

The Black Box & The White Cube



Those black boxes and white cubes;

Those abstracted vacuums pumped free of any contaminating atmosphere;

Those manifest vacancies scattered around our cities in perfect seriality;

Those ideal formulas of neutralised tensions, of disregarded imbalances

Are spatialized formulas of a completely vacuous religiosity,

Of comprehensive operational performance.

In them Architecture has reached the conclusion of its long journey in pursuit of performance, it has arrived at the stage of pure and total utilisation and finds that it has erased itself, that in its pact with the theatre and the gallery it has reduced itself to being a negative, a lack, an absence. And it is this thin skin of effacement that both sublimates Architecture and traps Art in a contract of suspension, a collusion in which Drama and Art is frozen in its own ludicrous morgue, captured in the placeless stasis of the black box and white cube's nowhere, and in which Architecture wilfully obliterates itself in the ghostly reflection (black or white) of its own ultimate achievement.

The Graveyard & The Morgue

"The whole visible universe is but a store-house of images and signs to which the imagination will give a relative place and value; it is a sort of pasture which the imagination must digest and transform. All the faculties of the human soul must be subordinated to the imagination, which puts them in requisition all at once."

From "The Painter of Modern Life" by Charles Baudelaire

I was harsh on those impeccable places of cultural commodification and serial exchange that are embodied in black boxes and white cubes. They are a form of divine reduction, an elemental abstraction that cuts ruthlessly to the core of their structural purpose. They proudly proclaim the point at which economy can –so far go no further in its demands for the reduction and conflation of space, and time, into uniform, measurable, quantifiable, and statistically relative units, units before which goods and value can be consistently registered and transferred. They analogise and mark the precise threshold beyond which traditional space, with its already tenuous grip on relative function, simply implodes in on itself as everywhere actually does become the same, and all goods, all forms of observation and exchange, all events, are available at any time and in any place. The reason they are so numbingly devoid of qualities is that they are the banal precipice, the very terminal point, of physical space constructed by man. They are the exact moment before it disappears, and so they are etiolated to almost nothing, for that is what they are destined to become: nothing. Their contract with what they contain is almost completed, and they will disappear.



Morgue of the Middlesex Hospital, London, prior to demolition, 2008

I was unfair to call their disposition a 'Morgue of Spatial Utility', a description tinged with what could be seen as a disrespectful attitude. However I would like to point out that a Morgue is a fascinating place, it is a purgatory of the flesh, a stretch of time in which a body has lost its soul, but has yet to be conferred to memory, yet to be commemorated, and concluded, with any ceremony or symbol. It is a place of irreducible human vessels. It is the place where we are essentialised to a level of absolute classical (or modern) simplicity which could never have been achieved when intermingled with the complexities of life, and will never be possible again either in the mirror image of life that is the graveyard, or in the extinguishing nothingness of permanent oblivion. I see this as a severe significance, with its own beauty, but hateful and provocative to those like me whose sensibilities yearn for something more voluptuous and full of life, but they are nonetheless infinitely preferable in their rigor to the towering collapse of expectation, and muddy indistinctness that arises when a desire for uniqueness, for rebellion, in all its naivety, meets with its opposite, and produce a bastard offspring.

Since I'm now in the habit of using places of the dead to analogize my point, let's move on to the graveyard in search of an alternative to those monochrome boxes. They are feeling all the more stifling for their apparent triumph and superiority.



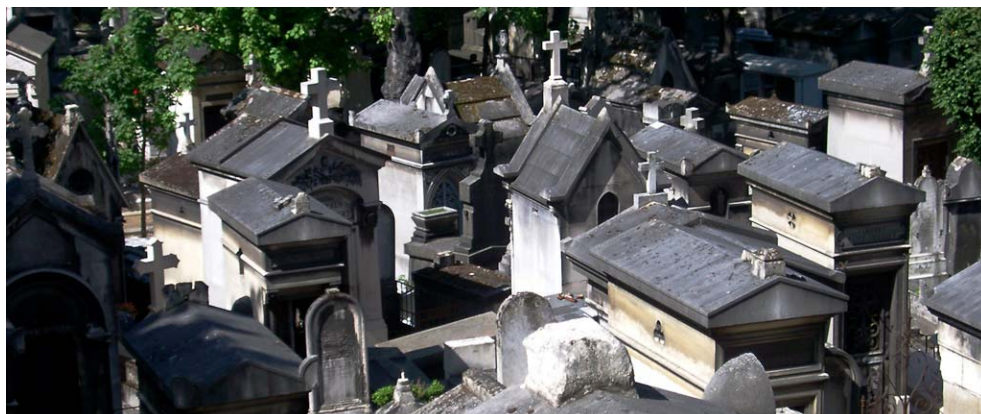
Recoleta Cemetery, Buenos Aires

Morgues may be fascinating, but I would be transfixed with a clinical terror if I were ever caught in one alive, perhaps not feeling dissimilar to how I am so often withered by the interiors of galleries. Cemeteries however, with their tombstones poking up all over the place, profusion of strange symbols from every period and walk of life, inexplicable formal concoctions animated by the love with which they must have been considered, I have always found to be most inviting. They simply force your imagination, no matter how flabby and asthmatic from inactivity, to start playing with all their suggestive concoctions, which is why they drew me so often at a young age to sit amongst their tumbling ivy at dusk, crouched atop their largest tombs, the ones closest to collapse, in order to make up long and meandering, nonsensical but riveting stories.

Where the morgue is the tight abstraction of the classical cube, skeletally containing the human body as enabling container devoid of life, the graveyard is, in its best examples, a specular landscape of flourishing symbols, each conveying nuanced impressions of individual cultural calibrations. It is the opposite of the morgue, it is all the material associated with the fleetingness of style and personality, of longing and affectation, frozen for perpetuity. The morgue relies on its lack of signifiers in order to emphasize the structurally essential nature of what it contains, whereas the cemetery does the opposite, implying and representing the very thing that it does not contain (the personality, the loved one), through the fleshiness of its signs.

If, like me, you see the truth in what Baudelaire says in the extract above, then perhaps the profusion of the cemetery is preferable to the essentialism of the white cube (sorry, morgue). It at least provides more material for the imaginary gland to metabolize. And even if it is not entirely preferable, if there is still love for the clear equations, and clarified relationships of the box, then I don't think it would be outlandish to say that it might at least hold more value together with the cemetery than alone, might form a productive correlation as complementary opposites. That the qualities of both might frame the two poles of a way to judge spaces and how they perform seems reasonable.

[Pere Lachaise Cemetery, Paris](#)



The one for the mathematician architect longing after universal transcendence minus experience, the other for the architect who wants to partake in that unstoppable and divinely comic attempt to touch beauty, or truth, or simply what lies inside each of us, that contingent and protean thing we often call style and fashion, the manifestations of our transcendent human subjectivity: a wonderful affliction, that affects thinking as much as material display, thank God. An affliction whose itching unease is catalogued as frozen moments, in miniature form, in our graveyards, is rendered grandly and slowly in our cities' buildings, and is displayed raucously every day (but never for more than a day, a week in the same state) in the clothes on the backs of everyone in our streets.