

**SCREENS**  
THE HAZE OF CANDLES  
NÍALL MCLAUGHLIN

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### THE HAZE OF CANDLES

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It is clear that screens in different manifestations have formed a consistent element in modern architectural practice. Certain factors have driven the prevalence of this phenomenon. The consequences of the energy crises on building techniques require laminated, discontinuous construction, forcing architects to consider the separate identities of inner and outer parts of the building envelope. The development of the computer screen as a primary interface between the individual and the wider world promotes this charged layer to special prominence. The post-modern desire for buildings to manifest themselves as presence, rather than logical order, pushes architects to seek more direct effects.

In this essay I will set out the principal characteristics of the screen as an architectural motif. Then I will look at the anthropological theories of Semper and Botticher who considered the representational function of the screen in relation to concealed essences. I will show how Semper edged away from the conception of the screen as representing physical support towards an elucidation of the spatial field. This is perhaps best embodied in Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion, which is briefly described. I will then look at the development of the Eastern Orthodox iconostasis and the way in which it brings the community into contact with the ineffable. The first section of this piece will end with a description of an un-built church by Herzog & de Meuron that brings a sharply contemporary focus to these ideas. I suggest that their work in the early 1990's has done much to bring the screen to the forefront of recent architectural thinking.

## The screen as an idea

I suggest that there are four distinct conceptual phases in the development of the screen as an architectural element. The first and most obvious purpose is to conceal an object from a viewing subject. This has consequences in terms of the width, height and depth of the screening layer and its general dimensions can be easily established given the relationship of the subject and object.

The second use that the screen may serve is to represent the hidden object to the viewing subject. This dual role opens up a world of rich possibilities. For example, the Chinese zaoping screen placed in front of the entrance to a house or a temple. Its function is to avoid passers-by becoming involved in useless ceremonies of prescribed etiquette by side stepping any visual encounter with the occupants. However, the materials and articulation of the screen become subject to their own etiquette in order to indicate the status of the concealed homeowner. They range from un-plastered brick, white stucco, elaborate wall painting, red for palaces to gold for temple entrances. The encounter between individuals in the inner and outer world is experienced vicariously through the mediation of this architectural element.

If the screen can represent a hidden object, it is equally possible that it may take into itself the world of the viewing subject. It may hide the object but represent it outwardly, hide the object but represent the outer world of the viewing subject, or it may simultaneously represent the hidden object and the world of the viewing subject. In this more complex manifestation the screen becomes a liminal zone mediating between two realities. We can think of it as a complex interface.

The last, and perhaps the most sophisticated, phase in the conceptual development of the screen is where there is no object. The screen stands before the viewing subject and, by convention, is deemed to conceal an invisible reality. This is common in religious architecture. The screen takes on the role of representing this ineffable world.

## What was Hecuba to him?

Karl Botticher, in his work *Die Tektonik der Hellenen* (1843-1852) put forward the idea of *Kernform* (coreform) and *Kunstform* (art or representational form) to embody the idea that the structure of a building, which has a concealed ontological reality, can be represented by an exterior encrustation. The outer skin shows out the hidden institutional and constructional reality of the inner world. The essence of Botticher's argument was that "the beauty of architecture was precisely the explanation of mechanical concepts."<sup>1</sup> In Botticher's case the nature of the essence that lies behind the appearance of the façade is primarily tectonic.

Gottfried Semper parallels much of Botticher's thinking. In his *Der Stil in der Technischen und Technischen Künsten* (1860-1863) he traces the origin of spatial enclosure to the woven fences that enclose pens in the most primitive form of settlement. He insists that "the beginning of building coincides with the beginning of textiles."<sup>2</sup> One key difference with Semper's thinking is that the enveloping screen is less concerned with representing the concealed support than it is with embodying the spatial reality that is consequent on its formation. He writes, "The wall is the architectural element that formally represents and makes visible enclosed space as such, absolutely, as it were, without reference to secondary concepts."<sup>3</sup>

The screen therefore is conceived as a woven element that encloses space and represents the spatial consequence of the act of enclosure. “For it is certain that a kind of crude weaving began with a pen as a means of dividing the “home”, the inner life from the outer life, as a formal construct of the spatial idea.”<sup>4</sup>

