

REload__ Chicago_ 2012

Eight years have passed since we walked for the first time the city of Chicago. We did it then in the company of the highly appreciated teacher Angel Nodar del Real and a large group of third year of architecture enthusiastic students. It became the beginning of a path we have been travelling side by side with our students since then to get closer to the glow emanating from architecture masterpieces when they really are so.

Having rested the seventh day, we went back to the beginning of the experience maybe due to our need to recover – with new eyes – the power of the initial process and the human landscapes shared in 2005, to be able to share them again with the new second year student generation that has joined us this time, always trying to re-launch their love for architecture.

During these eight years , the city of Chicago and its surroundings have experienced remarkable changes and new developments – Frank Gehry’s Millenium Park, Anish Kapoor’s Chicago's Cloud Gate (the Bean), Willis Tower (old Sears), Norman Foster’s Fortaleza Hall at the Johnson and Wax complex ... -, but their positive human and cosmopolitan aroma remains intact at all scales.

This shared architecture and human landscape permanent fragrance has shaped the scaffolding system of a poetic reflection that has been developed along these years that we then offer; some aspects of the 2005 adventure together with a few new experienced events up to this year 2012 are included, but we mainly try to refresh and enhance certain clarities that appear as timeless to us.

Opening movements

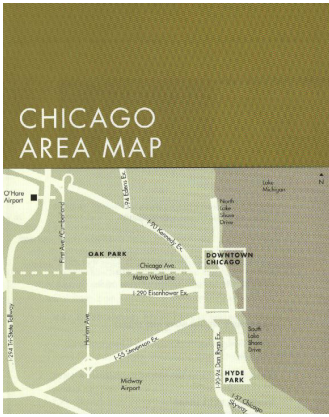
We are in 2005. Needless to say that we are five years from the beginning of a new millennium. The one just passed has raised enormous interest and great achievements in relation to the study and better understanding of structures, properties and forms of expression of the indispensable material world – both natural and artificial – to which we belong.

Applied to material goods' production, science's achievements and emerging Technologies offer abundant and refined trophies that allow us to appreciate high effectiveness and a certain amount of splendour in the world today.

We feel widely grateful to our ancestors and strongly encouraged to face the new challenges implied inside their copious heritage, facing these reality and progress, particularly on Architecture.

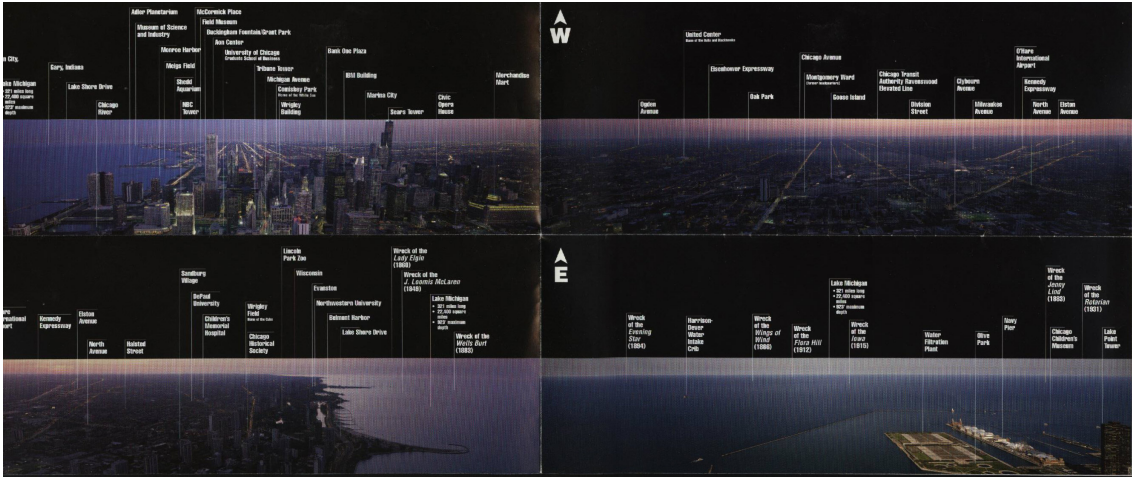
We have now to set on our time's balance pan innovative issues of interest and attention to put in connection certain masterpieces – whose spatial, geometric, material and overall virtues have been widely spread along the past century -, with the more personal reality of those who use them, travel them through, admire, fear, enjoy or suffer them in the present. All of it due to the fact that we consider them as something permanently valuable making us feel the need of bringing them again into our dialogue, reading and reviewing them again and transforming us - thanks to the ancestral power of spaces, content and form – in new explorers of their current life.

