



LYCEUM

2017-TRAVEL REPORT

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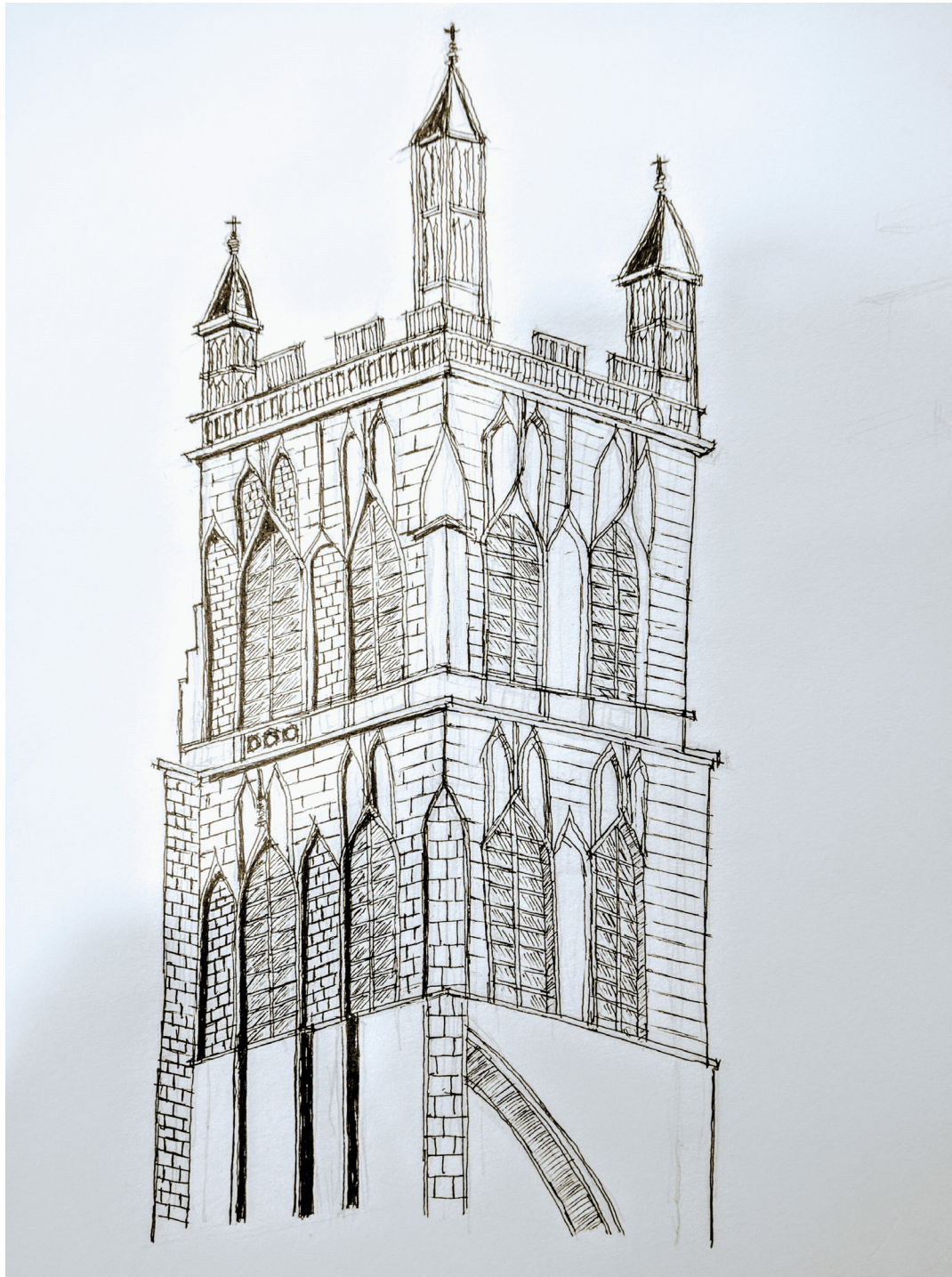
THE ENGLISH ODYSSEY

December 8- Initial Impressions and contemplation

I arrive in London on a snowy-sleety day as the sun sets on an amber cloudy sky. As the train trundles along to Ladywell in South London, my abode for this first portion of the adventure, I catch a glimpse of Foster's St Mary's Axe, The Gherkin and the Shard, three contrasting basic forms that soar up in the far horizon next to a vivid array of dam-moist brick walls and spires puncturing the sky like little needles.

Having fostered a deep interest in palimpsest, the rewriting and layering of history on the same earthly fabric, the city leaves a deep first impression. There is such a farrago of material, styles and history layered in a quaint comforting manner. Right next to a steel and glass tower are neighborhoods of Tudor style exposed timber-frame lining up a cobblestone alleyway reminiscent of the vivid scenes etched in my memory while reading P.G Wodehouse's novels in my backyard during childhood.

Apart from the urban cacophony, there seems to be another undercurrent soundscape of gently rustling leaves, intermittent rain striking against the cobblestone and rocking pigeons adding a treble to the soothing masked orchestra. The purpose of this trip is to understand holistic consonance - our architecture is a construct of inter-subjective reality, a concretization of our imagination. There is also the genetic, biological needs satiated through the sights and sounds of nature. This dance of the futuristic, ever evolving human imagination vs. the slow evolution of DNA to stimulus is the most challenging task for a designer of the built environment. How do you satisfy both the curious mind and the sluggish base emotions governed by DNA? Designers usually rely on empirical evidence- certain proportions, colors, lights and sounds just seem to please the human brain more. Why does the brain like seeing the greenery and hear the birds chirping? The cathedrals seemed to be the closest that came to expressing this feeling of transcendence withing the human mind. I feel excited to truly experience these spaces myself having read various vivid descriptions of their grandeur and excellence. I hope I will find some these answers or get at the very least get a better direction to harness my energies as I travel and experience some of these spaces.



