2010

Reflections of an Architect

Brianna Thiel

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/fishladder

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/fishladder/vol8/iss1/19

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Fishladder: A Student Journal of Art and Writing by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
Reflections of an Architect

An anticlimactic finish for my greatest act. The fire started on the fifth floor and soon enveloped the entire building. Fire crews were unable to contain the flames, which began with an electrical short near an exhaust fan. Several residents were treated for smoke inhalation, but no major injuries were sustained. None but the building itself—collapsed into a blistering inferno.

My phone rang off the hook the morning after the fire. Reporters looked for a comment from Silas Westlan, the building's ingenuous designer. I let my answering machine pick up—my way of communicating without having to communicate. Without having to mention my wife's name or hear how sorry they were for my loss. Felix's number came up on the caller I.D. around ten o'clock. My eyes burned from reading the paper's account, so I set it down and picked up the phone.

“You okay, Dad?” he asked.

Was I okay. Something that took years of my life had just melted in one night.

“Dad?” he repeated. “I mean, I know the place meant a lot to you and all—”

“I just need to get there,” I said. “I’m sure I can reconstruct the blueprints. Start again.”

“Well, you’re a little past your prime,” he said.

I got on a plane to New York an hour later.

313 Amsterdam had been my greatest achievement. The first building that my wife Dacia and I designed together, it had a vertical, graceful strength. Some called it eclectic. Its Neoclassical façade broke sharply with its dense urban surroundings, and the sporadic Gothic motifs made it seem theatrical, even garish.

But Dacia approved. There was a tense balance between brick and concrete, traditional and modern— and we had perfected it. It was six stories high, and two Corinthian columns stretched the full height of the building. At the top was an enormous pediment, secured to the roof by hidden steel beams. Two shorter brick walls angled away from the front façade. Lined up these, in vertical rhythms, were bay windows with Gothic pointed arches and surrounding balconies—one for each floor. A set of white double doors stood at the main entrance. Above, a stunning rose window in scarlet, amber, and blue stained glass sparkled. On either side of the doors, a sculpted phoenix sat serenely like a granite guardian.
The interior of the building had an octagonal plan. At the center was the cylindrical lobby, both awe-inspiring and symmetrical. A circle of columns led to the front mahogany desk, and marble tiles grounded the room in between. Behind the desk, a broad staircase led to the second floor, where it split into two spirals and climbed to the third level and beyond. The stairs looked up to a magnificent glass dome—a specter of light on the ceiling. Each apartment was identical in plan, but varied in design. The walls brought them to life, gave them individual personalities. That had been Dacia's doing—she dreamt up the blue apartment with marble chair rails and hard wood flooring, the elaborate Victorian suite, and sleek modern studio. Harmonious yet diverse.

But the rooms changed with time. Perhaps it was my fault. I let it go too soon—released it to the uncaring public, who slammed doors and cracked plaster, and traded Dacia's curtains for frayed white drapes. As the years passed, even the red brick faded steadily into the wheezing, smoggy umber of the neighborhood. One morning about five years ago, I found graffiti on the east wall.

That's when I decided to retire. Dacia convinced me to leave our architectural firm to Felix, and we moved back home to Ohio. The Midwest had always been an undercurrent to my heartbeat, and I found myself renewed. I started drawing houses again.

But soon afterwards, Dacia began to leave me. She blacked out and collapsed on the kitchen floor without warning. It was cancer. And it sucked her away from me one cell at a time.

My flight landed in New York after sundown, and I watched the city lights set the sky ablaze. Felix met me at the airport and carried my bags.

"Are ya hungry, Dad? You wanna eat?" he asked. "Cause we can go out, er—"

I could tell my white unshaven scruff and loose shirttails embarrassed him—he wouldn't want to be seen in public like this. Felix was suave. He got his mother's looks, striking dark hair and green eyes that look perpetually teary. Like her, he was always perfectly dressed—his pin-striped suit neatly tailored and his shirt and tie a complementary blue and orange.

"We can pick something up if ya want," he said.

"No, I'm okay. Let's just go," I said. "How far is it to Amsterdam?"