We start off a way of study and reflection based on the referred intentions, somehow coloured by a personal emotional ingredient that, far from the pretension of substituting or wiping out any other, could rather be placed next to or beside all of them.



Peeking into Chicago

Observing how all glass in the light burns becomes a rather easily shareable and touching experience. The city of Chicago was receiving us with an ordered and activated fire of infinite coming and remote, fixed and mobile, interior and outlying light's crystallographic arrangement as we were approaching to meet her from the Hancock tower's 94th floor, upon arriving in the evening of February 5.



That night, in front of us ¹, a large tapestry of sparkling and mysterious places, quasi axonometrically depicted and recognized by our eyes, fluttered about a plain's inner space furnished in a deep and incomprehensible way to any possible gaze. All was and at the same time appeared as somewhat clear, incisive and memorable: ' icastic ' – according to the idea of exactness proposed by Italo Calvino for the next millennium ² -, everything ' a revelation ' , paraphrasing Peter Eisenman ³.

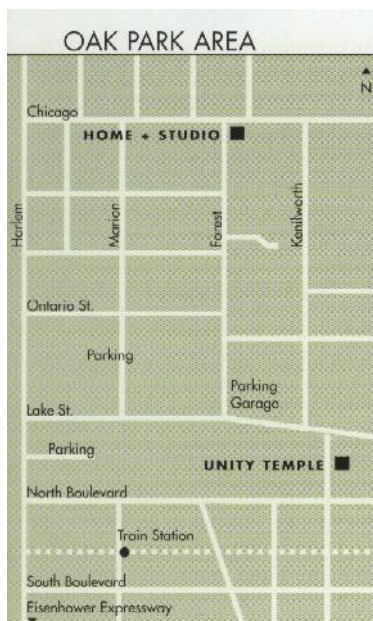
¹ Us: 125 students of Architecture + 3 teachers
² CALVINO, Italo, *Six nemos for the next millenium*, Ed. Siruela, Madrid, 2001, p.67.
³ EISENMAN, Peter, Lecture - presentation of his book on Giuseppe Terragni at Madrid's Teatro Infanta Isabel, splendidly live translated by Luis Fernández - Galiano on October 13th 2003.

With this shock and wonder derived from the seductive power able to be displayed by the work of generations when it arises as a constructed form available to set forward – through certain rumours, aromas and accents - the strata tissue we call a city, we went to bed our first night.

'laccio' – according to the Italian way of saying – the city dawned Sunday February 6. Each one of the three teachers that were travelling with the group made an spontaneous single scan output to carry out their initial exploration of the city before beginning the joint academic journey. The poetic vision of the daybreak veils over the buildings from the streets, the quick continuous race close to the frozen edges of Lake Michigan or the delicate melody of a soprano from Detroit at the cathedral, put some welcome accents to our first breakfast meal, back to our lodging.

While we were getting ready to leave the hotel, the street mist was withdrawing and almost disappearing in a way that, by the time we set our feet again on the sidewalks of the city, the morning showed open and exact as a Dante's verse.