RECONNOITERING THROUGH LONDON

St Clement:

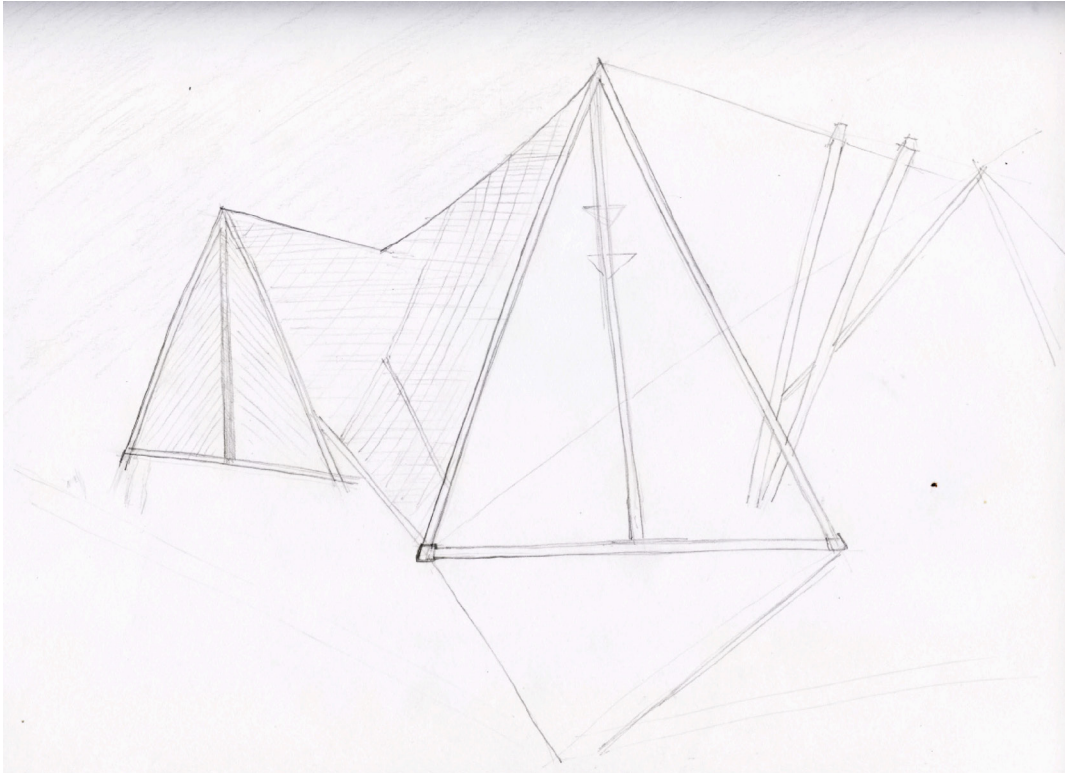
This was my first foray into the a cathedral. It was one of the most profound impressions Ive ever had entering a building. The golden-yellow interior contrasted with the black choir with daylight flooding through the high windows was extremely powerful. The choir was playing in the back-ground with the soft bass reverberating through the almost empty volume. I took the chance to sit on the last bench, do a quick sketch and soak in the powerful atmosphere. This was a wonderful start for my research into better understanding human perception of sights and sounds in spaces.

St Paul's cathedral

The next big on the list was the famous St Pauls by Christopher Wren. This one seemed a bit more of a tourist attraction making it a bit harder to truly experience the space. The different spatial experiences of the dark, low-ceiling height crypts to the sheer volume of the whispering gallery dome was quite impressive. Rather than going from the outside to a tall interior nave the transition was different from the crypt to the choir to the higher dome. These changes in heights to how I felt in the space was quite intriguing.

St. Pancreas

The exterior of this cathedral was most exquisite bathed in the dusk light. The proportions seemed a but off from the other two I had visited earlier in the day with it being more horizontal than the others. The most striking was the gradient of colors with the stone ashlar masonry from light beige to cocoa. The hierarchy of the spires also seemed more playful at first glance. As I sat across drawing at taking pictures, the buildings conceptual logic seemed a tough nut to crack. There was too much going on from colors, geometry to decorations to figure out the rules of the composition. The adjectives 'wild' and 'fascinating' came to mind while observing this exquisite exterior.



Sir John Soane's museum

This museum was one of my most awaited stops on the tour. It is one of the best example in the world of architectural palimpsest- the physical manifestation of the human memory through objects orchestrated within such a small space very artfully-a masterpiece of design detailing. One word came to my mind as I followed through the corridors through to the breakfast room from the Egyptian galleries - 'condensation'. This was John Soane's design logic visible through objects, day-lighting and the intricacies of placement. Does the human mind actually store memories this artfully inside the human brain?

Cedric Price- Snowdon Aviary

From the mind-boggling experience of the museum to the widespread ZSL is quite a transition. At this point, I am still speculating whether it is feasible or a good strategy for humans to physically occupy the same space as birds. Going into the tetrahedral meshing of the aviary was a good test. Now, I was literally inside the bird cage occupying and sharing space with another species, albeit trapped inside a cage. The soft sound of the brook bubbling behind had a sooth calming impact. When I went on to research this more with the museum guides, I came to know that these birds are being used to treat PTSD patients from all over the European union.

The Paddington station

My train to Oxford was from Paddington and the barrel vaulted wrought iron structure of the station with a beige ceiling was an interesting piece of the palimpsest puzzle. I felt I was occupying so many different vessels from such different epochs in the cities history. Having visited all the cathedrals to the modernist skyscrapers, it was good to visit this intermediate piece in the timeline. Perhaps this was a more apt example of palimpsest where an erstwhile railway station has evolved to meet more current programmatic needs but still retains quite a bit of its original shell. It's also different but similar from the zoo visited earlier in the day- a cage of different sort.



The oxford mallard cove

The gloomy English weather persisted as my train trundled into Oxofrd. Finally I was into the countryside!. The walk through the rural center is indeed a special one. The layering of a modern vs. the old had given away to a more traditional setting of sand colored stone and cobblestone roads.

As I made my way towards the fields north of the university, I was fortunate to run into a mallards nest. Mallards are dabbling ducks with the male having more colorful plumage than the female. This little lake right at the edge of campus was an awesome break to sketch and observe their behavior up close. As I sat there, I observed many families with their children walking by feeding the birds as they passed by. Apparently bird-feeding is the biggest human to non-human interaction in the world as I would go on to discover while looking it up later in the day.



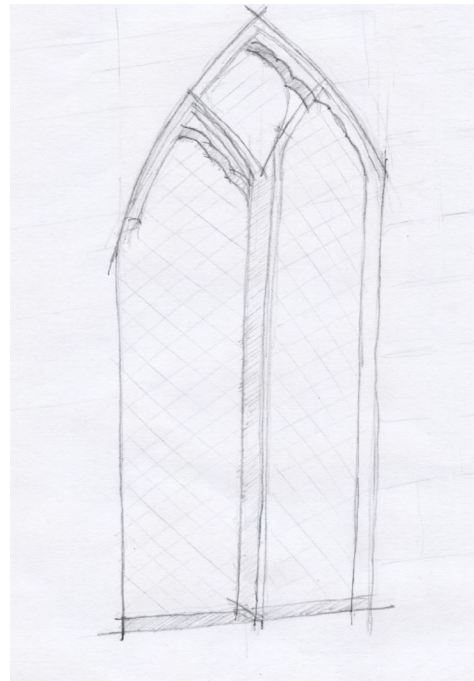
The avian crypt

The poignancy of death and life was most apparent in this gorgeous museum of steel, iron and glass. It took all the traditional Gothic elements and made a magnificent tall space for the museum. The stunning spaces showcases the evolution of the birds from mesozoic to the present with fossil displays to full size models. This was a palimpsest of birds in a human created vessel. The whole experience was a bit eerie in this beautiful mausoleum lit with ornate moldings and large skylights making grand gesture of a space.

