Phantom Limbs; 
Urban History and the Generation of Built Form

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the process of trying to manage decisions and objects coming together in a designated area of the city, questions are faced that are generated by more than one set of circumstances, the many histories of a place, its geology and typology and topology, the balance of pragmatism and idealism—the issue of whether or not to even engage in these dialogues... In the end the project must be for and about the citizenry— in all their many shapes and sizes— here are more issues and less clarity! It seems to me now that such a project must be run through a succession of cycles of construction and destruction, and I say this having watched this project settle a bit more with each rewrite and rehearsal. It also became painstakingly clear that the architectural idea that is to undergo this many washings needs to be a solid one. The overarching question engaged in the project and the one that remains is, simply, what does it mean to build in this city? I look forward to be able to try to answer it again and again.
PHANTOM LIMBS
urban history and the generation of built form
Dedicated to my grandmother Jean Cocroft Griffith, whose love of Architecture I hope to have inherited.

For Richmond.
Throughout the process of trying to manage decisions and objects coming together in a designated area of the city, questions are faced that are generated by more than one set of circumstances, the many histories of a place, its geology and typology and topology, the balance of pragmatism and idealism-the issue of whether or not to even engage in these dialogues... In the end the project must be for and about the citizenry- in all their many shapes and sizes- here are more issues and less clarity! It seems to me now that such a project must be run through a succession of cycles of construction and destruction, and I say this having watched this project settle a bit more with each rewrite and rehearsal. It also became painstakingly clear that the architectural idea that is to undergo this many washings needs to be a solid one. The overarching question engaged in the project and the one that remains is, simply, what does it mean to build in this city? I look forward to be able to try to answer it again and again.
There is delight in the brownfield. The vacant lot, the abandoned industrial yard contain both a measure of melancholy and freedom. The melancholy is the rich blend of ingredients at odds with each other that make melancholy so attractive and rare. The freedom is also a combination; this land is under civic protection—even if it is private no one cares to guard it—and at the same time it is free space, forgotten space, thus one's for the taking. The no trespassing signs have rusted into illegibility. Melancholy is temporal. There needs be the kernel of experience— the knowledge of the (faded) bright lights, the (echoes of) euphoria and abandon, the(ghosts of the) bright young things—in our case active streets, live buildings, the industry and bustle, the sounds and smells of a flourishing urban circumstance—all gone now. There is nothing it seems. Then there a cut block of granite—then maybe another. Inspection shows cobblestones under crumbling asphalt, and there is another block with an iron ring undoubtedly mounted in it—the trees start to tell a story, there is hardwood behind the weedy overgrowth and it maintains a certain shape. That is the past. Architecture resides in the present. Melancholia is three faced. It needs its past present and future— must face the day. A future that bears with it the knowledge of past failure, of recession, of withering that may yet come. It is the speculative rest between memory of rise and fall and the facing up to soldiering on.

This is in our city, this is our land, this is our urban cemetery ours to move about and sense those phantom limbs—the old effervescence of the run down neighborhood, the old pragmatism and sacrifice of the ironworks and the slaughter yard, the old schemes of the retail district, the old comfits of the social promenade. A citizen (especially an architect) cannot stand in this place without imagining what could or should be here—what seems barren ground at first is really ground almost too fertile for one who thinks in terms of space and design, every part of the city that still pokes out of the ground is a generator of possible positions to take. Different axes begin to demand predominance, a multitude of views clamor for attention.
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The site lies at the very Southwestern corner of the original city plan as laid out by Thomas Jefferson in the 1780's. In that life the site occupied land halfway downhill from the valuable breezy high ground where grace and Jefferson streets traverse, to the dank valley below where the city's east-west expressway now runs. As a result of this positioning the two blocks under consideration still bear the marks of their station. A fire station is the only still functioning tenant. The only other structure here of note is the long two-story brick building that originally served as stables for guests of the grand Jefferson Hotel located two blocks to the North; well suited for its later usage as a factory the building, now vacant, remains sturdy and handsome even with its somewhat mangled street face.