We started to walk the Michigan Avenue towards South in small groups, then we passed the Tribune and the Wrigley and under the watchful eye of Mies's IBM we crossed Chicago River. By the time we got to the Loop – around 10:00 a.m. – our internal temperature had raised up to adequate levels to undertake the journey with guarantees; vivid memories of the night before drawn in from the Hancock lookout tower, closeness and immediate contact with places, buildings and people, were starting to produce cogent effects of a high interest and excitement over us.



We took the green line towards Oak Park and Harlem. In fact, we were so full of energy and excitement – all comments were so vibrant – that a twelve stations distance across the industrial districts and outlying suburbs of the city became a one second event.

Much sooner than we could expect, silently accompanied by the smooth presence – without fences or other physical obstacles, just the respect – of the Prairie houses and the squirrels that live around them, we were moving along Forest Avenue; they, being excited, left with hurry their refuges and started to wander from place to place.

When we reached FLW's home-studio we couldn't get into it due to the fact that the building conditions didn't allow simultaneous visits of groups as large as ours (128 people). So, part of the group strode towards Lake Street 875 with the intention to approach the Unity Temple building – F.L.W. 1906/8 -, for which we had a non-guided visit reservation fixed with the Restoration Foundation of the building for the afternoon hours.

Right from our first look from Lake street's distance, the building appeared as a subtle accent on a greyish landscape easiness tinted; as we were getting closer, our wish to be by its side increasingly grew. When we finally reached our goal, for a moment we had the feeling that all spatial and time categories were filling up our spirit with a somewhat appealing dance in couples wittily recalled.



A brief introduction explanation to the whole group became necessary before going inside the building, since it was a non-guided visit. We were offered a double possibility to that purpose: to take a north-south walk along the eastern façade of the Temple or along its western's; in both cases we could get together over any of the two platform halls that lead to the Temple's doors - with their also double main entrances – according to the referred orientations.

The site was designed choosing its place at a second row from Lake street in order to avoid acoustic pollution derived from the tram's presence. " *FOR THE WORSHIP OF GOD AND THE SERVICE OF MAN* ", is the inscription that can be read over its access threshold and clearly shows the Universalist Unitarian Congregation double aim when, at the beginning of 1906, they hired the services of F.L.Wright.



This circumstance opened the possibility to have a first academic content intervention close to the building, on concepts like place and space, city and building, cross section and floor plan, spatial transition and other. Thinking phenomena in pairs can be of great help to discover surprisingly fertile alliances among the apparently opposite values; it can enlarge our replies not just by the sum but by the product of their values, since unity without multiplicity doesn't find an easy place in our both spiritual and material nature. We can also find this experience of thinking in opposites to make them converge through life as parts of a whole by drawing their singularity out to recall a true unit form, twenty years later – January 1927 – in the paper Mies Van der Rohe sent to Walter Riezler ' on form in architecture ' 4.

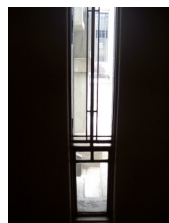
⁴ NEUMEYER, Fritz, *Mies van der Rohe - La palabra sin artificio*, Ed. El Croquis, Madrid, 1995, p. 301.

The building programme shows a strategy derived from the five points that since 1899 gave support to the universalist doctrine ⁵, synthesized in the present case as the addition of two thoughts or intentions: the worship of God + the service of man. Being given such a radical starting formula, it becomes easy to understand why the architect could take it as his main design strategy both for the whole building and for its different parts.



Functional, formal or spatial's permanent proposals using juxtaposition, mineral twin or dobbing, but always defined by pairs – as to articulate the presence of qualities, contents and entities or to express their absence – play not a minor role on the development of the design process of the work.

Once inside, the building invites us to follow the way opened at our left that splits into two, since it only leads to the path that drives us into the main room. We walk along brief and deep spaces, strongly low, narrow and dark. We find ourselves facing a redemption way – a physical, emotional and spiritual cathartic immersion – utterly embracing our whole person on a short distance.