This building had such a wide palette of materials from the brick and stone arches on the walls and clerestory aisle to the thin slender concrete-stone masonry columns terminating at ornate moldings from where the metal arches sprung from.

The ambulatory circulation through most of the space was particularly interesting and striking. Touring through the museum brought another facet of our relationship to birds- one of the sheer fascination of flight. These were the only dinosaurs to survive the mass meteorite extinction and continue evolving till today. The bird species are some of the oldest existing carrying forward an evolutionary legacy that was brought to an end on the terrestrial counterparts.

It was worthwhile to spend almost half a day at this place learning about the fauna that has fascinated me for so long from its therapeutic benefits in healthcare to the environmental benefits to the ecosystem. It was one of the most informative stops on this trip so far.



Hanukkah at Oxford

While exploring the streets at night, I came across a street show-a recurring theme during my travels. One of the artists invited me into the Trinity college for traditional Jewish Hanukkah dinner. The little library space where the event took place was an exquisite one with an oval shape made out of concrete with gorgeous wooden slats. Books lined up the walls giving a warm wooden undertone to grey backdrop. It was a space of perfect reverberance, a place of community coming together and one of the most wonderful experiences of the trip.

The two-hours spent in the college turned out to be quite productive with observation of some clever bird window motifs into the stained glass and some of the window framing in the church.



THE QUEST FOR THE DOVECOTE

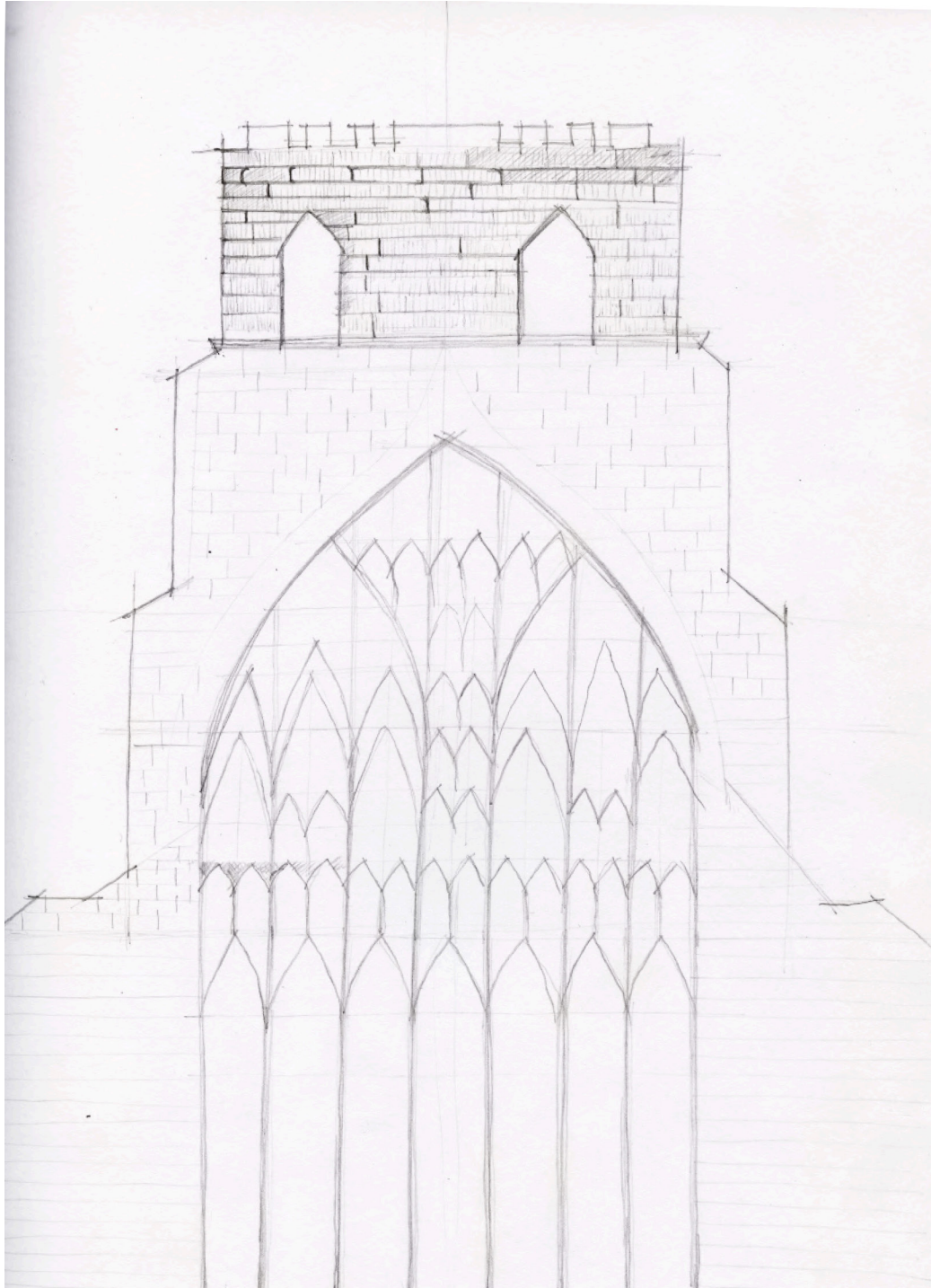
Cirencester is the land of the Cotswolds, the home of the English dovecote. Having read so much about the idyllic English landscape, this quaint little town did not disappoint. Thanks to my very kind AirBnB host, I was able to procure a map of the woods as I trudged my way through open pastures, sleepy little hamlets to these group of farms in Danglingworth known for the rearing of pigeons and doves. The walk through the snowed in countryside was a marvelous one through open horse fields to picturesque little manors and stone churches each of them deserving a poetic description till I finally arrived at the first of the dovecotes. I had researched so much about them before I had embarked on this trip and the 5 mile walk in the frigid weather through forests and fields was well worth this plain yet marvelous little gem in the middle of large field.

Constructed with little approx, 1' X 18" perforations into the brick, these little pigeon-holes have been the oldest known ways in which humans and birds have lived together. Initially used for agrarian purposes people began to incorporate them into homes in tiny towns scattered all across Europe.

Leer cottage,

Harnhill, the second of these on my list was a little manor further 5 miles into the Cotswold's heart. This one too was more or less identical to Danglingworth in its form and proportions but was constructed out of stone masonry on a plinth. It was also in more shabby shape with wooden beams in the ceiling starting to rot from all the waste from the pigeons adding moisture to the assembly- one of biggest challenges I had faced when trying to figure out a way to have birds into human architecture. They are too much of nuisance with all the waste they make. How do you reconcile with that? No matter how hard I tried many people apart from nature enthusiasts would never accept living in such sub-hygienic standards.

