, the whole project had been inspired by the above-mentioned visit, a trip to the Catskills, the previous year.

Louis Sullivan), endures only as a short tangent on what turned out to be the linear[15], not circular, course of architectural development.

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The project of Walden has its historical place on the brink of the massive formal and discursive changes wrought on the field of architecture by industrialization and mechanization. These changes, in time, led to a new and different minimalism, which, like Thoreau's hut, was ostensibly employed in response to what designers perceived as certain bourgeois excesses. The modernist forms and programs of Loos, Gropius and Mies van der Rohe[16] demonstrate "admiration for engineering 'purity'"[17] in their every detail. Le Corbusier's lament that "the engineers fabricate the tools of their time—everything except moth-eaten boudoirs and moldy houses"[18] resounds in the wake of airplanes zooming over the railroad tracks between Boston and New York, an unknowing rejoinder to Thoreau's good counsel ("men have become the

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[15] The linear path was itself a misconstruction, as Peter Eisenman explains in his essay "Post-Functionalism" (*Oppositions* 6, Fall 1976). This aspect of modernism as will be discussed in the subsequent section.

[16] Over the course of the late 1920's Mies modified his opinions, possibly as a result of contact with Le Corbusier (see: Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography by Franz Schulze, (University Of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1995) p. 137. In Words and Buildings, Adrian Forty highlights the significance of Mies' 1930 article entitled "Build Beautifully and Practically! Stop This Cold Functionality [*Zweckmässigkeit*]!" wherein Mies' "use of the word *Zweckmässigkeit* [purpose in terms of utility and destiny], not Sachlichkeit [thingness], makes it clear that he was referring to the expression of purpose, not to the rational expression of construction—upon which he never changed his mind."

[17] Bernard Tschumi, "Architecture and Trasgression." in *Oppositions* 7, Winter 1976. p.59

[18] Le Corbusier, Towards a New Architecture. Architectural Press, 1970. p.14

tools of their tools”). Underlying both minimalisms is a Miltonian awareness of the great cost of progress, a darkness. But whereas Thoreau, in calculating the loss incurred, produced “Economy” (and the like), the modernists simply reveled in the spending. They embraced technology and industry as part of their Utopian project.

Thoreau’s enumeration of his fellow New Englanders’ social, political and financial anxieties, their frailties, his diagnosis of their despoiled strivings as implicitly masochistic and death-obsessed, presages the more refined sociological and psychological formulas which emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The clean lines, white rooms, open plans, machine-made structural components, and inevitable glass houses of modernist architecture represent, on one level, their effort to treat the human fallout of modernity’s explosive present-ness:

“The white crusade of modern architecture, which dreamed of a healthy society running free through verdant parks, basking under an eternal sun, and serviced to its last desire by the transparent machines of its buildings, was rooted in the therapeutic ideology of the 19th century…. In this way modern architecture defined its life against the consciousness of death and decay introduced by modern physiology…. The positivistic utopia of modern architecture was…based on the repression of death, decay, and the ‘pleasure principle.’”[19]

[19] Anthony Vidler, in his introduction to Bernard Tschumi’s “Architecture and Transgression,” in *Oppositions* 7, Winter 1976. p. 55

In hindsight, we can see not only how the utopian manifestos, sketches and programs of the modernist architects served, ultimately, only, to exacerbate (and formally divulge) the terminal case that mature Enlightenment thought proved to be in the first half of the 20th century, but also how Thoreau's proscriptions[20] (would have) precluded infection altogether. Thoreau's hut, after all, was not conceived so as to impart "the demeanor of nobility"[21] that early Enlightenment thinkers attributed to primitive huts.[22] Even his construction techniques, and their effects (the above-referenced "auroral character") belie the Enlightenment essentialism which augured the utopian dreams of modernist architecture, here evident in M-A Laugier's interpretation of the primitive hut:

"Let us look at man in his primitive state without any aid or guidance other than his natural instincts. …He wants to make himself a dwelling that protects but does not bury him. Some fallen branches in the forest are the right material for his purpose; he chooses four of the strongest, raises them upright and arranges them in a square; across their top he lays four other branches; on these he hoists from two sides yet another row of branches which, inclined toward each other,

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[20] "Proscriptions" as understood by the general population, not Thoreau, as mentioned earlier.
[21] Harry Francis Mallgrave, "Gottfried Semper: Architecture and the Primitiv Hut." In: *Reflections: Journal of the School of Architecture/University of Illinois at Urbana*. Volume 3, No. 1. Fall 1985. p.60
[22] Although it was not *conceived* as noble, it would become noble, in manifesting the nobility of the soul inside: "While civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them. It has created palaces, but it was not so easy to create noblemen and kings. And if the civilized man's pursuits are no worthier than the savage's, if he is employed the greater part of his life in obtaining gross necessaries and comforts merely, why should he have a better dwelling than the former?"

meet at their highest point. He then covers this kind of roof with leaves so closely packed that neither sun nor rain can penetrate. Thus, man is housed."23

Thus, man is buried, for this sounds like precisely the sort of construction so closed off to natural phenomena that, "by night," it would "[give] out bad air, like a slaughterhouse." 24

If Albert Speer's denuded monuments—namely, his 'Cathedral of Light' for Nuremberg rallies of the mid-1930's, and the promise it held of the Reich architecture still to come—mark a final formal phase in the particular course of architectural history delineated by Semper (who drew, at least, anthropological arguments concerning the primitive hut from Laugier)—a progressive inwardness and simultaneous predilection for erecting monuments, which began with the temple's evolution from the hut, the culminating effort by "a free people [so] sustained by a national feeling"—then Thoreau's house at Walden pond, and the text which it yielded, may be considered a lacuna in the historical record of modern architecture.

