

Wandering intellect, intuition and chance in architecture

Gregory MEYER

Boston Architectural Center

gmeyer2002@hotmail.com

Abstract:

Improvisation is the art of fabrication with what is at hand. It fosters spontaneous decisions, but it is not random. It becomes a spiritual wandering of intuitive, intellectual, and chance components. Improvisation happens in the process of making art and architecture, and is experienced by wandering through the process using rational, intuitive, and chance components. This phenomenon is expressed in architecture, Abstract Expressionism, and jazz improvisation. These art forms are a synthesis of intellect, intuition, and chance based on culture, environment and memory, which reconstruct our *place* in the world. Heidegger and Piaget provide the philosophical foundation for this argument. Architecture engages these issues and is a vivid reflection and expression of our environment. The art forms of jazz improvisation and abstract expressionism also exhibit aspects of wandering and gathering. Classical and Avant-Garde literary sources will be used in support of wandering through the intellect by intuition and chance. Through wandering, such as Odysseus in Homer's epic, one's *place* in the world is found.

Wandering intellect, intuition and chance in architecture

*"... remembrance of going back and forth over the bridge, going to a job which was death, returning to a home which was a morgue, memorizing Faust looking down into the cemetery, spitting into the cemetery from the elevated train, the same guard on the platform every morning, an imbecile, the other imbeciles reading their newspapers, new skyscrapers going up, new tombs to work in and die in, the boats passing below, the Fall River Line, the Albany Day Line, why am I going to work, what will I do tonight. ..."*ⁱ

Henry Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*

I. The Philosophical Basis of Wandering

The context of wandering provides a realm for architecture's creation to be a meaningful concretization of place through the continuous interplay between intuition, chance and intellectual actions and events. Wandering expresses freedom within a framework. The act of wandering is the whole where the intermediate fragments of experiences are freely collected and juxtaposed against, on top, below one another and which exhibit some fruitful composition that makes one feel complete and which perfectly compliments and reveals the moment. This is true for the artist whether it is John Coltrane and Sun Ra, Jackson Pollock, Henry Miller, or Le Corbusier. As for the jazz improviser, intuitive impulses based on a collection of experiences are the bulk of the creation within a framework.ⁱⁱ

Architecturally speaking, this is true to Le Corbusier's later work in the 1950's that specifically revealed an assemblage of ideas fostered over his career such as in his work The Carpenter Center. It is a process that explodes the *microstructure* of the overbearing control, preconceptions, and restrictions on freedom of creation and expression.ⁱⁱⁱ Diffusion of these restrictions ultimately reveals an essence of a place in time through a work. This is precisely accurate when looking at Pollock's 'poured and flung' paintings where nature is intertwined through his process. The wandering harvests these creative works through the gathering, combining, and positioning of fragmented experiences and emotions within a spatial structure.^{iv} The philosophical basis and the 'why' for this exploration of the act of wandering is that it is recognition of this process that helps one to remove the shackles over expression and therefore the 'dehumanization of man by (systematic) world technology'.^v Wandering does this through a primitive and fundamental way of being, becoming mindful of the basic elements of life. Wandering is a continuum and is a search for completeness.

As one wanders, gathering, and collecting the remnants and residuals of such action, the human condition prompts one to hold on to, and to let go of, a variety of experience and the veritable flotsam of influence along the way. It is a time-based process that too is directional-implying movement. As a wanderer moves through any medium (space, time, place, intellect, experience), that medium exerts pressure in achieving or meeting a specific goal is unpredictable and perhaps unknowable. The phenomenon of wandering allows the freedom for creativity and chance events to occur. And so the contribution of the research is to investigate and put forth the notion of considering the action, (intuition through a framework) and subsequent (chance) events of wandering as expressed in other avant-garde arts as a valid method for the design process. It is believed that in following such a process a more humanistic and meaningful architecture will result.^{vi} The design process utilizing intuition and chance reaches down in the gut of *place* or culture and pulls out a concretized reality of the synthesis of experiences, structure of space, and environment.^{vii}

The Elements of Wandering

The basic elements of wandering include *intellect*, *intuition*, and *chance*. Of these elements intuition is subconscious and is directed through an amalgam of emotions, ones schemata, that is ones own framework that is carried through life, and the immediate environment^{viii}. In Abstract Expressionism for example artists use these elements in their process in hopes of revealing their inner being. Abstract expressionists were mainly concerned with the tendency in modern society for individuals to be stripped of their identity as in a

technocratic state. Heidegger expressed quite clearly that technology was disrupting the connection between 'man' and nature, and man's sense of being.