The trips to these dovecotes leave me unconvinced and took me no further in finding an answer to co-inhabiting spaces with birds. This was a big disappointment. I had always imagined visiting them would help me draw a logical and rational path to making an argument for co-inhabited spaces with birds



SHREWSBURY

In the heart of Shropshire, this was Wodehouse territory- the land of the Blandigs Castle. Although, I wasn't able to locate the fabled Emsworth arms, the town was a fresh palette of material to those I had visited so far. The stone gave away to red brick and towering spires to more humble crenelations. This was a town of idyllic bridges criss-crossing the river connecting picturesque landscapes with red brick buildings the cherry on top of the cake. It was a good relaxing day spent at the churches and town-houses sketching taking pictures and a nice break to the high amount of traveling I had done this week



CAMBRIDGE

The King's college chapel

The heart of science and famous scientists, Cambridge was a bit different from the other towns I had visited up till now. This had a very tourist-vibe to it with people scuttling down the narrow canal in boats and lining up in huge queues in front of colleges to catch a glimpse of the architecture inside.

My main aim for this visit was to go see the King's college cathedral: the epitome of fan vaulting(a unique trait in English gothic architecture). It definitely didn't disappoint. The metaphor of the tree canopy was very visible with the main columns like tree trunks with little slender stone reveals and moldings forming the high branches looking up to the sky,

The orchestra with the base undertone reverberating was very cool too and I could see why a person in this space would feel transcendent and having a connection with god. Towards the choir the intricate vaulting gave way to more ribbed vaults painted in white with stone linings. The transition seemed well done and gave a brilliant contrast to the dark wood and red tapestry.



The Waddesdon Manor Aviary

Located 110 miles north from the town of Ayelsbury, this was my final destination in the English countryside. Starting early morning, I decided to walk to the manor since it only opened at 12PM for visitors. The walk through was a scenic one with a lot of variation in styles, massing forms and the texture in landscape. Though it turned out to be a long one- 8 miles one way!

Nevertheless the path to the French Chateau was specially scenic with winding paths through specially crafted lighting leading to this ornate mansion. Towards the backend was the aviary that I had come to visit, In this eclectic wrought iron cage were these bird species at display. This was the kind of space I had been arguing against where we hold a non-human species in captivity as a subservient occupant of space. The whole set-up was a harrowing experience and a stark reminder to the most mundane and unimaginative way we design spaces for non-humans.

This was also my last stop in England as I took the train back to London and boarded the night flight for Greece.



GREECE

I arrived in Athens on Christmas Day. The warmer weather was a pleasant break from the frigid English winter. The ambiance was very different from what I had experienced so far. Taking the train down from the airport to the acropolis where I would be staying for 2 days, I was deeply impressed by the serene whiteness of all the buildings scattered across undulating hills with a pristine blue backdrop.

The walk up to the acropolis was a special one revealing the layers of Athens, the new and the old as the elevation grew higher. Greeted with cats, street vendors and great restaurants, the architecture seemed more reticent and stolid than the extravagant revealing and folding in the Gothic style buildings I had visited so far. How would that affect the acoustic feel of the space? I wondered as I made my way to the top to the Parthenon.

The Parthenon

The quintessential example of the perfect proportions. Again the question arose: why do these specific play of dimensions and proportions feel so pleasing to the human brain? Apparently the plain white wasn't how it used to be in ancient Greece but it did have a very calming tactile presence. Again It struck me that when I observe spaces, I can feel them, a good lead as I delved further into this research theme.

The agora's

The acropolis was scattered with these little square spaces of ruins- a doric column here, a pediment on a set of ionic columns over there and some protruding remains of foundations. I could re-construct a marketplace as I walked past them. Unfortunately a lot of it was littered with graffiti, a sad state of affairs.