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Nearing the end of his time at Walden, in the summer of 1846, Thoreau spent two months hiking and camping through northern Maine. During the trip, which was recorded in a book called The Maine Woods published

[23] M.-A. Laugier, Essay on Architecture, 1753. Trans. Herrmann.
[24] Likewise, Thoreau's "housekeeping" bears little relation to the reductive functionalism first proposed by Semper in 1852, or the early 20th-century idea of "function," in which "buildings themselves were described as acting upon people, or social material," as explained by Adrian Forty in his chapter on "Function" in Words and Buildings (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000. p.174)

after his death, he and his three companions climbed Ktaadn, a mile-high granite mountain. At times, he went ahead of his three fellow travelers and explored parts of the mountain on his own. Like Olympus, the summit was permanently concealed by clouds. He described his way as "scarcely less arduous than Satan's anciently through Chaos," and quoted Milton throughout the written account. Late one afternoon he wanders off and finds himself in a gash on the mountainside, a woodland aporia:

"I looked down ten feet, into a dark and cavernous region, and saw the stem of a spruce, on whose top I stood, as on a mass of coarse basket-work, fully nine inches in diameter at the ground. These holes were bears' dens, and the bears were even then at home, This was the sort of garden that I made my way over, for an eighth of a mile, at the risk, it is true, of treading on some of the plants, not seeing any path through it,—certainly the most treacherous … country I have ever traveled."25

He stands, once again, above a burrow. Beneath his feet, a garden; but this "was no man's garden, but the unhandselled globe;"26 unlike at Walden, a mile out of town, where "the thick wood [was] not just at our door, nor the pond, but somewhat [was] always clearing, familiar and worn by us, appropriated and fenced in some way, and reclaimed from Nature." On Ktaadn, there is "no clearing, no house."27 Thoreau, who had

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[25] Henry David Thoreau, "The Maine Woods," 1864, excerpted in Writing New England: An Anthology from the Puritans to the Present, ed. Andrew Delbanco. Belknap Press: Cambridge, MA, 2001. p.62. Italics are Thoreau's own.
[26] Ibid. 68
[27] Ibid. 66

written earlier in the same year, on “Solitude,” how “there can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still,” feels on this mountain that

“some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends. He is more lone than you can imagine. There is less of substantial thought and fair understanding in him, than in the plains where men inhabit. His reason is dispersed and shadowy, more thin and subtile, like the air.”[28]

In this condition he reaches the “Burnt Lands,” a desolate natural pasture for local wildlife, with blueberry bushes and poplars scattered around. He feels like a trespasser on privately owned land, but no owner comes out. He finds it “difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man,” perhaps as a result of his altered state. Eventually, he makes his way back to the campsite, where
“the trees here seemed so evergreen and sappy, that we almost doubted if they would acknowledge the influence of fire; but fire prevailed at last, and blazed here, too, like a good citizen of the world.”

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[28] Ibid. 64

Annie Simpson
FIRE
2007

II: FIRE, FUNCTION[29]

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"At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable.... We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and Titanic features, the seacoast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and decaying trees . . . We need to witness our own limits transgressed."
—Henry David Thoreau, Walden[30]

When we last left Thoreau, he was nearing the close of his Walden inhabitation. It was September 1847 and he was up on Mt. Ktaadn in Maine, camping in the Burnt Lands. The scenery was "so wildly rough" that it took some time for Thoreau and his three fellow travelers to find a proper space to pitch the tent. They finally found a level riverside spot with enough wood around for fuel, but, as Thoreau wrote afterwards, "the trees here seemed so evergreen and sappy, that we almost doubted if they would acknowledge the influence of fire; but fire prevailed at last, and blazed here, too, like a good citizen of the world."[31]

Their fire burned through the night. After they fell asleep, the wind picked up and stirred the embers, lifting one up to the tip of a nearby fir tree, which caught fire. One of the campers, "being startled

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[29] This is the second of two sections in a series.
[30] Henry David Thoreau, Walden. http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext95/waldn10.txt.
[31] Henry David Thoreau, "Ktaadn," an essay later printed as a chapter of The Maine Woods,1864, excerpted in Writing New England: An Anthology from the Puritans to the Present, ed. Andrew Delbanco. Belknap Press: Cambridge, MA, 2001. p.63

from his dreams by the sudden blazing up to its top of a fir-tree, whose green boughs were dried in the heat, sprang up, with a cry, from his bed, thinking the world on fire, and drew the whole camp after him."[32] That an ember would leap from an untended hearth, causing an unexpected and unwanted fire outside the hearth, is not surprising; even a wildfire, in their locale, would only function as a familiar regulator of the forest ecosystem. After all, these were the Burnt Lands. The distress of the shaken dreamer lay in his sleepy foreknowledge of the dangers wrought by uncontrollable flames.

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Vitruvius and Alberti trace the origins of architecture back to the element of fire. The communal fire was the basis of society, and huts and shelters were subsequently constructed around the fire, the hearth. All the way through the architectural record, "the primitive hut and the primitive fire are revealed to be inseparable:

"The protoarchitectural fire of the treatise writers, the sacred flame of the city and the house, and smoky chimney of the child's drawing all show the close identity of the house and fire in the luminous furnace that is the origin, the singular and unrepeatable moment, in which architecture is born in myth, in rite, or in consciousness. The warm hut of the imagination manifests this in the even more far-reaching moment in which architecture is reborn in the dream."[33]

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[32] Ibid. 63
[33] Luis Fernandez-Galiano, Fire and Memory: On Architecture and Energy. Trans. Gina Carino. MIT Press: Combridge, MA, 2000. p.17

Over the course of time since Vitruvius' and Alberti's writings, the diminishment of the ritualistic and mythological significance of the originary fire has manifested itself not only in the evolution of architectural form, but also in the effects those forms have upon the life within and without. Many modern architectural historians and critics have noted the diminishment, which is alternately referred to as a "decentering," "dislodging," "displacement," or even "absence" of the hearth. The fire is presently separate from the hut. This changes both the nature of the fire and function of the hut. For the purposes of this section, architectural "function" will refer to the "description of the action of the social environment upon buildings, and of the action of buildings upon society," not "a description of the action of a building's own mechanical forces upon its form."34

In the period since the Second World War, the fire in the hearth of the sort of architecture "reborn in the dream" has taken on an oneiric quality. Elusive in everyday life, it sparks up in different forms. Visions of these forms have been recorded by writers like Thoreau, Walter Benjamin, and Sigfried Giedion, in fragmentary texts that often, correspondingly, if faintly, delineate the modern vacuum of the space once filled by the hearth. Peter Eisenman designs and writes within that vacuum, and builds accordingly.

