

Gehryspeak

by eamon byrne

IN nature, it's hard to find a straight line. Stand on a beach. Look out to sea. There out far you might think you see a line where the sky comes down to join. Where two fields of blue meet. But where you're not quite sure for the line is a blur there. You have to blink. Or take circles. Where is there a circle? You don't dare to look at the sun. The moon itself is not quite fully round. The best you might get is a ripple where you drop a stone into a pool. Which the wind is likely to make wobble unless on a still day. But whether or not lines or circles truly exist, mathematics assures us that nature obeys fractal laws. It points to leaves and branches on trees. And the binary nature of dna. And so on and so forth.

One can readily see the difficulties. Is it any wonder we need architecture.

Suddenly geometry makes sense. Lines and spheres and cubes are things which can be *made*. Hard stuff dug out of the earth. Built up into boxes, blocks, flat sheets bolted to steel t-bars. Walls of glass and over all mighty spans. Domes to keep out water, wind. Add more. Keep adding. Look from above, from far above — a mosaic. Grids of lines, coloured patches. Seeming to form some sort of symmetry. Not really succeeding, sure, but the simulation's convincing enough. There's order to be seen even if it's just patterns our brains are good at picking out. Thanks to google maps. Software. Not really there at all but pretending to be. The globe split down its poles, spread out beneath glass. The real made to seem real because the real is not possible, because the real defies us.

Now imagine the beginning. Not the real beginning. Not caves. After we moved out and started with stone. Not what you find in rocks. They're not flat enough. But if you cut them into blocks and pile

them up, wide at bottom, tapered to top, you will have an edifice. That's how we did it then.

So basically we had the use. The rain which fell down and the sun which was up. Though we never underestimated gravity. It was easier to dig holes. But we weren't moles. So we built up. What message there? Did it point up to god for ancient man? All we really wanted was to keep our skins dry. But even then we needed to explain what was really very plain. We needed better than caves to resist wind and time. Windows to look out from. Vaults below to preserve royal bodies from tomb raiders. For the living everything points to the sky. For the dead there's below. Out of sight but not of mind. Tombs, crosses, monuments to leave behind.

Then brick, first rock to be made by man. Tame the earth, tame the rock. Small blocks. Pile up and *voilà*, volume tamed. Then wood, for rock no good for vaults if span too wide. So wood. And soon, age of iron. Then concrete, plastic, glass. With software CAD, these could be mixed, mashed, and new forms hashed. Ask Gehry.

Where rock kept out the light, that other rock of silica lets it in, and also bounces it back. But there are catches. That house at New Canaan has walls of glass but set in trees many birds are deluded and crash against the false foliage. What message is that to be giving a bird? If large enough a glass tower can seem to dissolve into the sky. Bigger birds need to be guided into it on purpose because of radar and other devices. So only natural birds are deceived really.

Are roofs for rain? Pipes just to drain? Consider the history of columns. Piles too old to know how old, Greek, Roman. Now the verandah. All this to keep a roof up? Hardly. All that craft of balanced stone, trusses and all the rest that came from Euclid now mouse-clicked and plotted out to lines again, lines and circles. Not

what you get in nature, where a canopy is a mass of branches, a cave for shelter is covered over by a mountain.

Here's my theme. Sooner or later geometry would have to take over. Easy to see that now, to say that looking back from where we are. It's how our minds work, minds which can't abide the simple. Not enough to keep the wind out, the wolf from the door, we have to play with patterns. So do columns go from Stonehenge to the fluted ones of another Johnson, the Wax one, where you'd have liked to have a job sitting at a desk there, all curved symmetry beneath the fluted lily-pads. That would be the use of that.

What better caves than those to look up at from within? What higher columns than those wrapped about those t-bars of steel? So high they rent the sky. Clouds part to make way for Petronas towers. And but yet fragile, almost a bluff. See how WTC has fallen. No more inured to time than Pharoah's squat design.

Up, up. In USA they built up. Sullivan did it in Chicago. Encased his t-bars in concrete and wrapped the lot in brick. In New York they put on gothic pointy tops. But better that than Roarke was told to do, and didn't. Astride his tower looking down on lover-girl looking up, he didn't know what all those fancy tops would do — come back as all things do which go.

How non-pure were they, those towers of yankee power and wealth? In Europe it was more art than function, or should that be more function than art? Both. Sculptures of curved concrete, gargoyles, with nothing inside the same. Spaniards are eccentric. But that guy was out of time. More like it was a move from *nouveau* to more modest work barns of steel and glass. Low-level functions from which to go up from. From there to high-level leggo before computer software came.

From bow-wow-house to our house it's been quipped. Thence to curve those flat walls. Curve with high-end graphic chips and cad-cam tools. Where once up-ended stretched-out squares now bendy cubes and walls twisted and split in pieces. Sculpted pure. What use of that? If nothing else to house works of art.

Almost won, Corbusier. But your clients were impoverished. The real money would want curved walls of titanium for their capitals of tin. Or if they wouldn't know what they'd want they'd at least know they could pay for what they were sold.