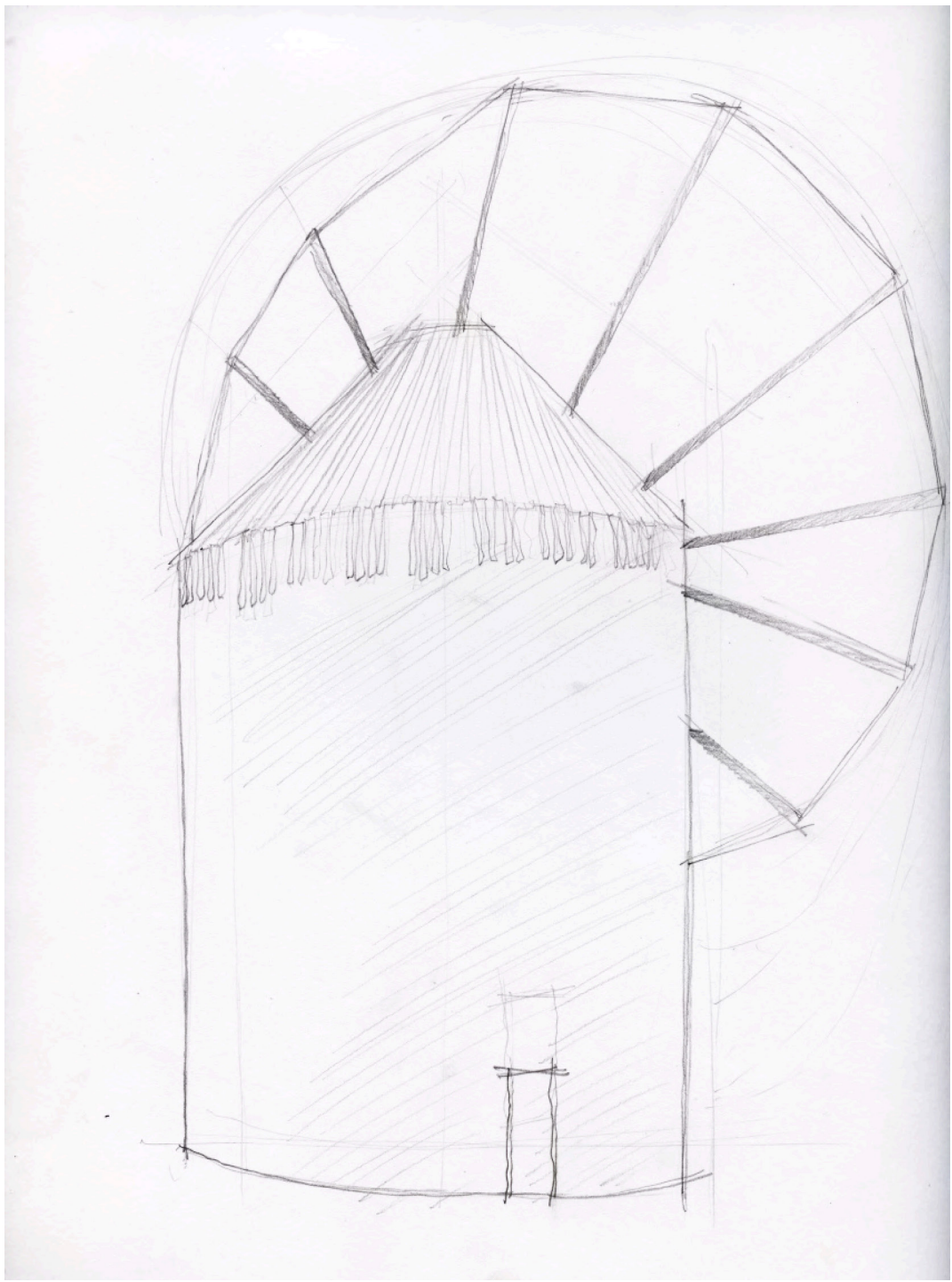


TINOS DOVECOTES

As the ferry from Piraeus was about to dock, this image to the right was my first view of the bird island of Tinos. These little stone houses were scattered all along the beaches with kids and families playing with the pigeons and doves. This small town is the very embodiment of laid-back atmosphere where you could sit by the waves, sketch at peace and watch the clouds ambling along slowly in the sky basked with pleasant sunshine.

This was the home of pigeon houses where erstwhile rearing sites had now been converted into homes. There were a large number of these houses scattered all over the island with little brick sized recesses in almost every balcony or window and some even whole walls. People would leave food left-overs and seeds for the pigeons and doves to feed on.

This island was the perfect example of humans and birds living together harmoniously performing and exhibiting every type of ecological relationship that exists between us and them.



MYKONOS AND DELOS

I initially regretted the decision to go to Mykonos as a part of my Greek island dovecote tour. It seemed more of a honeymoon spot than anything of architectural interest. However, as I researched further while feeding some birds along the main harbour, I heard about a ferry to the nearby island of Delos, one of the most ancient Greek ruins.

Delos was a very fascinating stop with the most unbuilt palimpsest I had seen up till now. This was truly a city of ruins left to a state anachronistic to present day with no further re-writing done.

The only link to the modern architecture was mills of Kato mili in Myknos which you could see in the distance. It was as if I was sitting in 2 BC looking over to the future world just across the see.

Mykonos was also my last stop in Greece as I headed back to Athens to move to the next stop in Rome.



ROME

The city of Rome is the very definition of 'palimpsest'. Carrying the most rich fabric of the collective imagination of people in built-form spanning across several millenia. I arrived in Rome on the first day of 2018. The first place as soon as I reached there was Michaelangelo's Campadoglio- the most monumental entry I have seen up the hill to this exquisitely designed set of buildings and plaza overlooking the city. This was a masterpiece and lived up to all the hype I had for it!

Mausaleio Di Santa Costanza

This was the my third experience of a mausoleum in my trip so far. They are always interesting to me architecturally for the meaning gravestones hold as palimpsest. It is the direct manifestation of a person's memory into a physical object which also forms an inter-subjective community function. Interestingly, the inside of the tombs in the cellar the system of storage of remains is based on dovecotes. I also learnt while touring that Roman orators used to use architecture as memory tools when giving speeches. The content of the speech would be stored in an imaginary rooms which the orator would be traveling through while speaking

The Colosseum

The memories of a brutal entertainment game from thousands of years ago stored in a semi destroyed beautiful circle lined with arches. These were my thoughts as I walked past the ruins of this well-known architectural and tourist landmark. While the vessel may be beautiful, the program can make the memories associated with a building lie more in the ethical grey zone.

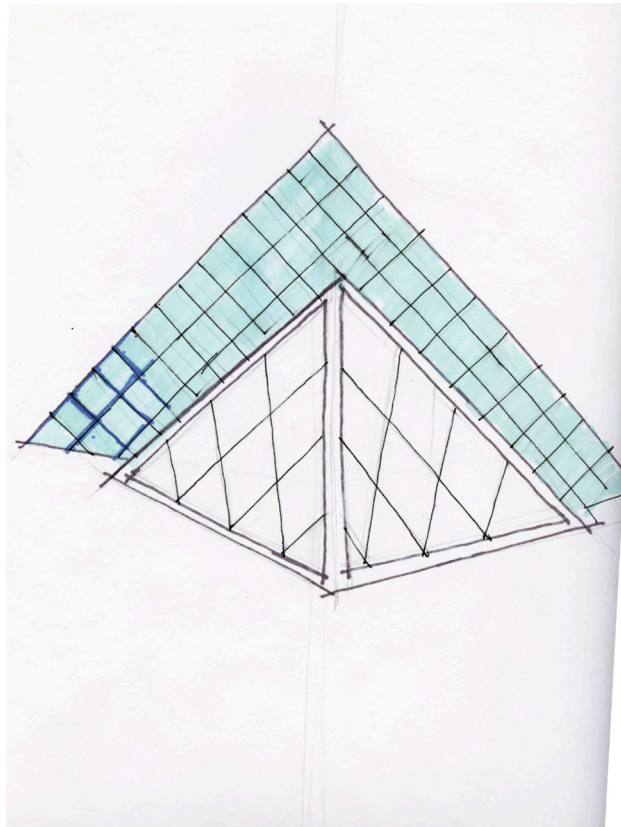
The Pantheon

Apart from the perfect dome and the oculus at the top, my personal experience with this landmark was more with public plaza in front of it. A hub of street music it made for a very vibrant space. In front of this monument from classical antiquity was this very modern music and dance that made a very for a very cool experience.



St. Peter's Basilica, vatican and sistine chapel

The last stop in Rome was a day long tour of the Vatican city- St Peter's basilica, Sistine chapel and a tour of the countless Vatican Museums. There was a plethora of visual and factual information to take in as I hurriedly toured through the exhibits. The museum was incredibly crowded to allow for sketching or spending too much time at one place. 'Excess' was the word that came to mind but that's perhaps unfair given how hurried my visit to these exhibits was.