If the original function of the building was to shelter the flame in the hearth, as recorded in Vitruvius and Alberti and onwards through at least the mid-18th century (in Semper's writing on the hut and the

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[34] Adrian Forty, Words and Buildings. Thames and Hudson: New York, 2000. p.188

temple, with its sacred flame), then the function of the building is radically changed by the lack, figuratively or literally, of a hearth. This development prompts the question, where is the fire if it is not in the hearth? And what has happened to the wood, if it is not being used for fuel for the socially generative fire within the building?

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Reyner Banham explored the dynamic historical and spatial relationships between man, energy and architecture using the following parable in Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment (1969):

"…a savage tribe (of the sort that exists only in parables) arrives at an evening camp-site and finds it well supplied with fallen timber. Two potential methods of exploiting the fallen timber exist: either it may be used to construct a wind-break or rain-shed—the structural solution—or it may be used to build a fire—the power-operated solution. An ideal tribe of noble rationalists would consider the amount of wood available, make an estimate of the probable weather for the night—wet, windy, or cold—and dispose of the timber resources accordingly. A real tribe, being the inheritors of ancestral cultural predispositions would do nothing of the sort, of course, and would either make fire or build a shelter according to prescribed custom…"35

The "ideal tribe," according to Banham, is the kind that has always "been a good friend to architectural theorists," whose history can be

[35] Reyner Banham, Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment. University Of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1984. p.19

traced back through the ages from Corbusier to Vitruvius, "reflecting in every age the current preoccupation of architects." Nonetheless, Banham identifies "Western, civilized nations" with the second, "real" tribe, contextualizing his technological polemic. This marks a paradigmatic shift in the historical discourse.

Though buildings may cover most of the ground in the Western world, since the onset of the industrial age our behavior certainly bears a closer resemblance to that of the second tribe. Regardless of which fuel we choose for our fires, we no longer have to choose between shelter and warmth, or "rationally" decide how to build in a way that makes optimal use of a limited quantity of the single available natural material which is used for both construction and energy.36 We use our wood (and other fuels) solely for fire. Although the energy may be powering construction, the unmistakable primary use for fuel is still combustion. "In the hearth, fire dwells in the building; in the oven, fire builds the dwelling."37 Wood, which up through Thoreau's time possessed a "value more permanent and universal than that of gold,"38 was the fuel for early industrialization. As W. G. Sebald has written, our age may be, and even so far has been, darkened by the resolve of that "power-operated solution" for the wood:

"Whatever was spared by the flames in prehistoric Europe was later felled for construction and shipbuilding, and to make the charcoal which the smelting of iron required in vast quantities. By the

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[36] That is not to say that our natural resources are not limited, but that is a wholly separate issue which will not be discussed here.
[37] Fernandez-Galiano 22
[38] Henry David Thoreau, Walden.

seventeenth century, only a few insignificant remains of the erstwhile forests survived in the islands, most of them untended and decaying. The great fires were now lit on the other side of the ocean, It is not for nothing that Brazil owes its name to the French word for charcoal. Our spread over the earth was fuelled by reducing the higher species of vegetation to charcoal, by incessantly burning whatever would burn. From the first smouldering taper to the elegant lanterns whose light reverberated around eighteenth-century courtyards and from the mild radiance of these lanterns to the unearthly glow of the sodium lamps that line the Belgian motorways, it has all been combustion. Combustion is the hidden principle behind every artifact we create. The making of a fish-hook, the manufacture of a china cup, or production of a television program, all depend on the same process of combustion. Like our bodies and like our desires, the machines we have devised are possessed of a heart which is slowly reduced to embers. From the earliest times, human civilization has been no more than a strange luminescence growing more intense by the hour, of which no one will say when it will begin to wane and when it will fade away. For the time being, our cities still shine through the night, and the fires still spread. In Italy, France and Spain, Poland and Lithuania, in Canada and California, summer fires consume whole forests, not to mention the great conflagration in the tropics that is never extinguished… "[39]

Herein we understand the initial displacement of the hearth flame, its relocation to "the oven" for the purpose of combustion. Giedion traces the first smelting of iron ore for industrial use back to the furnace

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[39] W. G. Sebald, The Rings of Saturn. Trans. Michael Hulse. New Directions: New York, 1999. p. 170-71

of the Darby family in England around 1750.[40] In the 19th century, structural iron enabled the construction of "pseudo-monumental exteriors in the old modes." Nonetheless, this new structural tool, Giedion points out, "by its very employment reduced these 'revived' forms to the status of false fronts."[41] Architects had yet to realize the "architectonic possibilities" of their new tools—"construction was, as it were, the subconsciousness of architecture; there lay dormant in it impulses that only much later found explicit theoretical statement."[42]

In 1816, Rondolet's call for a structural determinism in building design in his Discours pour l'ouverture du cours de construction à l'école spéciale d'architecture lead to the increased involvement of engineers in the building's conception.[43] After 1850, the newly surfaced architectural subconscious was plain to see in the great industrial international exhibitions, where highly engineered iron constructions were displayed, as well as new kinds of machines, tools, and mass-produced goods. The opening of the Crystal Palace for the world exhibition of 1851 marked the material emergence of architecture's new dream-state. Designed by Joseph Paxton—a landscape gardener,[44] poetically enough—the experience of being inside the building was described by Lothar Bucher as being "fairylike:"

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[40] Sigfried Giedion. Space, Time and Architecture. (1941) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956. p.137.
[41] Ibid. 181
[42] Ibid. 181
[43] Ibid. 211
[44] Giedion writes, "The curious association of an unmistakable grandeur with a certain gentleness was never again to be achieved." p. 253.