"...modern science, which develops a mathematical picture or model of the world and thereby reduces the world to a predictable and hence controllable object..."^{xix}

In response, the abstract expressionists used gestural painting as a method in pursuit to re-establish a balance of reason and intuition. The need for individualism and identity became paramount.^x Wandering by its free nature, its lack of a definite path and perhaps seemingly infinite path, is a method in producing something that is highly individual. If one were to take a multitude of slices through the wandering path the unique essence of its existence it's being would be revealed. The *intellect* component is the necessary element that provides a way in which the individual, gestural, and spontaneous actions may wander, explore, and create, and ultimately reveal a sense of place through the work. Pollock's seemingly chaotic paintings, known as 'all-over' or drip paintings incorporated a consistent level of structural components that allowed his freedom of expression to flourish. However, whether in jazz, painting, or literature, the reduction of more dominant hierarchical order produces a 'microstructure' that is peripheral, blurred, and particulate.^{xi} It is within this ubiquitous structure where the energy for expression lies without the dominance found in Renaissance painting, for example.^{xii}

The process of merging intellect and intuition ultimately leads to the third element-*chance*. It is indicative of Arendt's reference to 'action'. There is a link with wandering as a boundless course of action that is often unpredictable. The actual path taken, set a part from the *ideal* action, measured goals, is said to be *real* because of this unpredictable medium.^{xiii} In this unpredictability, the accident becomes a beautiful component of the artistic process. Although many criticized Pollock for seemingly 'purely accidental paintings' he spontaneously composed through controlled manipulation and acceptance of the accident.^{xiv} Abstract Expressionists are consistent with Arendt's idea of action and unpredictability as the expression of man's freewill. There becomes a disclosure as an image the rhythmic energies of place through the action of freewill.^{xv,xvi}

II. The Art of Wandering

The wandering process is not perfunctory. It is very much rooted in the "inner need" for meaningful expression.^{xvii} Kandinsky expresses this more directly,

"I value only those artists, who are artists, that is who consciously or unconsciously, in an entirely original form, embody the expression of their inner life; who work only for this end and cannot work otherwise..."^{xviii}

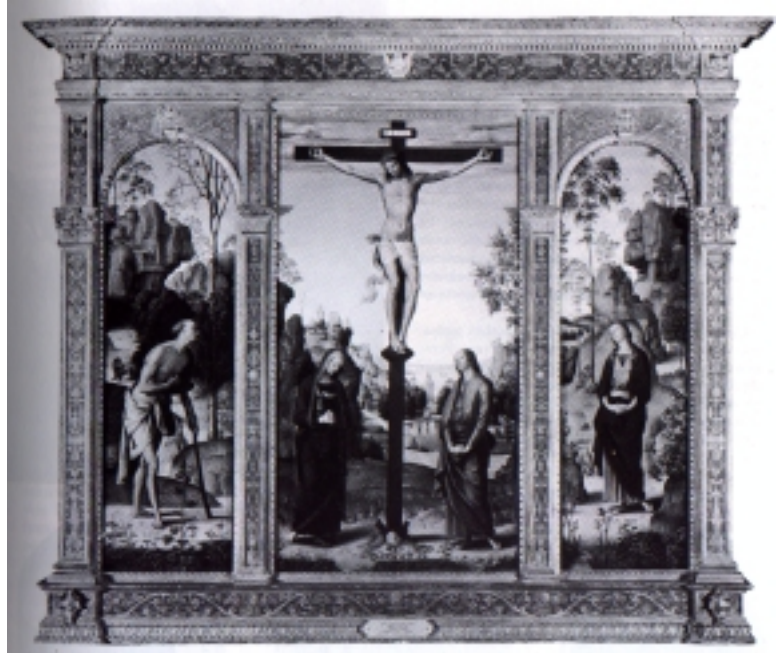
For the arts explored herein the necessity of the framework is paramount for which intuitive and the freedom of expression are able to flourish. And so the process of wandering becomes non-existent without its framework. This applies to all the aforementioned arts, where architecture should be certainly included. It is here perhaps where we as architects can benefit in learning about the art of wandering.

While we can not be integrated daily with the abstract painting of Jackson Pollock, jazz of Sun Ra, nor the literature of Henry Miller, architecture can be made to invoke the polemic of wandering as a design process or technique. As architects how can we learn through the other arts in utilizing this more expressive balance between intuition and structure?