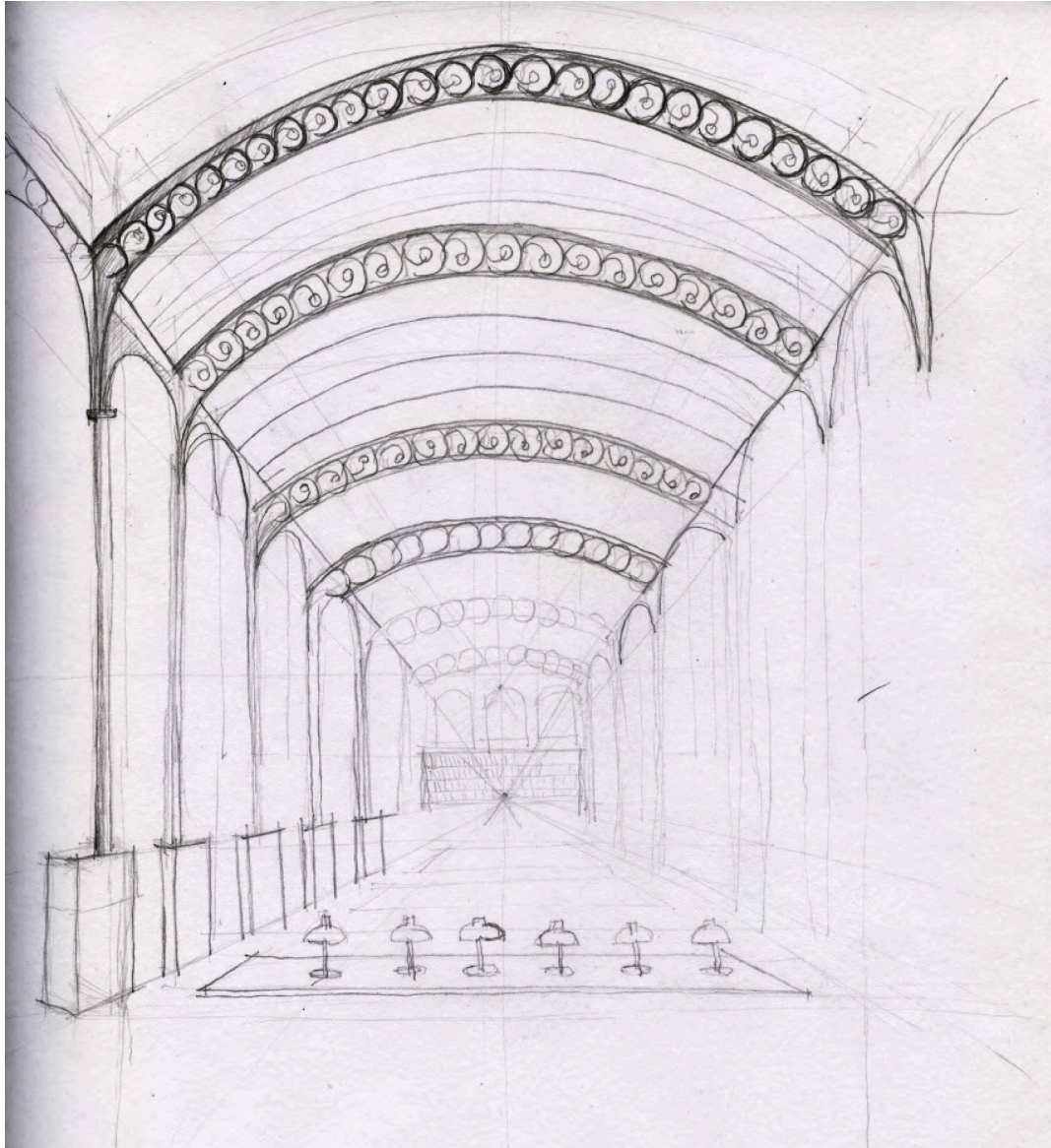
THE FRENCH FINALE

The Louvre

The last stops in this amazing journey were soon coming and I would get the chance to see some of the coolest projects I have always admired. IM Pei's Louvre is an interesting contrast to the Louvre museum that marks it on three sides. It's a very cool approach to palimpsest where instead of copying the style of what's existing, you add to it in your own way. I have personally never been convinced of autonomous architecture that is alien to a site. However, visiting this place personally made me feel a lot different. The pyramid blends perfectly well into the courtyard and forms the perfect node for the museum.

Pompidou

As with the Pantheon, the public space in front of it turned out to be as powerful as the building itself. More of a caricature than a serious building, the plaza and the soundscape was the part that fascinated me the most. It was an urban node for that part of Paris.

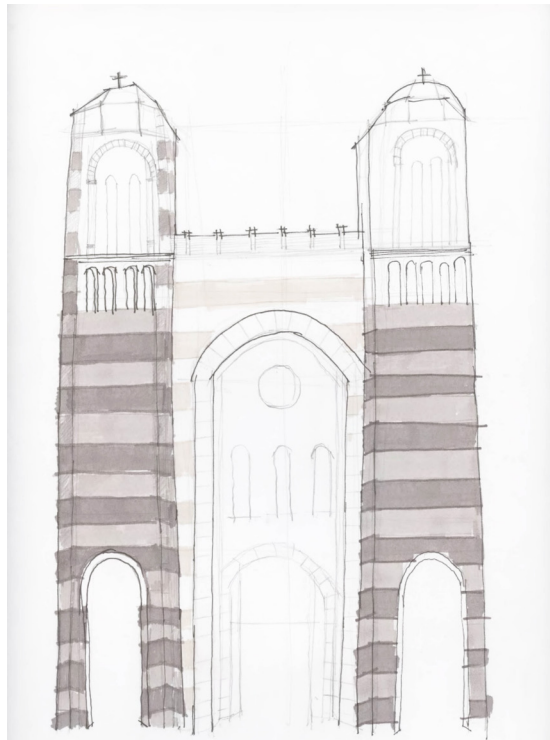


Bibliotheque St Genevieve

Reading in this library was a highlight of my trip to Paris. This amazing magical space created from wrought iron arches, neatly lined lamps and wood chairs made it a charming experience. It was a wonderful blend of a very diverse palette of materials. The quiet masked backdrop of people whispering while taking rigorous notes was very different to all the other typologies I had been visiting so far.

Notre Dame

It was apt to end my cathedral series with the epitome of it all. From Christmas decorations to the incredibly ornate interior, this was a sight to behold. It seemed the most refined of all the gothic ones I had visited so far where in terms of architectural quality and finesse of detailing only the King's college chapel came close! It was a bit unfortunate that I could only spend half an hour in this incredible space thanks to the incredible tourist rush.