“We see a delicate network of lines without any clue by means of which we might judge their distance from the eye or the real size. The side walls are too far apart to be embraced in a single glance. Instead of moving from the wall at one end to that at the other, the eye sweeps along unending perspective which fades into the horizon. We cannot tell if this structure towers a hundred or a thousand feet above us, or whether the roof is a flat platform or is built up from a succession of ridges, for there is no play of shadows to enable our optic nerves to gauge the measurements.”45

The production of “a building not circumscribed within its real limits,” a building which exists wholly as a “volume of free space,”46 facilitates the perceptual and spatial freedoms of the mid-19th century man. As the 1851 exhibition also initiated the commercial function future exhibitions—and their increasingly complex edifices—would serve, the space also serves to facilitate his material freedom. Arguably, this was the only one of the three freedoms engendered by glass and steel construction to outlast the age of the great exhibitions, which commenced its decline in 1893 inside the plaster-encased exhibition structures of the World’s Columbian Exhibition at Chicago.

By 1901, men like Henri Van de Velde “already recognized that the engineer promised the regeneration of architecture and not its destruction.” In 1940, Giedion believed this would leave the architect free for “new tasks,” namely, the development of “a living architecture

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[45] Giedion pp.251-52, quoting Lothar Bucher, from *Kulturhistorische Skizzen aus der Industrieausstellung aller Volker* (1851)
[46] Ibid. 268

[which might satisfy] those subrational, emotional demands which are deeply rooted in [the] age."[47]

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In Walden, Thoreau continuously illustrates how all human needs and wants, from mythological and primitive times onwards, have been attained through our use of fire. Wood, as used for fuel and shelter, is mentioned with increasing frequency over the course of his narrative. In the chapter about his chimney entitled "House-Warming," he observes how "remarkable [it is,] what a value is still put upon wood even in this age and in this new country, a value more permanent and universal than that of gold. After all our discoveries and inventions no man will go by a pile of wood."[48] His Saxon and Norman ancestors "made their bows out of it, we make our gun-stocks of it." The centrality of wood in Thoreau's narrative, both as a thing in the world and as a metaphor or vessel for humankind's story, serves to underscore what he perceives as the endangered political condition of a humanity comprised of men who "have become the tools of their tools."

Reflective and highly poetic passages on timber, the forest, driftwood, and the fallen wood covering the forest floor inform other, documentary, passages on contemporary building, design, the changing fuel demands of a rapidly industrializing country, and barn fires. His ecological and geological lexicon may appear, upon light reading,

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[47] Ibid. 216.
[48] Henry David Thoreau, Walden.

baroque, but as he uses it to present his prescient conception of modern man's place on the earth, it calls to mind the work of more recent philosophers, especially those concerned with the function of language in history and human relations. From his mid-19th century vantage point, it appeared that

"there is commonly sufficient space about us. Our horizon is never quite at our elbows. The thick wood is not just at our door, nor the pond, but somewhat is always clearing, familiar and worn by us, appropriated and fenced in some way, and reclaimed from Nature."

If we put aside certain preconceptions about Thoreau the naturalist, and simply consider the elemental functions of fire and wood, site and society, in his texts,[49] the immediacy of the text becomes quite evident. His essay on Mt. Ktaadn, perhaps more than any other work, evokes the language of 20th century phenomenology.

At one point, in his "Discourse on Civil Disobedience" (1849), Thoreau refers to sheepish men who "serve the state …as machines, with their bodies…[using] no free exercise of the judgment or of the moral sense" as "wooden men," who "can perhaps be manufactured [to] serve the purpose as well." In fact, wooden men had already been manufactured by humans, in the 18th century: automata, a cultural by-product of advancements in clock mechanization, would "perform" in the courts of Europe and at traveling fairs. Like audiences of today's vast entertainment industry, 18th and 19th century automaton audiences

[49] Points discussed in the preceding section.

appreciated the inner lull imparted by a good spectacle. Wooden men can be manufactured by many means.

It would follow that a nation (or world) populated mass-produced, serviceable wooden men would become tempting kindling to a tinderbox—an aspiring dictator, a media baron, a radical, or what we would call, today, a terrorist—a man who uses the displaced flame to kill. Thoreau introduced such a character to the wooden men of Concord, Massachusetts on Sunday evening, September 30, 1859, in his "Plea for Captain John Brown." Thoreau praises Brown's composure during a speech Brown made previously: Brown did not give "the least vent to his pent-up fire. It was a volcano with an ordinary chimney-flue."50 Herman Melville referred to Brown, in a poetic tribute, as "a meteor."

With respect the enormity of the changes wrought by industrialization and war in the 19th century, and their relation to the barbarism of the Second World War, Gideon suggested that
"should continue to be terrorized by them—then the nineteenth century will have to be judged as having misused men, materials, and human thought, as one of the most wretched of periods. If we prove capable of putting to their right use the potentialities which were handed down to us, then the nineteenth century, in spite of the human disorder it created and in spite of the consequences which are still developing out of it, will grow into new and historic dimensions."51

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[50]Thoreau, Henry David. "Plea for Captain John Brown." 1859. www.transcendentalists.com/thoreau_plea_john_brown.htm.
[51] Giedion 162

Eight years later, Giedion concluded, “without a doubt, it was that mechanization was used to exploit both earth and man with complete irresponsibility…. Means have outgrown man.”52

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In a society and in an economy where the fire of the hearth has been requisitioned for uses precluding its original coalescing function, wild sparks may catch light inside the minds of certain men. Likewise, combustion which occurs outside an oven, a further displacement, is a bomb. American history is short, and its most recorded portion roughly spans the time from around when the Darby furnace started working up to present day. The past twenty years have seen a number of terrorist acts in the United States—both domestic and foreign terrorism—far surpassing, proportionately, the number which occurred during the buildup to the Civil War. The foreign terrorism is not entirely foreign: several Californians have become “home-grown” terrorists in the past few decades. When each of the recent American terrorists first became violent, they were all around the same age as Thoreau when he visited Mt. Ktaadn. The two most prominent recent characters, Ted Kaczynski (the Unabomber) and Adam Gahan (Bin Laden’s “media director” and close cohort), are writers, in a fashion. All of the terrorists are white males from middle-class backgrounds, and all of them spent a time of strategic withdrawal from the world in a primitive dwelling before they acted, in a region which Joan Didion has referred to as “the raw

[52] Sigfried Giedion, Mechanization Takes Command. New York: Norton, p.716

western empty"[53] (like John Brown, out "in the great university of the West," which Thoreau notes in his speech).