Abstract Expressionism as Wandering

In this exploration in the 'Art of Wandering' we look at Jackson Pollock's work that epitomizes the notion of a greater freedom of expression of place through the merging of intellect, intuition, and chance. It becomes apparent, when examining the works of Pollock from 1947 to 1950, that there are fundamental structures within those works. Pollock's paintings can be analyzed in four structural levels: microstructure, primary structural configuration, secondary configuration, and format.^{xix}

The levels of structure in Pollock's works are precisely opposite to the hierarchical levels in the Renaissance painting *The Crucifixion with the Virgin, Saint John, Saint Jerome, and Saint Mary Magdalene*, by Pietro Perugino in 1485.^{xx} The Crucifixion illustrates a highly structured painting where the *primary structure* is clear and dominant. Christ on the cross and his disciples and the Virgin on the ground form two nearly perfect geometric triangles. The smaller triangle is within the larger, where the larger is an equilateral triangle and the second an isosceles triangle. Both rely on Christ at the high center as forming the symmetry and hierarchy in the painting.^{xxi} The *secondary structure* is seen as the inverse of the primary structure and is indicated by the horizon and tree line in the background in the shape of a 'V'. Here, the subservient *microstructure* is in the detail such as the rolls in the clouds and foliage in the background. The *format* is a tripartite paneled structure that sets up a horizontal rhythm that accentuates the verticality of the cross as the organizing element of the work.



Pollock's *Cathedral*, painted in 1947, on the other hand barely reveals the primary and secondary structures, where instead the microstructure is ubiquitous and dominant. Its particulate equivalence through out the painting is compared to atonal music in avant-garde jazz.^{xxii} The painting can be seen as a simple expression of 'internal rhythms' made up of poured, flung, and splattered paint. These varying techniques further detail a substructure within the microstructure. Each technique is identifiable in general and gives the painting its *all-over* character, and its energetic microstructure. The aluminum enamel paint is strategically controlled in its nearly even dispersion throughout the entire vertical format of the canvas. The enamel reflects and glares back slightly from the surface and contributes to the web of controlled explosions and clusters of black paint. Increasing the indeterminacy and the peripheral blur of the painting there are thin whips throughout the field that unify and dominate the work.

The primary structure is certainly not clear, but is suggested in three long main streaks that are interrupted and diffuse, forming a structure that accentuates the verticality of its format, but also assists in a dissolving of any hierarchy and dynamically leads the eye through out the painting's field. The secondary structure, its splatter also contributing to the microstructure, consists of arabesque swirls that are strategically placed to complete the balance of the entire field. It is also multi-centered and hinged which changes the linear dynamic of the painting.^{xxiii} By regulating the structure of the painting, Pollock regulates the tension in the painting.



It is also clear that Pollock's techniques was not solely invented by him, nor was his technique only apparent when his poured and splattered paintings began in 1947. It was a collection of techniques and experiences along

a wandering path. For instance, it is clear that his apprenticeship from Thomas Benton include intensive training in the schematic of a painting through composition and 'rhythmic dynamics'. Clement Greenburg, Pollock's leading critic, reinforced Pollock's rooted-ness in structure by connecting the modern styles of cubism with Pollock's work.^{xxiv} The abstract expressionist's use of the cubist's syntax was usually for structural articulation, not as an investigatory tool in itself "...it would serve as a graph or a blue print with which various shapes would be subsumed." The cubists grid provided a "basic modernists vocabulary of modernity, while the surrealists provided a working method; the two combined to form the basic tools that were determinant without being constraining."^{xxv} Also, it is known that Pollock was very much influenced by Mexican painters and muralists. In particular Pollock was exposed to modern art techniques-tools and materials were he "poured, dripped, splattered, and hurled paint at the picture surface" under the tutelage of David Alfaro Siqueiros.^{xxvi} Further the Mexican muralists Jose Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera had profound influence on Pollock.^{xxvii}

Linking a connection from this act of wandering, this merging of intuition with framework and unpredictability, to a meaningful grounding of sense of place with primitive aspects are sifted. It is through the sublime nature of Pollock's paintings, its indeterminate framework, and freedom of expression that brings a connection to nature, and therefore a connection to place and environment.