"Listen, tonight's really not good for me," he said. "It's already late, and I've gotta be at the office no later than six tomorrow. Maybe we can head over there this weekend. How long are you staying?"

"I can get on another plane right now if that's what you want," I said. He rolled his eyes and moved to the driver's side of the cab. Clearing my throat, I raised my voice a little. "I need to see it."

Dacia and I met in college at the Ohio Institute of Art and Design. It was September of 1958. She was studying interior design and needed an extra elective to graduate. So she sat down in History of Architecture next to me, a slouching, moody junior, and gave me a half-smile. I was immediately lost. A quiet architect with average grades, I was stunned by her strong personality;
The interior of the building had an octagonal plan. At the center was the cylindrical lobby, both awe-inspiring and symmetrical. A circle of columns led to the front mahogany desk, and marble tiles grounded the room in between. Behind the desk, a broad staircase led to the second floor, where it split into two spirals and climbed to the third level and beyond. The stairs looked up to a magnificent glass dome—a specter of light on the ceiling. Each apartment was identical in plan, but varied in design. The walls brought them to life, gave them individual personalities. That had been Dacia’s doing—she dreamed up the blue apartment with marble chair rails and hard wood flooring, the elaborate Victorian suite, and sleek modern studio. Harmonious yet diverse.

But the rooms changed with time. Perhaps it was my fault. I let it go too soon—released it to the uncaring public, who slammed doors and cracked plaster, and traded Dacia’s curtains for frayed white drapes. As the years passed, even the red brick faded steadily into the wheezing, smoggy umber of the neighborhood. One morning about five years ago, I found graffiti on the east wall.

That’s when I decided to retire. Dacia convinced me to leave our architectural firm to Felix, and we moved back home to Ohio. The Midwest had always been an undercurrent to my heartbeat, and I found myself renewed. I started drawing houses again.

But soon afterwards, Dacia began to leave me. She blacked out and collapsed on the kitchen floor without warning. It was cancer. And it sucked her away from me one cell at a time.

My flight landed in New York after sundown, and I watched the city lights set the sky ablaze. Felix met me at the airport and carried my bags.

“Are ya hungry, Dad? You wanna eat?” he asked. “Cause we can go out, er—”

I could tell my white unshaven scruff and loose shirttails embarrassed him—he wouldn’t want to be seen in public like this. Felix was suave. He got his mother’s looks, striking dark hair and green eyes that look perpetually teary. Like her, he was always perfectly dressed—his pin-striped suit neatly tailored and his shirt and tie a complementary blue and orange.

“We can pick something up if ya want,” he said.

“No, I’m okay. Let’s just go,” I said. “How far is it to Amsterdam?”

“Listen, tonight’s really not good for me,” he said. “It’s already late, and I’ve gotta be at the office no later than six tomorrow. Maybe we can head over there this weekend. How long are you staying?”

“I can get on another plane right now if that’s what you want,” I said. He rolled his eyes and moved to the driver’s side of the cab. Clearing my throat, I raised my voice a little. “I need to see it.”

Dacia and I met in college at the Ohio Institute of Art and Design. It was September of 1958. She was studying interior design and needed an extra elective to graduate. So she sat down in History of Architecture next to me, a slouching, moody junior, and gave me a half-smile. I was immediately lost. A quiet architect with average grades, I was stunned by her strong personality;
she gripped people with her vibrant humor. She could look at a room and know immediately what color it should be. With her, I wanted to be something paramount. Build her a mountain and name it my devotion. But she just laughed and told me I could read walls like Shakespeare could write sonnets, and that was fine with her.

After graduate school, we started our own architectural design firm. Our first several jobs met with mediocre success. But Dacia grounded me and gave me courage to keep trying. I landed our first big contract the same year Felix was born, and after that my work became all-consuming.

Felix and I never connected. Maybe it was nights spent pouring over blueprints while he tried to show me his report card or tell me about his day. I’m not sure when he realized I wasn’t listening—or when he stopped talking too. But he did, and somehow it was easier for me to be a backdrop in his life. After his college graduation, he started working at the firm. We became professional acquaintances, even took each other to lunch once a week. We argued often over project designs—he favored sound engineering over aesthetic. Somewhere in the middle, I realized I had lost a son—or maybe I had never found him to begin with. But now the distance was stretched too tightly, and I was scared of the effort it would take to loosen it.