The Unabomber story embodies such a perfect calibration of declinicist theories that it almost seems like a historical or philosophical millennial fantasy. Any formal architectural analysis of the materials involved is redundant; the story itself is purely, and wholly, a "constituent fact," as defined by Giedion. Constituent facts are "those tendencies which, when they are suppressed, inevitably reappear. Their recurrence makes us aware that these are elements which, all together, are producing a new tradition."[54]

Mark Wigley has pointed out that Kaczynski's bombs had "exactly the aesthetic of the house in which they were built."[55] The bombs were meticulously crafted from wood, including handmade screws, with additional household items sometimes incorporated: "the everyday as weapon."[56] The bombs all appeared as smooth-edged wooden blocks. The house was "a display of control—even if it was never meant to be seen by anyone other than its reclusive occupant."[57] Likewise, inasmuch as a violent detonation can be "controlled," Kaczynski's fastidious bomb making and delivery system over the course of twenty years resulted in a murderous precision that mystified and amazed law enforcement, even to this day.

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[53] Joan Didion, "Varieties of Madness." *The New York Review of Books, Volume 45, Number 7 · April 23, 1998.*
[54] Giedion Space Time and Architecture p.18
[55] Mark Wigley, "Cabin Fever." *Perspecta* Vol. 30, Settlement Patterns (1999), pp. 122-125 p. 124
[56] Wigley 124
[57] Wigley 123

This sort of endgame was not what Le Corbusier had in mind when he made his appeal for "the regulating line" in 1921, but, as discussed in the previous section, his rather Thoreauvian stance was more a response to the stylistic prevarication of contemporary architecture than a clear mapping-out of an alternative, purposive route apart from the functionalist path architecture was speeding along on. Deriding the architecture of the Paris suburbs and the International Exhibitions, he suggested that architecture had lost sight of its roots, its function thereby detached from human instinct.

For this reason, the world is unanimous in considering as dangerous gas-bags, shirkers, incapables, dull and hidebound characters, the one or two people who have grasped the lesson of primitive man in his glade, and who claim that there do exist such things as regulating lines: 'With your regulating lines you kill imagination, you make a god out of a recipe.'58

The "supreme determinism" which Le Corbusier said "illuminates for us the creations of nature and gives us the security of something poised and reasonably made, …something infinitely modulated, evolved, varied and unified," is precisely the factor which, perversely, motivated Kaczynski, as indicated in his 1995 manifesto.59 Kaczynski sent his bombs as signals. He selected victims whom he felt were thwarting that

[58] Le Corbusier, Towards a New Architecture. Boston: Architecture Press, 1970. p.73
[59] Kaczynski, Theodore. The Industrial Society and Its Future. http://www.42inc.com/~estephen/manifesto/unabe2.html

determinism. His treatment of each intended victim as a symbol, rather than an individual life, demonstrated the very lack of humanity—as a result of our being continuously "swamped by the tide of history"[60]—that he cited in his manifesto as being the sickness of industrial society.

The manifesto includes nothing we haven't already heard from countless writers over the course of the century; what sets Kaczynski apart, of course, is his criminality. The categorization of his violence as an effect of history, rather than an agent of history—as John Brown's violence was—is an important distinction. He resorted to violence because he believed it was the only effect which would not be muffled by that "tide of history,"[61] ever crashing. Years earlier, Adorno, writing in exile in California on the loss of individual autonomy as a result of industrialization and rampant materialism, referred to a "refractory individual who does not capitulate and completely toe the line [and consequently] is abandoned to the shocks which the world of things, concentrated into gigantic blocks, administers to whatever does not make itself into a thing."[62] Criminality aside (for a moment), Kaczynski's own blocks should be recognized as the penultimate materialization of the cost of industrialization, blocks crafted from the stuff of Adorno's blocks, but then used to strike back.

In the elapsed time between Le Corbusier's alarm and Kaczynski's bomb, "the shocks" piled up: "in the place of the wilderness which the

[60] Kaczynski paragaph 111
[61] And, he writes in paragraph 185, "As for the negative consequences of eliminating industrial society—well, you can't eat your cake and have it too. To gain one thing you have to sacrifice another."
[62] Theodor Adorno, "Aldous Huxley and Utopia." Prisms Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997 p.98

pioneer intended to open up spiritually as well as materially and through which he was to accomplish his spiritual regeneration, there has arisen a civilization which absorbs all life in its system,"[63] wrote Adorno. By this point, the space of industrial society had revealed itself to be entropic. In Kaczynski's time (and ours), the hut's function is to shelter us from the heat outside, as opposed to the olden function of sheltering the hearth within; to an extreme degree, the interior is a place of retreat.[64] The Unabomber hut, in itself, has utterly breached the Thoreauvian vision of the "deliberate" life, and his vision of the hut as a redemptive space (as well as its subconscious trace in the imagination of the American public). As Wigley writes,

a seemingly innocent structure is accused of sheltering the target of the biggest manhunt ever… Not much for the jurors to look at though. Everyone can picture the hut before seeing it. Any child could draw it. Indeed, people are always drawing it, dreaming about it. [65]

In the dream, the significance of the originary fire and the originary shelter has been reversed: the Unabomber "used his settler's cabin" to write a modern manifesto, and to build bombs. "The point of the violence, said the ex-professor of mathematics, was to break society down into small units, to break the pattern."[66] While this is not the only, nor the most obvious,[67] 20th century example of "the rigorous aesthetic of simplicity… craftsmanship, and geometric purity [to]

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[63] Adorno 97
[64] As argued in the previous essay, Thoreau's hut was not a place of retreat.
[65] Wigley 123.
[66] Wigley 123
[67] See previous section, p.15

become an unsettling agent of horror,"[68] it is certainly the most ominous, as a constituent fact, for the future of “civilization” as understood in the work of architectural historians—even Banham.