Looking again at *Cathedral*, the composition's abstraction, through its dim 'cave-like' colors and arabesque swirls are mindful of Piranesi's sublime etchings. It was Motherwell, the most articulate of the Abstract Expressionists that likened their sublime works to a tour of Homer's Hades and river Lethe in his epic *The Odyssey*.^{xxviii} Therefore, it is through this sublime wandering, for painter and for observer, that we become closer in connection to the primitive unconscious mind.^{xxix}

Avant-Garde Jazz as Wandering

John Coltrane's *Ascension* is a piece that exhibits the intuitive actions within a broad framework. Over the entire piece there is a framework from which improvisation, largely collective improvisation, takes place. This work again shows us the freewill that is allowed in and around the arrangement with fluctuations between varying degrees of collective improvisation. In *Ascension* there is a high degree of unpredictable-ness and boundlessness as Arendt suggests in society as a whole-it is the arranger that leads (action) where the followers finish by seeing the work through (consequences).^{xxx}

Through years of experience in Jazz improvisation and arrangement John Coltrane assembles his microstructure. Through out the piece the microstructure is made of various types of bop, including bebop, cool bop, and hard bop.^{xxxi} It consists of intense polyrhythmic fragments of various types of bop that make up the microstructure with in each collective improvisation. The percussion in particular recalls the improvisational and loud drums that are often equated with hard bop. The fragments also recall the periodic bebop timing held by the high-hat cymbal. In earlier recordings Coltrane's cool bop riffs and characteristics can be recognized such as from the works *A Love Supreme* and *Olé*. As part of the overall structure there is a continual reciprocation between collective and solo improvisation. There is no real hierarchical climatic statement. The scale of the work, two-forty minute pieces, resembles Pollock's sublime canvas size. Both arts blur the format or periphery of their work, implying infinitum and indeterminacy and therefore encourage a divine and spiritual quality.

Eric Nisenson, in his book *The Murder of Jazz*, illustrates this with an existential approach:

"it is in a loose atmosphere that jazz musicians feel relaxed and unpressured, and in which they feel as if they have the freedom to let their music take them wherever it goes...the only way for music to evolve is not through theories or even practice, but in the existential situation of musicians defining themselves in the moment"^{xxxii}

Avant-Garde Literature as Wandering

The idea of wandering in architecture as a creative method is supported through looking at avant-garde literature. In reading the work *The Tropic of Capricorn*, by Henry Miller one peers into a dense medium of experience, of action, of consequence not only through Miller's stories but more specifically by the way that he writes and by the way that one reads his book. The writing grabs you and holds you until you finish each long sentence or sequence of short sentences, with each long paragraph, with in each long chapter. The book is a layering of wandering from the unmarked chapters to the sentence. The style is in fact similar to the works of Pollock and Coltrane, there is a freedom that is entirely unrestricted and without inhibition. All utilize a field of indeterminacy. The structure of the Miller's novel is inherent by its lack of a detailed and obvious framework. For example, there are very few dialogues; there are no chapter numbers and therefore no preconceived overall order of events. The events simply unfold and are often continuous strokes or swirls as in perhaps the secondary structure of Pollock's *Cathedral*. He is circuitous in its writing; he wanders through his story by using the microstructure as his framework. The microstructure is fabricated within his sentences through his repetitive leading subject and predicate such as "I wanted..." or continuously leading with the infinitive such as "to be...".

Using his structure Miller freely and expressively paints the essence of the struggling existence of a man in New York City in the 1920's mainly by digging into the chaos of his work and also describing in clear spatial terms his 'meaningless' existence. His emphasis on this 'meaningless' existence is inherently an ontological question that he is in search for the meaning of his Being. He writes,

"...fish will come and bite, tomorrow a new life, where, anywhere, why begin again, the same thing everywhere, death, death is the solution, but don't die yet, [wait another day], a stroke of luck, a new face, a new friend, million chances, you're too young yet, you're melancholy, you don't die yet, [wait another day]...maybe being up high between two shores, suspended above the traffic, above life and death, on each side the high tombs, tombs blazing with dying sunlight, the river flowing heedlessly, flowing like time itself; maybe each time I was up there, urging me to take it in, to announce myself..."^{xxxiii} (my underline and bracket)

There is a driving, but easy syncopated rhythm of independent clauses that seem to be indefinite. He blurs that boundary of the novel and poetry. Illustrating this below, Miller uses this technique in describing his longing to feel human, close to nature, not separated from nature because of the consequence of modern society. He writes,

"I wanted the earth to open up, to swallow everything in one engulfing yawn. I wanted to see the city buried fathoms deep in the bosom of the sea. I wanted to sit in a cave and read by candlelight. ..I wanted something of the earth, which was not man's doing, something absolutely divorced from the human of which I was surfeited. I wanted something purely terrestrial and absolutely divested of idea. ..I wanted the dark fecundity of nature, the deep well of the womb, silence, or else the lapping of the black waters of death. I wanted to be that night which the remorseless eye illuminated, a night diapered with stars and trailing comets. To be of night so frightened silent, so utterly incomprehensible and eloquent at the same time. Never more to speak or to listen or to think. To be englobed and encompassed and to encompass and to englobe at the same time..."^{xxxiv} (my underline)

III. Conclusions-Architecture as Wandering:

Framework and Freedom as Cause-Wandering as Consequence

Through the research of the art of wandering it was found that all of the seemingly most abstract and free works whether in painting, music or literature, achieve not just the gestural and spontaneous freedoms, but bring to light the necessity of a framework. It is only through this recognition of a broad framework then can a truly meaningful improvisatory and spontaneous expression of the moment take place. For each art the elements of the artists' wanderings were analyzed where the framework was revealed.