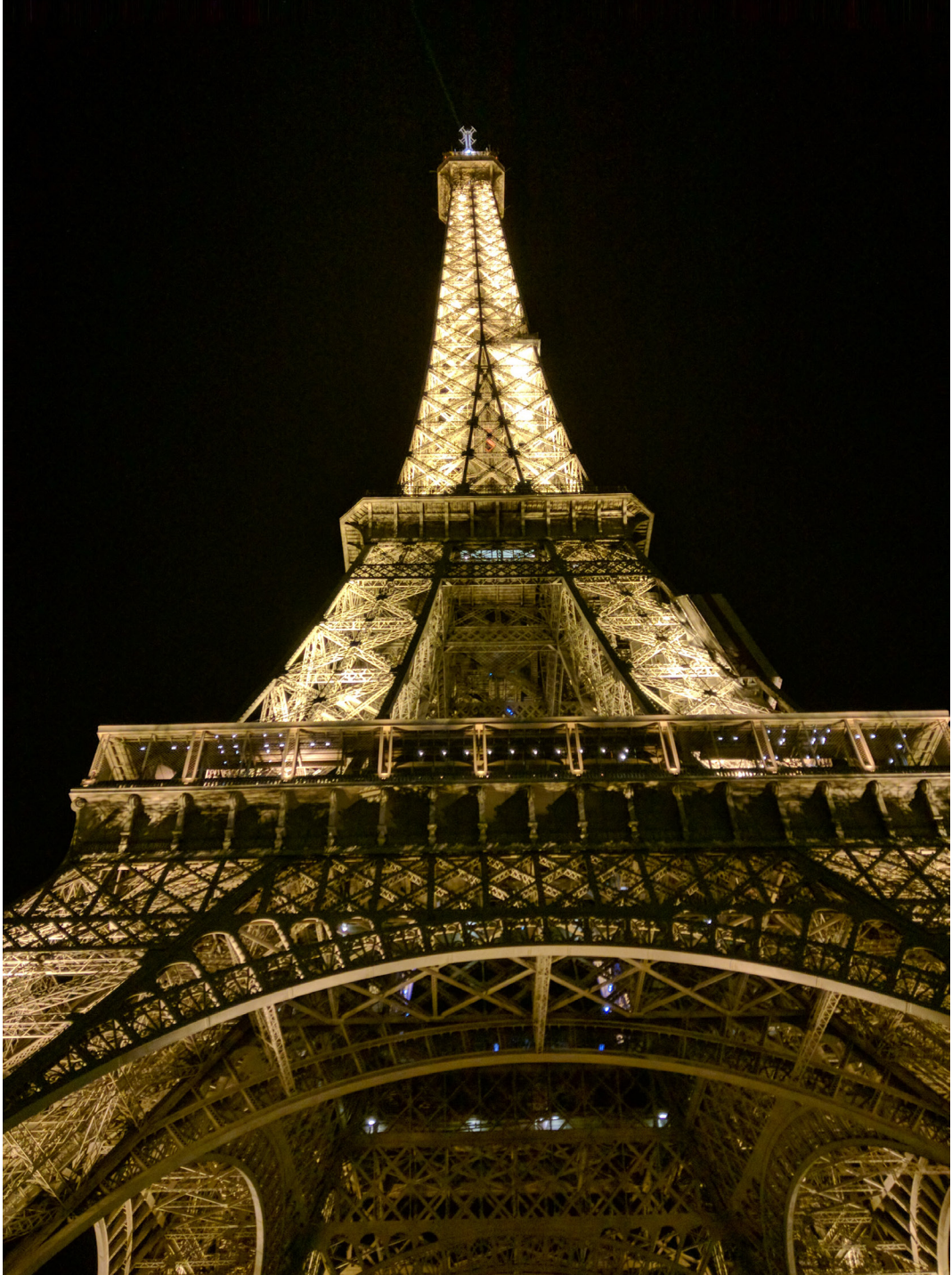


THE CORBUSIAN DETOUR

On the plane to Marsielle, as I contemplated about my travel experience so far, I attempted to place how Le Corbusier's spatial work fits in this theme of how the brain experiences spaces, the idea of a design concept and how it's achieved in his work. Corbusier is the godfather of defining rules when designing (the famous five points). Yet as I sat across the Unite d'Habitation courtyard, I couldn't help but feel that before visiting I had a very simplistic understanding of what he was trying to say in 'Towards a new architecture'. If you follow rules too rigidly at every design decision you make, the building tends to look more monotonous and more like what an engineer would come up with - rational but unexciting. The music analogy came to mind where certain off-scale notes such as minor chords and intervals which often add flavor to a well structured riff of a song. In a similar way, the play with primary colors in the windows to the sculptural pilotis and tower at the top added to a marvellous section make for a great residential space - one of the few such modernist projects of this kind which were successful at that.

The Marsielle Cathedral

A slight detour on this trip was a visit to this marvelous byzantine striped cathedral along the shoreline with a huge front courtyard. The oversized proportion of the entry way to the squinch dome above the altar was a marked departure in every way from all the other churches I had visited so far.



BON VOYAGE! - January 8

The travel through Europe sometimes arduous but mostly mesmerizing comes to an end today. I feel satisfied to have learnt many important lessons and achieved my goals for the trip. I leave with some very fascinating questions as I head back home:

When I look at the Eifel tower, I can feel the tactile rigidity of the iron that forms its skeleton. When I look at a space, I also feel the space. When I look at the proportions that look pleasing, why does the brain feel that way? When a non-human species such as a bird would look at it, would their consciousness interpret it the same way? Can we ever concretize a home for a bird without knowing how it's consciousness work?

When I was inside all of the marvelous cathedrals, the sounds and the light gave a feeling of transcendence? Non of the modern projects- Pei's Louvre to the Corbusian gargantuan housing sculpture could evoke quite a strong emotion. When we shifted to the more modern materials, did we lose a bit our ability to construe spaces with all five senses in mind?

Birds with all their marvelous colors and enchanting sounds seem a bit too dissimilar from us!

To sum it all up in some key words: memory's stored in spaces, the natural habitats of birds and their relationship to our mental well-being and the spaces we imagine and create for living, how the brain perceives them and how to piece all these components together in making a successful building- proportions, music and reverberance, ecology, colors, light and how to blend all these to make a 'happy' space. Challenging and enthralling topics to think through and try as I design projects in my career!