In our time, even more so than in Thoreau’s time—when people in Concord referred to him as “weird,” in the archaic, fatalistic sense of the word—the primitive hut is a place of transmutation. It no longer merely houses the generative fire, but rather is a generative space for the actions of certain men possessed of fiery and lethal will.

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The character—or function, as earlier defined in this section—of the space in question is effectively described as “the destructive character,” by Benjamin in his eponymous essay of 1931. Benjamin’s “character” is, interchangeably, a disposition, a person, and an agent of history. The essay was composed like a barbarism checklist. Relevant items include:

“The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away.
The destructive character is always blithely at work. It is Nature that dictates his tempo, indirectly at least, for he must forestall her. Otherwise she will take over the destruction herself.
He has few needs, and the least of them is to know what will replace what has been destroyed. First of all, for a moment at least, empty

[68] Wigley 123

space - the place where thing stood or the victim lived. Someone is sure to be found who needs this space without occupying it.
The destructive character is a signal.
The destructive character has no interest in being understood. Attempts in this direction he regards as superficial. Being misunderstood cannot harm him.
The destructive character stands in the front line of traditionalists. Some people pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus conserving them; others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them. The latter are called the destructive.
The destructive character has the consciousness of historical man, whose deepest emotion is an insuperable mistrust of the course of things and a readiness at all times to recognize that everything can go wrong. Therefore, the destructive character is reliability itself.
The destructive character sees nothing permanent. But for this very reason he sees ways everywhere. Where others encounter walls or mountains, there, too, he sees a way. But because he sees a way everywhere, he has to clear things from it everywhere. Not always by brute force; sometimes by the most refined. Because he sees ways everywhere, he always stands at a crossroads. No moment can know what the next will bring. What exists he reduces to rubble - not for the sake of rubble, but for that of the way leading through it."69

This is fairly straightforward. Two years later, Benjamin recited the effects of the destructive character—again, interchanging definitions

[69] Quotations selected from: Walter Benjamin, "The Destructive Character." In: Reflections. Ed. Peter Demetz. New York: Schocken, 1986. pp.301-303.

of "character"—in "Experience and Poverty." His depiction of these effects echoes the language of anomie used by Thoreau to describe his experience of the knife-ridged mountain and surrounding Burnt Lands in "Ktaadn." At the beginning of his essay, Benjamin considered the generation of men who lived through the "monstrous events" of the First World War. He wondered, "wasn't it noticed at the time how many people returned from the front in silence? Not richer but poorer in communicable experience?"70 The shocks of that war on the world, as Benjamin described it, annulled all prior experience (and understanding of the world as it once was) possessed by that generation. They "had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars," but now found themselves standing "in open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body."71 Like Thoreau standing alone on the raw granite slope of Mount Ktaadn, "an undone extremity of the globe," looking up at the "hostile ranks of clouds" swathing the mile-high summit, the human being Benjamin described has no possible voice, no community; "there is less of substantial thought and fair understanding in him"72 now than in the landscape of his youth.

Whereas Thoreau's sensations of terror, insignificance and isolation in the Burnt Lands arose from his encounter with "inhuman Nature," "something savage and awful, though beautiful," Benjamin's speechless modern man has been awed by the inhumanity of his very civilization. Conversation is nothing, for "the destructive character

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[70] Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934. Trans. Rodney Livingstone, Ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Belknap Press: Cambridge, MA 199. p.731
[71] Benjamin 732
[72] Delbanco 64

has no interest in being understood." On Mt. Ktaadn, Thoreau found his reason "dispersed and shadowy, more thin and subtile, like the air…. Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at a disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty:

"She seems to say sternly, why came ye here before your time? The ground is not prepared for you…why seek me where I have not called thee, and then complain because you find me but a stepmother? Shoudst thou freeze or starve, or shudder thy life away, here is no shrine, nor altar, nor access to my ear.73

"…The tops of mountains are among the unfinished parts of the globe, whither it is a slight insult to the gods to climb and pry into their secrets, and try their effect on humanity. Only daring and insolent men, perchance, go there."74

The hubris Thoreau alluded to here anticipates the technological strivings of engineers and architects (in fine company with biologists, physicists, and the like) in the second half of the 19th century and onwards. The speed of progress soon outpaced the rate at which experience could be sought and obtained. "With this tremendous development in technology," Benjamin wrote, " a completely new poverty has descended on mankind… For what is the value of all our culture if it is divorced from experience?"75

"Poverty of experience," Benjamin pointed out, "is not merely poverty on a personal level, but poverty of human experience in general." By

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[73] Delbanco 64
[74] Delbanco 64-5
[75] Benjamin 732

the time of Benjamin’s writing, the sublimity of the technological accomplishments that heralded our industrial age—embodied in the massive engineering projects and fantastic skyscrapers of the early 20th and late 19th century, respectively—had been significantly eclipsed by the increasingly evident dispossession characterizing urban life. As Sigfried Gideon noted in Mechanization Takes Command, in the span of time between the two World Wars, “mechanization implanted itself more deeply. It impinged upon the very center of the human psyche, through all the senses. For the eye and ear, doors to the emotions, media of mechanical reproduction were invented:”

“In the time of full mechanization still newer developments set in, whose drift and implications cannot be foreseen. It is no longer replacement of the human hand by the machine, but of intervention into the substance of organic as well as of inorganic nature.”76