Those few steps taken in darkness and shrink, offer nevertheless a cogent maturity experience that

⁵ DAMBORIENA, Prudencio, *Universalistas*, Gran Enciclopedia Rialp, Tomo XXIII, Ed. Rialp S.A., Madrid, 1975, p.104.

fosters and anticipates our wish of arriving at other clearer and higher places.

It consists on a spatial mechanism that amazingly acts over visitor's psychology, in an analogue way as the one performed over the conscientious desire of a person by the operative and patient wait for something long time wished. Somewhat alike to an explorer's experience that, not rarely, needs to go through a valley or a chasm before gazing the dreamed summit.



That wished high and clear place, in our case appears as an interior room well limited whose seating capacity concentrates on a three level set of rows arrangement. Two light sources articulated on four complementary devices feed its brightness. A continuous vertical or diagonal, golden or neutral flow of natural light coming from up and out, on the one hand; a carefully displayed artificial light – amber, warm, punctual and close – hanging from the cover's structure or set from the lateral enclosures offering a full of nuances reinforcement to the interior space atmosphere, on the other.

The pathos of places that jealously keep something can be perceived; places to host a reflective conscience shaped by silence and interior search: strongly characterized 'sacred' places, according to the ancient temples's meaning but at a clearly different scale.

A jewellery box – Wright would exclaim – for the worship and meeting with the Almighty and with those of His qualities we feel inclined to share when we enjoy certain places and moments. Everything is geared according to a real compromise somewhat dismantled thanks to the *universalist* defence of apocatastasis – return to all to its original primitive or heavenly starting point -.

Along our history, that longing for the lost paradise has become a trigger of a large variety of gazes cast from the art and culture worlds. Naturalistic research streams

over human's first primitive hut are in the origin of some of the well assessed architectural productions.



There exists a shared identity will, a quest over the roots of a common initial basis agreement, previous to any appearance, development or growth of diversities, complexities or specializations, very consistent with unitarians's creed and derived from this paradigm, we can guess.

Nevertheless, Wright does not design the building with a nostalgic look over a place or a time of the past but, always and in any case, from the present time and towards future. As a matter of fact his jewellery box is a gift able also to hold old memories, but above all it is a sparkling artifice wittily designed to cause live encounters among people attracted by its both serene and disturbing presence.

This characteristic property was slowly more explicitly coming out as we were reaching the building's core.



We were slowly immersing ourselves inside an atmosphere whose intensity left no room for uncommitted calculations. So we were coming closer to each other silently whispering from our more personal intimacy 'interpretations that always get to the heart of the thing keeping respect for the unknown that exceeds our capacity, tasting no apparent beauty from each appearance...'⁶, in a somewhat spontaneous and unexpected way.

After a while, both students and teachers of the group found ourselves surprisingly assembled at the main room of the building, eagerly drawing our attention over the lectern situated on the Chair's table axis.

That simple assembly became quite an event so as to naturally open the possibility of a second intervention over academic issues like: origin and meaning of the site, the work of an architect, personal relations and architecture construction, space and form generation from structure, interior colour and material expression, light, content elements of a building, the city...

⁶ Von Balthasar, H.Urs, *Herrlichkeit, Fächer der Stile*, vol.2, Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln 1961.



Everything was again new for some of us and at the same time it appeared clear, incisive and splendid: the huge and the subtle, the pleasant and the modest, the rational and the emotional.



By designing and building this Unity Temple – taking the baton of the old wooden church destroyed by fire during a storm in 1905, and being a starting point for the long process of generation of the first Unitarian Church building by Louis I. Kahn at Rochester, New York, half a century later – Wright introduces us into the interior room of a large sacred mountain from whose inner coloured space one can stimulate any personal transformation, setting in front of us the evocative sketch of a spatial promise open to wish and hope: a new Earth and a new Heaven.



Juan Millán López_2005.12