

Sunflower: Snake Persephone: Berlin

John Hejduk

House of the Book, texts by Cook P., Hejduk J., Hecker Z., Black Dog Publishing Ltd., London; 1999; Photographs: Helen Binet;

I.

Zvi Hecker's recently completed Jewish Community school in Berlin must be considered one of the major works in our time for its thought-provoking energy that makes us think deep about many things related to life and architecture, not least about the meaning of knowledge, expulsion, place and death.

Hecker's arch it (. cultural plan of the Jewish School is unique in our time, it cuts into the heart of what matters. Surely it is about the renewal of hope, as it is surely about the inner anguish that brings us face to face with the past and the impact of the enormity of the loss. This work of Hecker's has the joy of innocence, at first, yet it is *shedding* architecture. Its sheds its first skin, or is in the process of doing so, in Berlin. It is a sister of Zvi's Spiral Apartment House. In Israel where the process is one of peeling, one building relative to the north, one building relative to the south; the south about sunflowers, the north about the presence of the snake. Hecker sees the light of the sunflower and the dark of the snake.

II.

The first time my wife and I crossed the Berlin Wall into the then East Germany it was with a fair amount of trepidation. We were certainly disturbed and uneasy as we passed by a prison where the prisoners were shouting at the street's passers-by. It was grey. The buildings, the sky, the people, grey.

When we entered the museum there and were confronted with the Paragon Hellenistic marble friezes, I was stunned. There were many snakes within the work. Man and snake. Those images have never left me. The writhing of the snakes and men.

We then proceeded to the room where Persephone was. To see her, impregnated our souls. The light in the room had a grey mist. You could see the particles of air at times giving off an opaque crystal light. Persephone was in a contained room in Berlin. A year or two later we returned to gaze at her again, but she was no longer the room, it was empty ... had she

returned from the Underworld to her beloved homeland, far to the Southeast? Her departure left a feeling of fore boding.

During the same year we were able to visit the Archaeological Museum in Athens. We arrived almost at closing time and few people were left in that haunting place. We looked at the sarcophagi which were surrounded by sculptures of the dead mother, father, and child, domestic animals and strange winged creatures - man and beast. The conclusion I came to was that these creatures were simply unimaginable. They, too, as the mother, father, child ... *were*.

In Solopaca, Italy, in 1953, I walked up a hill covered in olive trees with my wife's eighty-year-old uncle; we started down the hill on stone stairs. On one side was a high descending stone wall, on the other side, the olive trees. Suddenly in front of our path a large black snake slithered in front of our feet. I was taken aback. I said to Uncle America: "Did you see that snake?" He replied: "What snake?" I answered "The one that just crossed our path." He said "No, I did not." In amazement I said: "How could you possibly not have seen such a large snake?" He calmly replied "I do not believe in snakes."

A friend of mine who is an anthropologist related an ancient phenomenon where one of the gods becomes an immense monumental snake that eventually swallows up everything in the world, even the air. I thought to myself that that god snake had swallowed up every /thing outside in ... nothing left ... nothing to fear. The exact opposite of living life and of understanding its sacredness.

III.

Some aspects of Zvi Hecker's Jewish School that I wish to touch upon are his initial sketches, black and white and coloured, his technical black and white plans and the axonometric, the built building, and the problems of photographing such a work. As well as the program and some thoughts on its possible underlying meaning.

Before I go into the above thoughts, let me make a brief observation about Zvi Hecker's spiral apartment building in Ramat Gan, Israel. No doubt about it, I believe this architectural work to be one of the rare buildings of our time. First, it is one of the few Cubist buildings ever to be built. And it is from the Garden of Eden. When asked about its meaning Zvi alludes that it perhaps has something to do with Paradise. I think it has to do with the concept of peeling. It is like taking an apple and in one continuous knife-cut peeling the skin off - for a split second the apple appears white, then quickly begins to fade to another, darker

colour. The inner core of the apartment building is like the apple, a hard core of rough stone and inner planar fin-like flying structures with amazing reflective mirror panels (the reflective seeds). The outside wall of the curving spiral is smooth stuccoed, revealing exposed stone frame openings, and stone wall ledges. Yet once the apple is bitten some agony is to be expected, for the building is literally punctured with planes of metal shafts partially serving as external balconies (heads of piercing arrows). The building remains as stoic as paintings of a martyred saint's body filled with arrows. On one of the building's ledges (of rough stone) there appear to be petrified stone snakes taking in the sun. Antoni Gaudi was equally interested in snakes within architecture. While visiting Paestum in 1953 late one afternoon I saw a snake resting on the top of one of the temple's capitals. After all these years it never occurred to me until now how it got there.

IV.

Zvi Hecker's arrival in Berlin to construct the Jewish School was a lifetime's journey from Poland to Samarkand, to Kracow, to Israel and then to Germany. Another journey from Poland to Israel, then to America, then back to Europe, and on to Berlin was taken by Daniel Libeskind who is presently constructing the Jewish Museum in Berlin. The Jewish Museum and the Jewish School are the most significant and creative works built in Berlin in recent times. They bear witness to the indomitable spirit of a people. Daniel Libeskind's Museum is a lightning bolt signalling through architecture the sacredness of life and its mystery. Zvi Hecker's School, at another end of the city, is the celebration of learning, education and hopeful hearts. That these two men came to be in this place at the same moment is cause for serious thought about predestination.

V.