Writing in 1947, Giedion characterized his time as being one of “mechanized barbarism.” Even so, he held out hope for some vague future reconciliation of humanity with fragmented, unbalanced modernity, unlike Benjamin, the melancholic, who believed that contemporary men longed “to free themselves from experience; they long for a world in which they can make such pure and decided use of their poverty—that it will lead to something respectable.”77 Everywhere he saw willfully wooden men, for whom only a sleeping dream could “make up for the sadness and discouragement of the day—a dream that shows us in its realized form the simple but magnificent existence for which the energy

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[76] Sigfried Giedion, Mechanization Takes Command. New York: Norton, 1969. p.44
[77] Benjamin 734

is lacking in reality." When he describes Mickey Mouse as the embodiment of that dream, the reader understands the full depth of his resignation: the silence of the man standing in the newly open air—the raw and exploding landscape man is now situated within—is broken only by barbaric laughter. Perhaps the man is laughing in his sleep, at Mickey Mouse, in which case an individual would be wise to "step back and keep [his] distance," as Benjamin suggests, for a man in such a deep slumber, at this juncture, has already shown he can sleep through any conflagration.

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In 1976, around the same time Kaczynski started constructing bombs, Peter Eisenman published "Post-Functionalism," a perfect document of destructive character. In the essay, he reconsidered and recast the roles of "form" and "function" in modernist architecture. He proposed a "modernist dialectic,"[78] a "new theoretical base [which] changes the humanist balance of form/function" to "a dialectical relationship within the evolution of form itself." Post-Functionalism "begins as an attitude which recognizes modernism as a new and distinct sensibility:" it would amend the misconstrued dualism of humanist/functionalist "form and function."

Eisenman attributed this misconstruction, "the tendency to presume architectural form to be a recognizable transformation from some pre-existent geometric or platonic solid," to a "reductivist attitude

[78] Peter Eisenman, "Post-Functionalism." In: Architecture Theory Since 1968. Ed. Michael Hays. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. p.239

[which] assumes some primary unity as both an ethical and an aesthetic basis for all creation.” This tendency, which he termed “a relic of humanist theory,” finds its source in 19th century architectural histories of Gottfried Semper and the American sculptor and writer Horatio Greenough.79 Earlier in the essay, Eisenman pinpointed early 20th century architecture’s fundamental misapprehension of the 19th century shift from humanism to modernism as being manifested in architecture’s “dogged adherence to the principles of function.” The results of this misapprehension, modernism’s “stylistic manifestations,” brought about “a displacement of man away from the center of his world.” This episode gave “rise to design in which authorship can no longer either account for a linear development which has a ‘beginning’ or an ‘end’—hence the rise of the atemporal—or account for the invention of form—hence the abstract as a mediation between pre-existent sign systems.”

This misapprehension, this error of conceiving “of modernism as merely a stylistic manifestation of functionalism,” brings to mind, specifically, the revisionist history of Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, realized in their 1932 formulation of “the International Style” for exhibition and publication. As Adrian Forty (among many others) has pointed out, their (reductive) characterization “as ‘functional’ those aspects of European modernism they wished to discard—its scientific, sociological, and political claims” served the

[79] Interesting to note that Greenough kept company with the Transcendentalists. Thoreau misunderstood and inexplicably despised him. See, “Thoreau's Reactions to Horatio Greenough,” by William J. Griffin in: *The New England Quarterly*. 1957 Vol. 30 No. 4. pp.508-12

purpose of "cleansing [modernism] of its political content."[80] The "fictitious category of 'functionalist' architecture to which they consigned all work with reformist or communist tendencies" represents a major lapse in architecture's political historiography, one which ultimately, Forty argues, "denigrates" the earlier, finely nuanced ideas of function which had existed up until this muddle. Even Johnson and Hitchcock acknowledged "the appearance of a certain dogmatism"[81] in their project. Forty gives additional examples of modernist architects, including Gropius, who manipulated the public's understanding of functionalism so as to purge it of its politico-geographical connotations. While some other writers may qualify this sort of effort merely as a discursive aberration, a form of "positivistic historiography,"[82] it still falls under Eisenman's rubric of "displaced positivism."[83]

Although Eisenman avoids this discussion altogether, maintaining that this particular essay is "not the place to elaborate a theory of modernism, or indeed to represent those aspects of such a theory which have already found their way into the literature of other humanist disciplines,"[84] his plainspoken point about the decentering of man is integral to any consideration of modernism's human fallout, especially

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[80] Adrian Forty, Words and Buildings. p.187
[81] Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, The International Style. (W. W. Norton & Company: New York, 1997) p.37. Of course, capping off the same paragraph with the statement, "Architecture is always a set of actual monuments, not a vague corpus of theory," merely reinforces the argument of Forty and others that their dogmatism was precisely the thing it "appeared" to be.
[82] Panayotis Tournikiotis, The Historiography of Modern Architecture. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999. p.228
[83] Eisenman 237
[84] Eisenman 238.

during and immediately following the period of Hitchcock and Johnson's project. Eisenman also criticized the postwar Neo-Functionalist architects, including Banham, Cedric Price and Archigram, whose "idealization of technology," characterized by "ethical positivism and aesthetic neutrality" and a "substitution of moral criteria for those of a more formal nature," continued the degradation of type-form in architecture which had been going on since the rise of industrialization, with the entrance of the "mass client." The ongoing degradation of type-form over the century (or so) leading up to the Second World War led to the entrenchment of the "oversimplified form-follows-function formula" within the field of architecture, which Eisenman accordingly dismisses as nothing more than "a late phase of humanism, rather than an alternative to it."

The essay is Eisenman's call for that potential alternative: an utterly undefined, save abjurations, "new consciousness in architecture," which would presumably fill the void wrought by his "term of absence," Post-Functionalism. True to his destructive character, all the essay leaves us with after effecting his "negation of functionalism" is a vague "[suggestion of] certain positive alternatives," some "existing fragments of thought which… might serve as a framework for the development of a larger theoretical structure" –not even an actual theoretical structure, just a framework for development—and the further assurance that Post-Functionalism "[is] not, in and of itself" a "label" for the new consciousness. He's so good with his stiletto—the essay doesn't leave us with much.