Initially it was hypothesized that architecture has not obtained the freedom of creation, as have the other arts. After performing research however of the other avant-garde arts, uncovering their own dependency to structure as a spring board and a sustaining tool for their creativity, it was realized that architecture in fact

was parallel in many regards in painting, music, and literature. In architecture, however the difficulty of the use of abstraction such as in a work of Pollock, or the words Miller is apparent. However, their works do provide a method of using an innovative and inventive structure to act out ones spontaneous and gestural qualities. As an emphasis in describing the importance of structure, it is almost antithetic where creativity is not found in the gestural move or the spontaneous act, but rather in the invention of a new structure, new framework to move and think with in. It is the continual reinvention of structure that becomes replenished through the amalgam processes and events of previous framework, previous spontaneous gestures, and revealing consequences. The image, the Pollock drips are the effect of the controlled cause of his action. He decides on the large or small black swirl and the confluence or clash of colors, based on perhaps unconscious empirical actions, but largely he understands the overall framework, sticks to its essence.^{xxxv}

Pursuant to utilizing the microstructure for expression, defying and blurring the boundaries of architecture as a means of architectural design process, Le Corbusier mixes and redefines the hierarchy of interior and exterior spaces. This is shown clearly in Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts built in 1964; Corbu took this opportunity given by Josef Sert, to represent the culmination of his ideas into his only United States building. Its relevance here demonstrates the extension of his method of creation, still true to his roof deck, his pilotis, in a newly found expression. The Carpenter Center is an example, more so than Ronchamp, a merging his previous framework of design with those gained in his buildings of the early 1950's. Here, even more so, the interior and exterior spaces collide, mix, and swirl all within an orthogonal context where Ronchamp had none. The deep recesses of modular fenestrations, the penetrating ramp, the pilotis with lower program, the gestural forms that appear as if the interior free space from his 'open plan' spaces were turned inside out, so that interior and exterior spaces are treated equally, are without hierarchy while creating a energetic free architectural expression.

-
- i Miller, *The Tropic of Capricorn*, p50
 - ii Erry Coker, *Improvising Jazz*, p 3
 - iii "Microstructure " as opposed to a clear hierarchical order. As in Jackson Pollock's 'all over painting' the dominant framework is the microstructure-an egalitarian composition.
 - iv Christian Norberg -Schulz, *Existence, Space, and Architecture*, p10
 - v Strauss, *History of Political Philosophy*, p897
 - vi Mitchell, *Redefining Designing, From Form to Experience*, p29
 - vii Norberg-Shulz, *The Phenomenon of Place*, p418
 - viii Christian Norberg -Schulz, *Existence, Space, and Architecture*, p10
 - ix Strauss, *History of Political Philosophy*, p897
 - x Australian National Gallery, *The Spontaneous Gesture*, p5
 - xi Rohn, *Visual Dynamics*, p107
 - xii Ibid, p5
 - xiii Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p184
 - xiv Rohn, *Visual Dynamics*, p40
 - xv Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p185
 - xvi Rohn, *Visual Dynamics*, p107
 - xvii Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p26
 - xviii Ibid, p vii
 - xix Rohn, *Visual Dynamics*, p4
 - xx Rohn, *Visual Dynamics*, p5, Plate 1
 - xxi Rohn, *Visual Dynamics*, p6
 - xxii Ibid, p106
 - xxiii Ibid, p13-17
 - xxiv Cernuschi, *Jackson Pollock, Meaning and Significance*, p115
 - xxv Hobbs, Levin, *Abstract Expressionism, The Formative Years*, p19
 - xxvi Siegel, *Painting After Pollock, Structures of Influence*, p14
 - xxvii Hobbs, Levin, *Abstract Expressionism. The Formative Years*, p14
 - xxviii Ibid, p24

-
- xxix Ibid,pl3
xxx Arendt, The Human Condition, p189
xxxI Kernfeld, What to Listen for in Jazz, p130
xxxii Nisenson, Blue: The Murder of Jazz, p115
xxxiii Miller, The Tropic of Capricorn, p50
xxxiv Ibid,p74