In this particular place the decision was made that here was an outpost, albeit one located within the city. This location is at the old city limit and the end of the original grid. Seen in plan the city visibly swings into a different alignment west of this point, so here there is a palpable moment in the city’s plan, history, and contemporary alignment; this moment seems to demand recognition.
The proposed project retains this building as educational and administrative space for the new idea. The other inhabitants of the site are low, mean buildings not worth saving. When one stands on the gaptoothed sidewalk in front of the site they are presented with clear views of a thriving city in each direction, though there is nothing but decimated asphalt making up the immediately adjacent two blocks. To the South are the falls of the James River, but between you and they are the downtown expressway and beyond that the high security and chemically manicured compound of the Ethyl Corporation's corporate research center—both equally off limits as viable pedestrian pieces of the City, there will be no going there for a long time.
Turning left, to the West is visible the more recent enthusiastic push beyond the old city edge. Monroe Park is a quiet significant space surrounded by buildings made up of a varying mix of grandeur, cultural significance, and economic importance. There is significant city height in this direction with several buildings of more or less fifteen stories—visual clues to the healthy and dynamic city section that lies beyond—and one is also looking directly against one way traffic flow up Cary Street, a major conduit from the West past the viewer into Downtown Richmond. Turning to follow that flow and looking East there begins a shady rhythm of well-ordered buildings, trees, and brick sidewalks; a mixture of small businesses and residences heading gently uphill for four or five blocks. After this the land crests and heads steeply down into the tall building financial district, the result is a delightful presentation of the top 1/2 of clattering downtown skyline arrayed behind the leafy quiet of midtown.
It is however, as was earlier noted, the situation to the North that above all holds contextual sway over the site in question. Completed in 1895, the Jefferson looms over this part of Monroe Ward in the past, present, and future.

“...The grand hotel of Richmond for over a century, the Jefferson Hotel was commissioned by Major Lewis Ginter to be the showplace for the city. Carrère and Hastings, fresh from their triumphs at St. Augustine, Florida, created a Beaux-Arts confection that drew upon the Villa Medici in Rome for the West Franklin Street facade and Spanish buildings for the towers. The steel frame is covered in a pearly white brick and with white terra-cotta from the Perth Amboy Terra Cotta Company. When it opened the Jefferson had 342 guest rooms, electric lighting, central heating, and hot and cold water in each room, and a grand lobby reached from West Franklin Street. The hotel was completed a few weeks ahead of schedule so that the wedding reception of Charles Dana Gibson and Irene Langhorne (his model for the “Gibson Girl”) could be held there.”

Combined with the earlier-mentioned urban moment that defines the site, there exists a strong contemporary need to hold reinforce and mark this location. In particular by treating the site as an internal outpost compression is created that will result in benevolent backfill. Part of that compressive force relies on the Jefferson as another internal anchor. The plan is to answer the Jefferson architecturally but on a more democratic level, not to compete with the grand hotel but to use its placement and demeanor as serendipitous part of a larger urban maneuver. The now vacant less than desirable spaces will be transformed by becoming spaces in between the Jefferson and the new project. The new project will differ from the Jefferson in that it seeks not an elite domination of the city corner, but seeks to employ existing contextual circumstances (and the lack thereof) with the goals of civic edification and elevation of the urban experience in mind.
The Richmond Treasury
The project is a public project. It is a collection of spaces meant to create a place for the compilation, preservation, and study of the things and ideas that concern the ongoing history of the City of Richmond, Virginia, a city that I feel is in desperate need of an adequate curiosity cabinet. The surrounding area is to be considered in a way that makes that museum a viable and vibrant part of the city, an arrangement that encourages and provides for healthy and dynamic future urban development.