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On a fundamental level, the deficiency of his post-functionalist, anti-humanist, pro-fragmentary (but not in the sense of the fragment as "simplification," of course) proposition lies in his misdiagnosis of the 19th- century "disruption"—here, the disruption of the balanced pre-industrial dialectic of "concern for internal accommodation—the program and the way it is materialized" and "concern for articulation of ideal themes in form." In attributing the cause of the disruption (and the subsequent emphasis placed on social and programmatic aspects of design, which led to the aforementioned degradation of type-form) to the "rise of industrialization," and not to the speed of the rise, he committed his own sin of oversimplification. Speed was the agent of changes in consciousness, and sensible changes in form; the" rise of industrialization" was (is) a historical development, and historical developments have their gradual effects, but the effects we are concerned with here are jolting shocks—which have speed as their agent. Like the panic of the sleeping man at Thoreau's campsite—a panic prompted by the "suddenness" of the fir tree's flaring up beside him, but not the presence of fire, itself (either outside the tent or as it exists in the wilderness as a natural phenomenon)—Eisenman's call for "a new consciousness in architecture" is, merely, one more reaction, or effect, in a long line of reactions to the jolting shocks caused by the exponentially increasing speed of progress we have observed since the 18th century.

Speed is the thing. If the rise of industrialization had happened at a slower rate, perhaps designers would have had sufficient time to reconcile type-form with the increasingly "complex functional nature" and swelling programs of buildings demanded by the freshly

industrialized client, the "mass client." The failure of his search for a new theoretical paradigm, a purported "interiority outside of…the historicity of the present,"85 is laid bare by the very object of his project. His "desire for some condition of autonomy,"86 (autonomy being the presumed object), is merely a late manifestation of the same negative freedoms which have been accelerating our "inevitable momentum towards a progressivist future"87 since John Stuart Mill published On Liberty in 1869.88 Even from his 21st century vantage point, Eisenman fails to recognize the illusory nature of that autonomy. Unlike Thoreau, Benjamin, Giedion and even Kaczynski (criminality aside), Eisenman is yet one more embodiment of the destructive character in our present Hegelian endgame, despite his protests on the contrary.

[85] Peter Eisenman, Inside Out: Selected Writings 1963-1988. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004. p.x
[86]Ibid.
[87] Ibid. He cites this drive in reference to early 20th century writers such as Loos and Le Corbusier, and claims his work is not about that.
[88] From Mill's introduction: "The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right. These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him, or visiting him with any evil, in case he do otherwise. To justify that, the conduct from which it is desired to deter him must be calculated to produce evil to some one else. *The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.*" (Italics added for emphasis)
http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/m/mill/john_stuart/m645o/chapter1.html

Eisenman's putative manifesto reifies the absence of the hearth. Knowing that this, to him, is production,[89] we might wonder, all over again, where the flame has gone, if it is not in the hearth and is not being used as energy for construction. Nor is the subject of his house inflamed, for the subject dwells—if one can even call it dwelling—in the emptiness of the clearing Eisenman has made. In his house, the dream which would show us in its "realized form the simple but magnificent existence for which the energy is lacking in reality" is fleeting, since the bedroom does not work as a bedroom should.[90]

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With Space, Time and Architecture, Giedion offered us a genealogy of a modern movement which, in its time, "was a radical, though justified, revolution that kept pace with the upward course of its history." His genealogy "made it possible to comprehend modern architecture as a form of revitalizing rift within the overall history of historical

[89] Peter Eisenman and Christopher Alexander. "Discord over Harmony in Architecture: The Eisenman/Alexander Debate." *Harvard GSD News* 11, no. 5 (May-June 1983): 12-17. Eisenman says, at a heated point in the discussion, "I would like to suggest that if I were not here agitating nobody would know what Chris's idea of harmony is, and you all would not realize how much you agree with him ... Walter Benjamin talks about "the destructive character", which, he says, is reliability itself, because it is always constant. If you repress the destructive nature, it is going to come out in some way. If you are only searching for harmony, the disharmonies and incongruencies which define harmony and make it understandable will never be seen. A world of total harmony is no harmony at all. Because I exist, you can go along and understand your need for harmony, but do not say that I am being irresponsible or make a moral judgment that I am screwing up the world, because I would not want to have to defend myself as a moral imperative for you." He certainly took Benjamin's call for a "new, positive concept of barbarism" to heart.

[90] See Susan Shulof Frank and Peter Eisenman, A Client's Response. New York: Watson-Guptill, 1994.

evolution."[91] As discussed earlier, his faith in the regenerative properties of modern architecture and the attendant mechanized trappings of industrial society subsequently faltered. His dismal conclusion in Mechanization Takes Command— "after the Second World War, it may well be that there are no people left, however remote, who have now lost their faith in progress. Men have become frightened by progress, changed from hope to a menace"[92]—was not quite tempered by his sketchy description of some future "man in equipoise" who might deliver us. Like Benjamin's Mickey Mouse, his fictive powers hold no real promise of spanning the ever-increasing distance between where we stand in the clearing and the "purpose of our existence, [which] seems to have been reduced to the most distant vanishing point on an endless horizon."[93] Man will simply have to adapt, wrote Benjamin. He will have to begin "anew and with few resources," and rely on the new barbarians, the "men who have adopted the cause of the absolutely new and have founded it on insight and renunciation."

"In its buildings, pictures, and stories, mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be."[94] In that event, history will no longer be seen as a process. Only trauma projects into the future. The blocks pile up, until they no longer jolt us but instead, eventually, form an imbricate structure which would be our new shelter. Then mankind may leave his new hut and join Thoreau where he still stands on a mountain, again "on the edge of the wilderness, …in a new world, far in the dark of the continent." Why, Thoreau once asked, standing in this spot,

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[91] Tournikiotis 226
[92] Giedion, Mechanization Takes Command. p.715
[93] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty" 735
[94] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty" 735

should we “read history, then, if the ages and the generations are now?”[95]

95 Thoreau, “The Maine Woods.” p.73

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