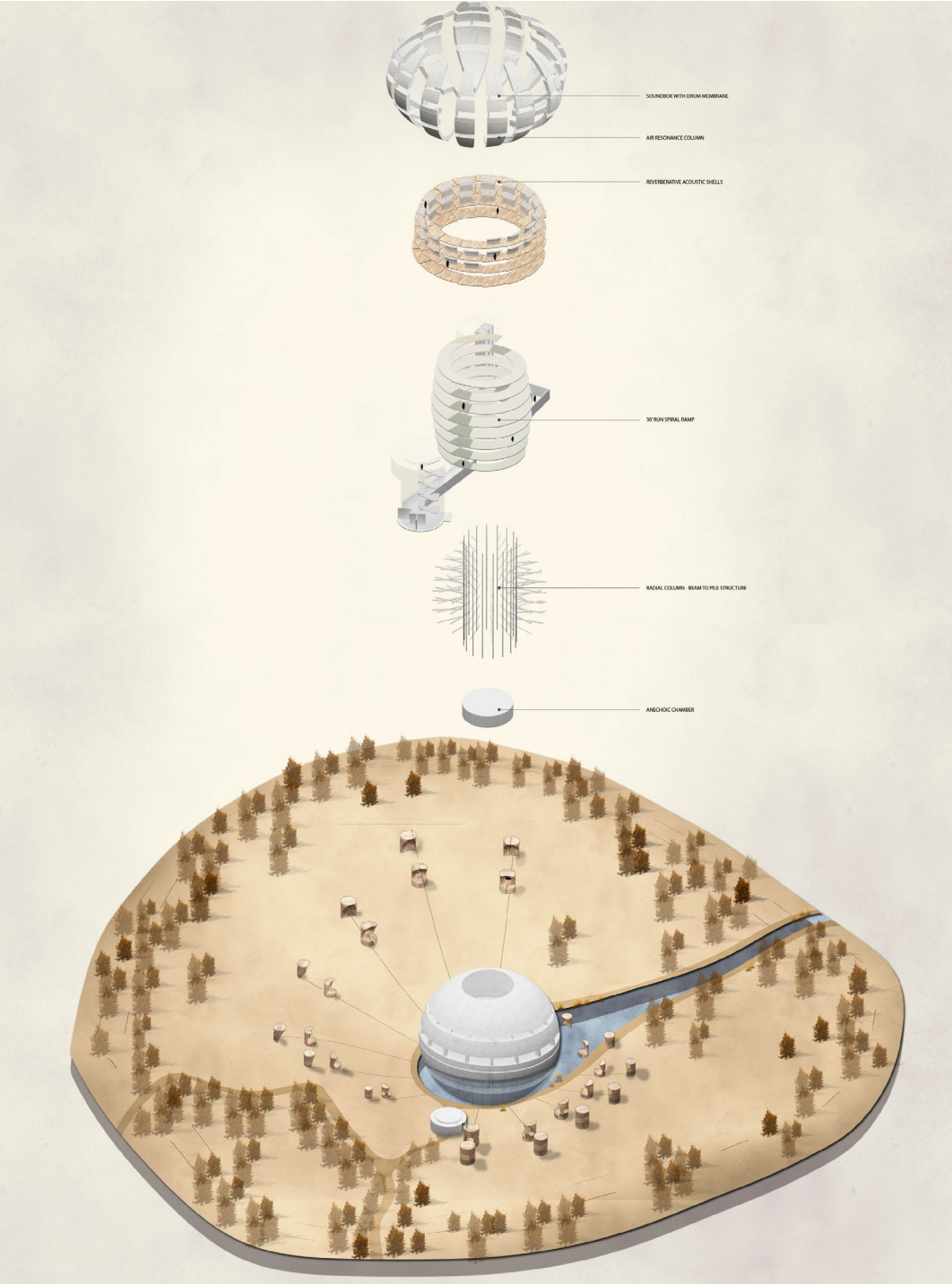
LYCEUM TRIP INSPIRED WORK -CONSONANCE SHARING SOUNDSPACE WITH BIRDS

The lessons and information gained through my trip to Europe made a fundamental change to the way I tackled the idea of co-inhabiting spaces with birds and designing ecologically sustainable ones that are poetic and have a direct relationship to how the human brain interprets and perceives spaces.

I came to the resignation that birds are too dissimilar to us to physically occupy the same space. Our primary relationship to them is visual and aural. We can however, occupy the same soundscape and visual scape as them and that has various therapeutic and programmatic benefits to us in treating diseases such as PTSD, reducing average length of stay in hospitals and in general creating more holistic spaces with species that we share the planet with.

The solution presented was the idea of acoustic co-inhabitation using synanthropic(mutually) species of woodpeckers and doves as a test case based on avian migration research. Woodpeckers though scientifically classified as a mutually beneficial species are considered annoying due to the drumming sound they produce. This is taken as a dissonant note: a problem of acoustic perception and material properties has been converted it into a consonant one by proposing a series of structures laid out in a double spiral based on the harmonic scale. The harmonic scale consists of notes which are integral multiples of one another. When they interact with one another they reinforce and create resonance. An avian acoustic sphere- an imaginary volume that demarcates a space for consonant bird sounds that can be used for therapy. Three auditory scales are considered: a big avian sphere, the smaller reverberation chamber (where the spatial perception is bigger than the physical space) and finally the anechoic chamber-which is the most introverted one giving a person to sense his own pulse and breathing.

The project sought to capture the visual and aural connection and how spaces can be co-inhabited between humans and birds visually and aurally while respecting the scale differences and physical antagonism between them. The intent is to re-conceive design from an empathetic point of view taking into account architectural poetic experience, ecology and stress therapy.



The avian sphere is generated by the woodpeckers migrating through the site. Woodpeckers are perching birds attracted to dark woods, crevices and eat acorn and insects. The construction of these woodpecker xylophones consist of a black walnut key tuned to a particular note with copper resonator tubes behind. When a wood pecker pecks on the face it transferred through a sound box(show model) to the paraboloid reflector disc behind. These copper paraboloid discs convert this spherical source into a planar one which is projected to the therapy space which takes the form of a sphere which is the most apt geometry for the the sound wavefronts coming from all sides. Which has a membrane wall lined with Helmholtz resonators and air resonance columns forming the outer membrane walls.

The access to the sphere is through two cylinders which are placed on the vacant spots in the musical spiral. The outer walls in the cylinder columbarium's for nesting birds while the inner ones are frosted glass which show shadows of extinct birds based on the position of the sun in the day. Hence the wexperience through the space starts as a melancholy one with a narrative of ephemeral silhouettes(point to the rendering) which leads to the sphere through a tunnel from underground opening up into the anechoic chamber. The journey up the sphere is through a spiral ramp with landing spots around it where the musical notes hit the sphere vibrating the membranes and creating a rainforest of musical sounds. These are essentially directional speakers and a visitor can explore through locations and find notes which are soothing and exciting. The structure is held up by a series of radial piles and beams which split the platforms and sphere into 16 halves.

The project seeks to capture the visual and aural connection and how spaces can be co-inhabited between humans and birds visually and aurally while respecting the scale differences and physical antagonism between them. The intent is to re-conceive design from an empathetic point of view taking into account architectural poetic experience, ecology and stress therapy.

The response is site specific taking into account analysis of ecology and mutually beneficial relationships with an aim to preserve the feral. The key paradigm is human adaptation to avian processes as much as they adapt to human constructions. The project redefines "nature" free from its biopolitical limitations in modern society and culture and should serve as a strong tool for designers seeking tangible solutions for ecological problems.



THANK YOU !

The opportunity to travel and deeply explore my interests in architecture and design was an incredible one. Participating in the competition and all the future work that has resulted has been an incredible experience that has further fueled my desire to improve my skill-set and design better spaces. I am very grateful and feel very privileged to have had this incredible experience. Thank you to my mentor and the people at the Lyceum foundation who organize this competition every year for making all this possible!