Zvi Hecker's Jewish School is an architecture of shedding and more. Zvi insists on the word precision regarding the building. And precise it is. Also it has clarity, sharpness along with perfection in detail. The program is impeccable. These equalities are to be expected from an artist such as Zvi Hecker. I appreciate these qualities, but there is more, the hidden. For the hidden we must go to the sketches and the extraordinary coloured/pencil drawings. It is in their depth of evolving thought that lies, I think, the deepest of soul-meaning. These drawings present us with the workings of a mind as it creates. They reveal the psyche and the revelations with in its struggle to unearth, to search, to discover. Zvi refers to the plan as a sunflower. It can be that, but in Berlin it is more and possibly otherwise. In plan there is the snake moving through the sunflower petals. There, too, is the snake in the garden. The explosive coloured sketches, the line drawings of the overwhelming movement of the snake as it startles. Zvi draws and renders the petals and snake over and over again. He is

obsessive and appears to be exorcising something throughout out of his drawings. He begins to erase parts of the connecting snake with the educational volume. His coloured drawings are filled with fire, blood and darkness. It is his struggle to cleanse. Originally, there was no snake in the plans, then its appearance, then its movement through the plans, through the pages of the house of the book. The former sunflower petals become knife blades, the curved triangles places of learning, they cut and segment the snake out of the (earning space. Architecture and knowledge kill the snake. It's outside remains as a memory of past evil-doings but it remains. It must be remembered, not forgotten. The sun beats down on its metallic empty skin as remains. I have said this building is about shedding but also solid y fixing memory. The expulsion and killing of a people can never be permitted or tolerated. Zvi Hecker's anguished drawings serve as a warning, hidden at first in his internal/eternal book. The blades can metamorphose back into the sunflower petals as expressed in the built work in the enclosed garden in Berlin.

The subtlety of Zvi Hecker's mind and the mastery on his discipline is first expressed in the black ink drawings of his plans and of the axonometric of the building. There is nothing like these plans of this axonometric. One of the most radical plans is presented as a gift to the public. It is one of the most dynamic, kinetic, riveting plans in the history of architecture. The organization of the plan is brilliant, precise, and exhilarating. The precision which Zvi speaks of is also in the plan. Every student of architecture should study these black ink drawings and the axonometric, also the coloured sketches. In the built work the five curved wedge volumes moving around a centre are like five land-ships ploughing through a sea of earth to their destination, a centre of learning. There should be a well in the central section of the site where the seeds of thought can be dropped into the water, mixing together for the birth of new thought.

The five curved wedges are themselves shedding. They attempt to shed their skin of the past. They leave shedded metal structures, we can see the metal trusses shedding their encasements. The tall metal columns supporting the horizontal free buttresses exposed to wind, sun, rain, snow, night and day. These floating structures are the first shedding. The wedges close to the land-ships near the ground produce a second peeling, a second shedding takes place, making way for the birth of a pure white prow, for the whiteness is the innocence of children learning ... to be free.

Within the triangular volume there is a classroom where the wedge triangle shape exaggerates the diminishing internal perspective, an inversion takes place. The last school desk in this room is placed in the apex of the triangle. As the triangle widens forward to the

end of the triangle (where the teacher must be), the desks increase in number from the distant apex. The faces ... most students facing the teacher are in the front of the class. The teacher overlooks the sea of faces and sees in the distant apex a single child, the last one. Behind the child is the vanishing point.

Zvi Hecker has created a master work, a house of the book. Perhaps sometime in the future the present fence surrounding the school's site might metamorphose into a wall of books, two books thick; one side, the outside public space, for the outer reading; the other side, the inside exterior garden space of the school for inner reading. I have studied and read Zvi Hecker's book and I thank him for his gift to humanity and to the children most of all.

PART II

Through her photography, Helene Binet searches for the soul within architecture. This is a difficult task, one that requires utmost perseverance, precision and concentration. But more is demanded: does the architectural work looked upon have a soul, and how can the photograph reveal its essence? Can the photographer enter into a communion with the synopsis of a fleeting soul-thought and record its existence in the two-dimensional surface of a still photograph which captures the extraordinary moment of a complete silence? A pregnant silence, which announces that one is in the presence of a soul-sound. The great photographers, such as Helene Binet, hear through their eyes and their patience. They wait for the miraculous vibration. They taste the air change. They anticipate the coming. Their eyes become extended, elongated rays probing within the projected waves, touching the essential source, like the two fingers in Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* where he showed us that the possibility existed of an expanded abundance in concentrated, compacted forms of spirit.

Zvi Hecker's Jewish School in Berlin is abundant in spirit and meaning, and I believe Helene Binet, through her photographs, has made a sounding into its heart of memory regarding life and death. Zvi Hecker's architecture and Helene Binet's photography of the Jewish School in Berlin brought forth certain questions. The first part of this paper explained what the architecture of Zvi Hecker provoked within my thoughts, the second part, the fact of the built architecture and the photography of the built work led me down an unexpected path: the issue of built architecture as fact, programmatic reality, and the thought that past events and horrendous past tragedies are in the built architecture's memory. Also the question as to where does this reveal itself and the possibility that certain Binet photographs of the built work bring forth the memory of the past. The photograph of the architecture recalls the memory, yet it is an architecture recently built and inhabited.

Put another way, a building/architecture is built for the program of a Jewish School in Berlin. In its naming, already a momentous statement takes place, and it functions as a school, celebrating the hope of the future, it is a profound moment, a pivotal affirmation, a moment of determination and joy, a strong, living reality. Still, the memory of the past must be kept in the inhabitants' minds and in those outside of the school. The architecture of the school keeps its promise through its fact of existent reality, of its program and its memory of the past, the latter revealed mysteriously in certain black, white and grey photographs by Helene Binet. The covenant of the architecture's soul and memory is revealed through the space of her photographs, that is, they capture an instant of time from which the stillness and soundlessness make one remember the past, an essential condition for the existence of a future where life and freedom can exist ... and evil is crushed.