His separation from Botticher is underlined by his demotion of structural support as the primary form-giving element. “Scaffolds that served to hold, secure, or support this spatial enclosure had nothing directly to do with *space* or *the division of space*. They were foreign to the original architectural idea and were never form-determining elements to start with...They remain only the inner and unseen support for the true and legitimate representation of the spatial idea - which is the more or less artfully woven and knitted textile wall.”<sup>5</sup>

Semper goes on to look at the common linguistic root of wall or screen (Wand) and garment (Gewand) as manifestations of visible spatial enclosure. The effect of this anthropologically based theory is to dematerialise the screen, distancing it from its constructional reality.<sup>6</sup> In a memorable footnote he further qualifies the material primacy of the screen itself. “Every artistic creation, every artistic pleasure, presumes a certain carnival spirit, or to express it in a modern way, the haze of candles is the true atmosphere of art. The destruction of reality, of the material, is necessary if form is to emerge as a meaningful symbol, as an autonomous human creation.”<sup>7</sup>

The effect of these descriptions, taken together, is of a dematerialised woven membrane representing the primary act of spatial enclosure where structural support is present but veiled. So the thin membrane of the screen becomes the representation of spatial depth, both within and beyond it. Later

critics like Schmarsow (1893) criticised Semper for placing emphasis on the façade at the expense of the experiential body of the building considered as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

### The Inner Life and the Outer Life

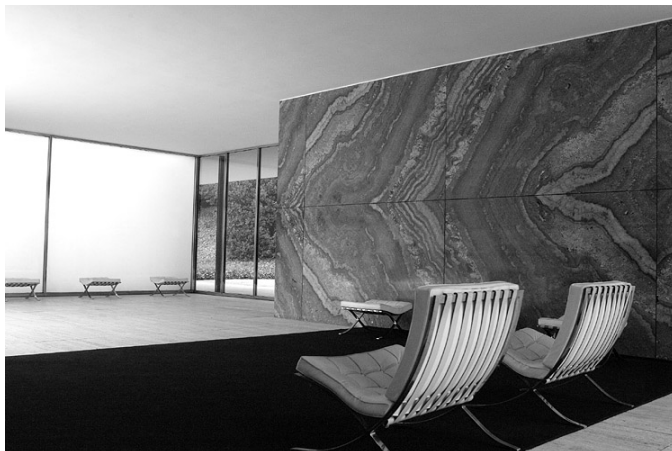
The Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe conforms, in many ways, to the Semperian model, even in its origins as a festival structure. It is conceived as an enclosure of screens mounted on an earthwork or plinth and supported by a tectonic frame that is visible but plays a secondary role to the act of enclosure. The spatial model can be read as a pen enclosing the ‘inner world’ from the ‘outer world’, and the freestanding screens formally represent and make visible enclosed space itself.<sup>9</sup>

The enclosing screens are made of travertine, alpine green marble, Algerian onyx, white glass, clear glass and partially mirrored glass. The supporting frame, already veiled by the glass, is clad in evanescent polished chrome. A distinction can be made between polished materials that emanate light (white glass), reflect light (chrome, gray, green, mirror glass), transmit light (clear glass) and other materials that reveal their section, or depth, in the way that they are cut and book-matched (marble, onyx, travertine). This sets up a dialogue between surface and section within the field of screens.

Robin Evans has written about the manner in which the balance of light on floor and ceiling, taken with other devices, create a perceived symmetry along the eye line of the viewer.<sup>10</sup> This reinforces the apprehension of the arrangement as a charged space between screens. The complex arraying and book matching of the stone creates a tapestry-like quality in its

Inner world of  
Barcelona Pavilion,  
reconstructed 1983

*Mies van der Rohe*



rhythmic organisation.

Standing within the 'inner world' created by the screens, we become part of a labyrinth of surface, reflection and rhythmic pattern. The partially reflective glass belongs to a picturesque tradition associated with the Lorraine Glass, a device to focus and estrange the landscape by altering tonal values. The theatrical nature of the screens is an echo of Peppers Ghost and other stage devices, which create suspended bodies and apparent hallucinations. Standing by the pool, looking at the half-mirrored glass wall, you can see the green book matched marble in reflection, beyond the glass, the deep gold of the onyx screen seem suspended on the same plane, the chrome columns repeat like electric charges in the dim interior, light wavers off the water. The conflation of multiple surfaces, across a spatial field, onto the same screen produces a densely woven illusory quality. The overall atmosphere is of suspension in a dense spatial mesh. Our perception keeps flipping between the plane of the screen and the multiple illusory spaces it appears to contain within itself. The viewing subject, the veiled interior and the outer world are brought together into a kaleidoscopic array of screens that embody the spatial idea.

