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## On the Architecture of Pleasure

By *Hiram Crespo*, editor.

In my recent visit to the federal capital, I was taken in by the majesty, the beauty and the history of the buildings of our government (and corporations, these days there's no clear boundary). If I had not understood the alphabet and was to judge the buildings by their architecture, Bank of America's building would have been a government building.

Without writing an edict or enacting a law, the government and the banking cartel had articulated messages through the architecture. The banks are making themselves out to be indistinct from our government and government buildings frequently utilize architectural styles that mirror the glory of ancient Greece, claiming for themselves the humanist legacy of the land that saw the birth of the earliest form of democracy.

It's interesting to note a land's architecture and the narratives (and identities) that are woven into it. There is much that is implicit in the red of Chinese architecture: a state-sponsored narrative of revolution from the top down. Whether or not we buy into the narrative, the act of displaying it with pomp makes the narrative powerful, relevant, and pervasive in the culture that witnesses the architecture.

A society's architecture shapes the people's identity in many subtle ways: by being ever-present, by lurking high above the people, by serving the ruling classes as a symbol of their power and legitimacy, and by the layers of history that nourish a people's attachment to the sites. Accidents of abuse and rebellion can at times evolve, within the urban setting, into monuments to the people's history. I'm reminded of how the Stonewall Inn, where gays first fought back police brutality in 1969, has become a site of pilgrimage for many LGBT people comparable to the monuments to the founding fathers in DC. Not all architectural narratives happen from the top down.

And then there are the hidden, and Freudian, narratives, the (perhaps?) unintended ones. The phallic symbols that embody power, conquest and fertility. In my visit to DC I noticed that our national obelisk (fashioned after the ancient Egyptian model) was being fixed, curiously during a time in which America's global hegemony is increasingly being questioned, as if old Uncle Tom was in need of viagra.

We all, consciously or not, choose to identify with various types of architecture according to sets of values and aesthetic tendencies that reflect, I believe, much more about ourselves than we may even know. In watching

science fiction for many years, I've noticed the curvy and anarchic urban designs found in films like Star Wars, Planet of the Apes, and other futuristic films (whether utopian or dystopian). I've always been intrigued by how so many science fiction storylines imagine (and intuit) the architecture of the future in this way. Notice how, in the Star Wars planet of Tatooine, the inner architecture of homes is almost organically curvy and blends into the ground and the land effortlessly. Like the people of our much-feared overpopulated future, the people of Tatooine live in deserted lands where water must be harvested.

Joseph Campbell, the famous mythographer who mentored George Lucas during his years of incubating the Star Wars narrative, believed that a circular or round form favors wholeness and is a symbol of the Self and of completion.

I say these shapes also promote egalitarian models of relating to each other, whereas a pyramid has obvious classist connotations, and was in fact the most famous symbol of one of the societies that was most loyal to class divisions in antiquity: ancient Egypt. The recent stirrings of the Egyptian revolution could have only happened long after the ruins of its past glory had been overtaken by the sands.

Notice, for contrast, the openness and flatness of the sites of modern revolutions: plazas and squares like Tahrir and Zuccotti Park. Notice also how the idea of Occupying a space, owning it, and giving it a new identity (Zuccotti became Liberty Square) becomes an act of writing history, of weaving new populist narratives, and how these narratives that emerge from horizontal spaces explicitly repudiate classism (the 99% versus the 1%).

The futuristic documentary [The 11th Hour](#), in proposing solutions to the present environmental and spiritual crisis that humanity faces, presents ideas for redefining progress by building our architecture and our machines in the image of how nature makes things efficiently rather than with the mindset of taming or controlling nature, which is admittedly the failed spiritual longing of our predecessors. By embedding our technology into the cycles of nature, we work with her rather than against her and we secure a sustainable future for our descendants in this so-called **[anthropocene age](#) of our own creation** that we are entering.

There is a deeper intuition behind this emerging mindset, which leads me back to my own spiritual and philosophical master, Epicurus, and to the architectural model that he called for.

### **His schools were Gardens.**

Ponder the semantics, the layers of meaning behind the architecture that he meant to favor, the type of covenant with nature that is implicit in the image of the Garden, which served pragmatically as a source of agricultural goods but was also his house and his school.

Gardens, in many of the worlds' mythologies, serve as metaphors for the earliest and future paradise, the green world full of life that all the desert religions dream of, but to us this paradise is not other-worldly. It is the space we are called to occupy. Epicurus wanted his followers to be Gardeners, nature's responsible, happy and awakened care-takers; and also scientists, the types of sages whose wisdom is derived from the study of nature. The space he meant for them to occupy was one of serenity and beauty, of civilized pleasure always in the presence of nature.

The Garden is a metaphor for bringing nature back into the city, for being both natural and civilized, and for Epicurus' dethronement of reason in favor of nature, not to deny or repress reason but to utilize it under the guidance of nature. In Epicurean cosmology, man must engage in the study of nature (science) but is not destined to tame nature or called to govern nature by force.

Epicurus was very ahead of his day, and yet he is ancient and eternal. The Earth will go on, with or without us. She does not need us in the way that we need her. In fact, viewed from space human civilization looks like a cancer, like a giant bacteria that is attacking and overcoming her. We 'tame' nature to our own detriment. In order to be spiritually relevant and useful, our narratives of progress must learn from and imitate nature instead of seeking to overcome and control her.

We can read into the architecture of the Garden how nature is built into the home, into civilization, into the polis, the city, into family and community life, how she is invited to be present there in the midst of it all. She's not exiled. We don't robe her in pavement or cement: we invite her in and she dwells among us.