Because real urban context is removed in every direction the very idea mandates that the project create its own context and then react to it. That required that a long series of inquisitive scenarios be introduced, dealt with, and in most cases, discarded. This process left a kind of theoretical residue against which the project developed, becoming richer and hopefully more apt with each cycle. Cafés, playgrounds, parking facilities, residential arrangements—all of these and more have been drawn out and examined then discarded—yet there are echoes of each proposal left in the final iteration. In retrospect this seems a healthy method of recreating urban evolution in the laboratory—at the very least it has lead to a thorough examination of the physical realities of the site.

Fundamentally the original site choice has never changed, but it has grown due to sage advice about the need to have a larger sphere of consideration in such an urban gambit. The working site grew considerably both horizontally and vertically early on, with emphasis on the relationship between the horizontal and the vertical eventually becoming a dominant theme.

The theoretical collection that would be housed was more closely examined. From the Richmond History Center’s web site:

“Mann S. Valentine, Jr., the museum’s founder, made his fortune with the creation and production of Valentine’s Meat Juice, a health tonic made from pure beef juice. As did many men of his era, Mann collected artifacts. His collection may have begun, as rumored, with a cigar box filled with arrowheads, but it soon grew to comprise hundreds of objects.

Mann shared his love of history with his brother, renowned sculptor Edward V. Valentine. Mann laid the foundation for the museum in 1892; when he died in 1893, he provided the original bequest for the Valentine Museum, leaving his personal collection of art and artifacts and the 1812 Wickham House.

The Valentine Museum, the first private museum in the City of Richmond, opened in 1898; Edward Valentine served as its first president from its opening until his death in 1930. In his own will, he left an incredible collection of his sculpture, papers, furniture and memorabilia to the museum that still bears his family name.

Over time, the institution has evolved from a general art and history museum to one focusing on the life and history of Richmond, Virginia. For more than 100 years, the History Center has collected, preserved and interpreted the materials of Richmond’s life and history. Through its collections, exhibitions and programs it reflects and interprets the broad issues and diverse communities which define the history of Richmond and its surrounding counties. The History Center is the only institution in the city committed solely to this mission.

The History Center offers major changing exhibitions, which focus on American urban and social history, costumes, decorative arts and architecture. The History Center includes the stately 1812 Wickham House, a National Historic Landmark and outstanding example of neoclassical architecture featuring rare wall paintings.”

I was fortunate enough to speak with Bill Martin of the History Center and was allowed a special tour of the collections there. What I saw, how I saw it, and how he spoke about conservation and presentation of artifacts had a profound effect on the speculation surrounding the developing architecture.

I saw at close range a wildly mixed bag of items from Richmond’s past. In fact in many instances the only thread that could possibly be strung between these objects was that they were somehow “of” the City of Richmond—whether it was there that they occurred or there that brought them about. The proximity of a needlepoint sampler by a young girl commemorating Rochambeau’s visit to the city to a small mummy’s foot stolen from Egypt by a 19th century tourist was but one of a series of strange and lively juxtapositions presented by the collection. Here was a sprawling compendium of things belonging to the haves and the have nots, the rare and the (at the time) mundane, “careless” everyday items mingled with the exquisitely wrought single things. I saw objects that brought the closeness of our ties to the older civilizations of Europe, Africa and Asia into substantive focus.

We talked about the origin of museums—about private collections of art, natural history, human history, and the collection and dissemination of knowledge that was the mission of that institution. I began to suspect that perhaps interpretation had superseded “mere” conservation and presentation in museum’s mission statements, and that individuals were being steered away from the chance to observe the whole and ferret out their own versions of our collective story. I began to realize that the 21st century has no special claim on jarring juxtaposition and reality shear, in fact the collection made evident just how far fantasy has been driven from daily life. I began to think of a building where you could just go and see it, the “interpretations” would be those that were overheard from other visitors.
Inspiration for the museum building’s interior arrangement initially came from studying photographs of British private museums, as well as vintage arrangements of larger collections like the Smithsonian, also current arrangements that have maintained the wonder and delight of this approach like New York’s Museum of Natural History and certain parts of the Met. It was determined that a level of calm restriction was needed in plan in order to prepare for the chaotic nature of the display to come; it was felt that sequential confusion in the architecture of any sort would be in effect repeating the sins of the misguided “interpreting” curators employ that has drained the joy from the museum experience.