The night was foggy and humid. Small beads of rain made a dreary path down my window as we rode. I watched silently, wishing I could catch them.

“Glad you listened to me, Dad,” Felix said. “It’s not like I had anything to do tonight besides pick my neurotic father up from the airport.”

He could sting, just like his mother. But what in her had been sarcastic charm was self-centered cynicism in Felix.

“It’s one of the perks of inheriting your neurotic father’s business,” I said.

“Right. I love how you say that as if it’s the greatest disappointment of your life,” he said. “How terrible for you to have a capable son to inherit your mess.”

“And what exactly has my capable son accomplished recently?” I asked.

“Town houses? Post-modern trash buildings?”

“Who are you to talk?” he cut in. “Without Mom you would’ve been nothing.”

“Well, at least I had her,” I said.

“Yeah, I guess we never did have much in common, did we?” he said.

We rode in silence for several blocks. It was getting late. The streets were nearly empty, and the stop lights and lit-up restaurant signs melted in eerie colors on the wet pavement. There was something I needed to know.

“About what I said this morning,” I began.

“It can’t just be rebuilt, Dad,” he said. “You know that and I know that. So ya move on.”

As we turned the corner onto Amsterdam, I shut my eyes. Maybe I didn’t want to see this. Charred brick lay in uneven piles, and smoke still hovered over the site like an endless fog.

“I told you this wasn’t a good idea,” Felix said.
she gripped people with her vibrant humor. She could look at a room and
know immediately what color it should be. With her, I wanted to be some-
thing paramount. Build her a mountain and name it my devotion. But she just
laughed and told me I could read walls like Shakespeare could write sonnets,
and that was fine with her.

After graduate school, we started our own architectural design firm. Our
first several jobs met with mediocre success. But Dacia grounded me and gave
me courage to keep trying. I landed our first big contract the same year Felix
was born, and after that my work became all-consuming.

Felix and I never connected. Maybe it was nights spent pouring over blue-
prints while he tried to show me his report card or tell me about his day. I'm
not sure when he realized I wasn't listening— or when he stopped talking
too. But he did, and somehow it was easier for me to be a backdrop in his
life. After his college graduation, he started working at the firm. We became
professional acquaintance, even took each other to lunch once a week. We
argued often over project designs— he favored sound engineering over aes-
thetic. Somewhere in the middle, I realized I had lost a son— or maybe I
had never found him to begin with. But now the distance was stretched too
tightly, and I was scared of the effort it would take to loosen it.

The night was foggy and humid. Small beads of rain made a dreary path
down my window as we rode. I watched silently, wishing I could catch them.

"Glad you listened to me, Dad," Felix said. "I'm not like I had anything to
do tonight besides pick my neurotic father up from the airport."

He could sting, just like his mother. But what in her had been sarcastic
charm was self-centered cynicism in Felix.

"It's one of the perks of inheriting your neurotic father's business," I said.

"Right. I love how you say that as if it's the greatest disappointment of
your life," he said. "How terrible for you to have a capable son to inherit your
mess."

"And what exactly has my capable son accomplished recently?" I asked.

"Town houses? Post-modern trash buildings?"

"Who are you to talk?" he cut in. "Without Mom you would've been
nothing."

"Well, at least I had her," I said.

"Yeah, I guess we never did have much in common, did we?" he said.

We rode in silence for several blocks. It was getting late. The streets were
nearly empty, and the stop lights and lit-up restaurant signs melted in eerie
colors on the wet pavement. There was something I needed to know.

"About what I said this morning," I began.

"It can't just be rebuilt, Dad," he said. "You know that and I know that.
So ya move on."

As we turned the corner onto Amsterdam, I shut my eyes. Maybe I didn't
want to see this. Charred brick lay in uneven piles, and smoke still hovered
over the site like an endless fog.

"I told you this wasn't a good idea," Felix said.