

Earth and Air

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One of my first childhood ambitions was to be an architect. Why? Was it that my cousin's husband in Cleveland was an architect and a kind of role model for me? Was it that one of the few other Lloyds I'd heard of was Frank Lloyd Wright? Or was it that I grew up in New York, where I was continually astonished by the skyscrapers? I could see them from the BMT train as we crossed the Williamsburg Bridge from Brooklyn into "The City." I could look up at them from Times Square or Macy's or the 42nd Street Library. When my family moved to Queens, our house was on the last street in that development and for years — until a new neighborhood sprang up on the empty lot — we had an unobstructed view from our back porch of the Manhattan skyline (my Emerald City). I loved buildings the way I later got to love painting. And now that I write about music, I find myself using the term "architecture" a lot, as a way of describing and measuring structure — structures — shapes, patterns. *Measures*.

But I've never gotten over my early passion for buildings themselves.

Surely behind this passion is the exhilaration that's triggered by the tension between weight and buoyancy. (This is true in music, too — a cliché about Bruckner symphonies, for example, is comparing these big "heavy" works to vast "cathedrals of sound.") One of my favorite buildings is H.H. Richardson's train station in North Easton, Massachusetts. What could weigh more than those piles of heavy brown stones? Yet, with all the open space created by those expansive, interlocking arches — arches within arches — the station seems to be floating. Not unlike the way the Chrysler and Empire State Buildings seem to be lifting off. Soaring. Mies van der Rohe had a similarly fascinating trick. From the ground up, for the first couple of stories, his windows increase rather than decrease



in size, doubling then redoubling, as if space keeps opening up and out the higher you go. It's just the opposite of what you might expect and it takes your breath away. Something similar happens with Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie houses, only the direction is different — space opens up horizontally rather than vertically. It's like Cinerama — the way that small square of movie screen widened out sideways and we were suddenly on the Rockaway roller coaster, gasping!

Whenever I can, I go to places to look at buildings. I grew up with a New Yorker's prejudice against the Midwest until I actually visited Chicago. Just walking through the Loop was like being in a museum of American architectural history — from the austere Monadnock Building to Mies's elegant Lakeshore Drive apartments. In the old Rookery Building, possessing one of Wright's earliest interiors, the glass dome hovering over the central lobby has that mind-bending combination of gravity and airiness.

I found that same mixture of earth and air in Egypt: the temple of Karnak, with the world's most massive columns reaching to the sky; the pyramids dissolving to an otherworldly point. I actually went to a technical high school for one semester to study architecture, but I disliked all the

math and graphs. Now I'm convinced that the very idea of mathematical proportions creates a kind of mystic — *musical* — numerology. Despite the surrounding marketplace of tourists, hired guides, vendors, and guards, for me the act of looking at these ancient wonders — watching Time itself slowly eroding their massive solidity into something precious and fragile — became an experience of spiritual elevation.

Last year, I fulfilled a longstanding dream to see Palladio's villas. Armed with James Ackerman's profound study, I discovered that these buildings — each in its varying state of repair or disrepair, access or lack of access — were not only exquisite in their musical proportions but also deeply moving. Simultaneously welcoming and awe-inspiring, they embodied that sense of balance — *measure* — I wish I could achieve in my own life, and keep searching for in the world at large. ■

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