Nine quiet, circular salons are stacked in sets of three at the front of each section of the tripartite building mass. In this arrangement, echoing the front parlor arrangement existing in many of Richmond's homes in the city’s urban core and the front showrooms of the commercial spaces of the same area, the building here gives the visitor a settled progression of spaces and the curator a set template within which to create variance as they choose. Horizontal circulation happens along a sometimes concrete, sometimes implied corridor immediately behind the salons. Behind the corridor the building becomes less structured and more light is admitted, accommodating other functions such as gift shops and the 2nd floor cafe; thus a duality is set up between the parts of the building separated by the corridor: there is levity in the back and the salons are allowed a more “serious” tone. Vertical circulation occurs by means of partially hidden curving stairs at the front of each set of salons, giving each stack its own sense of containment despite their horizontal linkage by the corridor. The main entrance is in the rear off of the courtyard and there is also the main stair, arching over itself repeatedly and offering a more public and social ascension.

In terms of the arrangement of the building on its “main” (Cary Street) elevation the building looks to Richmond for inspiration while still assuming its own identity. In a move of urban replacement a bay size and rhythm of historic proportions is reintroduced and then adjusted befitting a public museum.

The tower has a dual existence in this proposal—its presence as near object and far object. Originally envisioned as part of the Plaza wall, it was moved to the street corner to better exploit the possibilities offered by both existences. As a type the near tower triggers surprise, delight, vertigo, and a jarring shift of scale with the individual. The far tower exists as serene landmark giving identity to its part of the city.

The tower’s skin of translucent green shingles gives a shifting temporal presence during the day as light conditions change. At night interior lighting makes evident the tower’s directionally focused steel structure.

Programmatically arranged as magnet and locator for the Treasury, as well as serving as its ticket window, the tower also has the greater urban aim of becoming the symbol and marker of a future thriving district.
Cary Street Elevation, view looking South. Emphasis on the vertical, that in turn reaffirms the horizontal of the rest of the district.
Jefferson Street Elevation, view looking East. Tower as punctuation mark, elevations of Treasury District provide walls to Plaza’s room.
Section through wall, across Plaza, through Tower and Treasury, looking North. Street now belongs to the Plaza.
Section through westernmost part of building looking East, showing relationship between stacked salons and frontal curved stairs. Also narrowing of entrance condition into the sunken court.
Section through center of Treasury looking East, showing relationship between salons, corridor, main stair, and sunken court.
Lateral section through rear of Treasury looking North, showing arrangement of outdoor cafe seating, main public stair and fire stair.
View from one part of the city to another. Looking East from Oregon Hill—an neighborhood itself marked by the tower of St. Andrews.
Looking South, dialogue with the Italianate tower of the Jefferson.
View to the West, Tower as landmark at the low point showing relationship to minarets of the Richmond Landmark Theater.
Sections along Cary and Jefferson Streets showing area with and without project's presence.
process and evolution
"(the museum is) the most typical institution of the metropolis, as characteristic of its ideal life as the gymnasium was of the hellenic city or the hospital of the medieval city."

- Lewis Mumford
The architecture of the tower is concerned with quantity and dimension. With its program devoted to being a monument, the tower’s architecture has to be typologically clear and to display some extraordinary quality. It is this “extra” that poses the quantitative question, which is answered by following the internal logic of the building type: if the physical attribute of a tower is that of displaying dominance of the vertical dimension over the horizontal, its functional attribute is to provide a unique viewpoint at an unexpected location.”

- Rodolfo Machado & Jorge Silvetti
Bibliography


(Jefferson history quoted on p. 5 is found on page 222 of this source)


Promenade le long des Anciens Murs Francesco Bandini 1984 Alinari, Firenze

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