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### God's Holy Fire

The screen that conceals the ineffable from the viewing subject reaches a clear form of expression in the 15th Century iconostasis of Eastern Christianity. This is a partition that separates the sanctuary from the nave of the church. Over time, this screen became a receptacle for icons.

The nave is the body of the church open to the congregation and

the sanctuary is the concealed space where the consecration occurs. The act of consecration manifests the presence of God and, as such, the sanctuary may be read as the place of the invisible God. The screen that separates these two spaces takes the role of representing the ineffable presence. It is significant that the iconostasis is bedecked in an array of images, but that no images are allowed beyond it into the sanctuary. The only objects permitted within the sanctuary are the paten, the chalice and the book of Gospels. So, this screen encrusted with icons, is also the limit of images.

In Greek theology the St. Basil makes a distinction between God as ousia or essence and God as hypostasis, which is his showing out, or manifestation, to the world. In the architecture of the church, this screen can be seen as the hypostasis of a hidden essence (ousia) within the sanctuary. In Eastern Christianity the iconostasis is imagined as a bridge between God and his people and it is identified with Christ himself. It is understood as his embodiment, so it is literally an incarnation. There is a paradox in the conception of the partition that visually and physically separates two spaces but is understood as something that connects them. Literal opacity is transfigured to spiritual transparency. Timothy Ware describes this strange spatial quality, “the faithful can see that the walls of the church open out upon eternity.”<sup>11</sup>

The congregation facing the iconostasis are presented with a regular structured array of images. Each one contains a figure and they are often rhythmically organised. The figures represent avatars, prophets and saints. The community of the blessed, arrayed on the screen, mirrors the community assembled in the church.

“Unlike an individual picture, icons make their statement, not to an individual, but to the whole community. Accordingly they form a community of their own, a harmonious chorus, without losing their importance in proximity to other icons, on the contrary they profit by it.”<sup>12</sup>

This set of relations embodies the most sophisticated development of the concept of the screen. It exists as a facade where the community come to witness an intangible essence represented on its surface and, at the same time, they see themselves shown back as an exalted correlative. The glittering array of icons is manifestly the limit of images. This primarily two-dimensional construction holds into itself the space of the congregation and the space of the Godhead. It is not just a plane but a threshold characterised by paradox and silence.

### **The Destruction of Reality**

Thinking of Semper’s dematerialised woven screens embodying space, and the iconostasis as a spiritual bridge bedecked with images, I am reminded of Herzog and De Meuron’s competition entry for a Greek Orthodox Church in Zurich (1989). The project was conceived at an interesting point in the development of the practice. It stands between the Ricola Storage Building in Laufen (1986) and the Signal Box in Basel (1989) on one hand, and the Ricola Storage building Mulhouse (1992) and the later Eberswalde Library (1995).

The Ricola Storage Building in Laufen has a façade that embodies Semper’s ideas of a structured screen. It represents the stacked objects within the hidden interior and the stratified cut in the quarry that forms the natural edge to the site. The



Facade of Ricola  
Storage Building,  
1987

*Herzog & de  
Meuron*



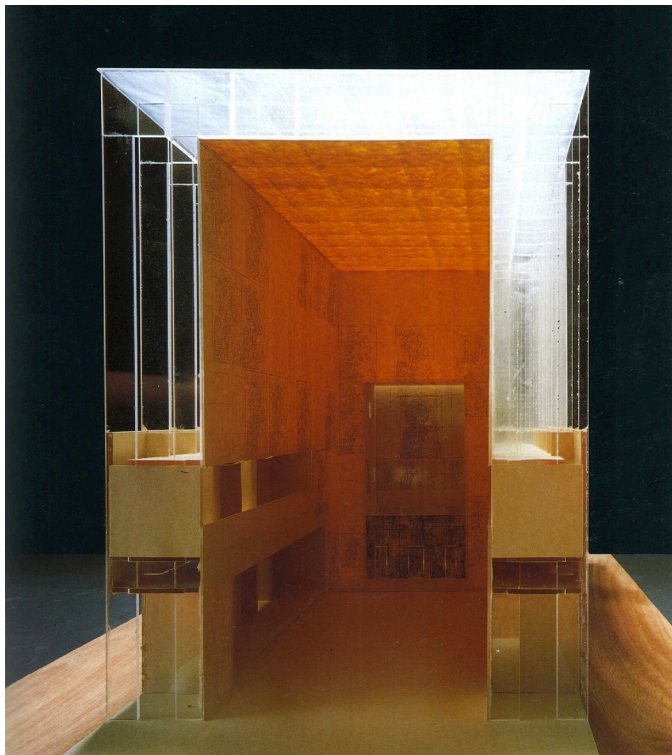
screen itself has a matter-of-fact material quality that reveals its own making but remains silent on the veiled structure of the storage building. Whether through programmatic requirement or careful calculation, the site of the architecture is resolutely focussed on the screen of the façade. It becomes a lightening conductor between the hidden interior and the site beyond. This interest in Semper may be related to a revival of scholarship on the subject at ETH where they were students.<sup>13</sup>

In the Greek Orthodox church in Zurich the architects proposed an interior lining for the nave, narthex and iconostasis made from translucent Pentelic marble panels etched or tattooed using a silk screen process showing photographic reproductions of old icons.<sup>14</sup> The use of a translucent marble screen echoes Gordon Bunschaft's Rare Book library at Yale and the transcendent presence of the stone in a backlit array brings to mind Herzog's comment that "the reality of architecture...finds its manifestation in its materials" and that materials find "their highest manifestation..... once they have been removed from their natural context."<sup>15</sup> However, the laying on of images is a transformation of another order. It brings to mind Semper's "destruction of reality, of the material."<sup>16</sup> Imagine the presence of the illuminated screen surrounding the nave, the irradiated crystalline structure of the marble occupying the same space as the tattooed icons. The stone is at once present and undercut by the images.

The local bishop rejected the project and we should regret this. I would like to know more about the theological debates surrounding this particular hypostasis. Essential questions for a theologian might be of equal interest for an architect. At least four distinct transformations occur in this proposal:

Model for the  
Greek Orthodox  
Church in Zurich,  
competition 1989

Herzog & de  
Meuron



1. The marble is consciously arrayed in a way that estranges it in order to bring it to our attention by removing its ordinary context.

2. In Eastern Christianity, each individual icon is made from materials, like paint and wood, that are “rescued from their present state of degradation and restored to their proper ‘Image’....(an icon) is a concrete example of matter restored to its original harmony and beauty, serving as a vehicle of the Spirit.”<sup>17</sup>

3. Icons are photographed and, using mechanical processes, the images are tattooed onto the surface of the marble.

4. The tattooed marble bears multiple images that are arranged serially within a screen.

The idea of the individually crafted icon released by photographic reproduction and serially arrayed on another material, the dual reading of marble as essence and as ground for images, the serial reproduction of sacred icons. These, considered as a modern hypostasis, prompt fascinating questions and prefigure many significant later projects by Herzog & De Meuron. Imagined as an architectural experience, it suggests a compelling sense of presence, echoing the serial repetition of litanies and bodily gestures in the Orthodox rite. The screen achieves a state of ecstatic suspension, a ‘Prayer of the Heart’ reached by repetition, silence, and paradox.



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Frampton *Studies in Tectonic Culture; The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995) p.82

<sup>2</sup> Gottfried Semper *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2004) p.247

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.248

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.439

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Frampton *Studies in Tectonic Culture; The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995) p.89

<sup>9</sup> Gottfried Semper *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2004) p.248

<sup>10</sup> Robin Evans 'Mies van der Rohe's Paradoxical Symmetries' in *Translations from Drawing to Building and other Essays* (London: AA Publications, 1997) p.258

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Ware *The Orthodox Church* (London and New York: Harmondsworth, 1963)

<sup>12</sup> *Icon*

<sup>13</sup> Philip Ursprung ed. *Herzog and de Meuron: Natural History* (Montreal, Quebec & Baden, Switzerland: Lars Muller Publishers & Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2002) p.

<sup>14</sup> El Croquis 84 (1997) special issue: *Herzog and de Meuron 1993-1997*

<sup>15</sup> Philip Ursprung ed. *Herzog and de Meuron: Natural History* (Montreal, Quebec & Baden, Switzerland: Lars Muller Publishers & Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2002) p.54

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Timothy Ware *The Orthodox Church* (London and New York: Harmondsworth, 1963) p.42