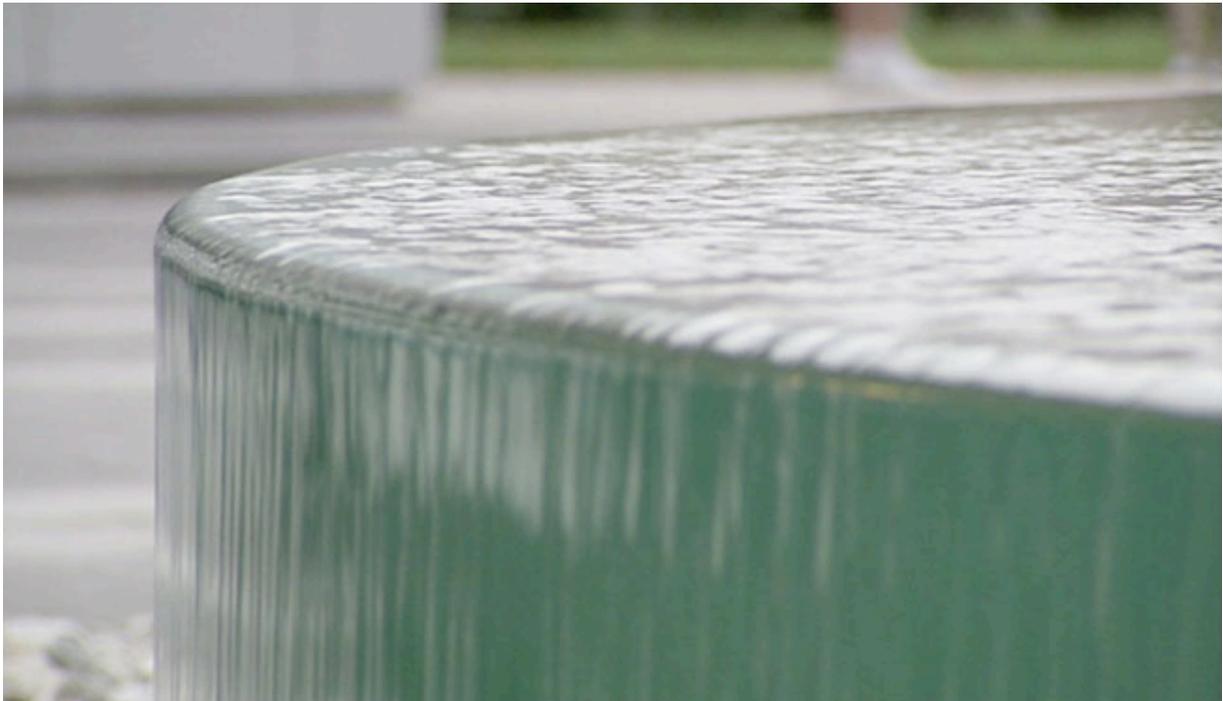


# Diary of a Filmmaker

Observations by Thomas Ball of Telos Productions

## The Opposite of Architecture

September 28, 2008



*A minimal work of art designed to live in memory by Landscape Architect, Peter Walker*

It's next time again.

Instead of coffee this month, perhaps we can share a refreshing cup of tea and a shortbread biscuit. It has been a time of great intensity. I can't recall three weeks which have been more varied or more interesting. I've had the great good fortune to interview two world class Architects on both sides of the Atlantic and the ideas they have expressed are radically transformational. Surprisingly, both of them discussed, in their own ways, the topic of last month's Blog. Surely you will extend artistic status to negative space – this month epitomized by the courtyard. By artistic, I mean an otherwise useless thing which can often provide a big impact.

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What is the purpose of the courtyard? How does it work? Why is it needed? Why would one dedicate valuable real estate to such an ephemeral thing?

The first Architect I interviewed did a great job of asking and answering these questions. He sort of fell out of the sky and landed in front of the camera for a rush project about new buildings and landscaping at Cleveland Clinic. We created a half hour show for them in a whirlwind two weeks which has left me catching my breath. Peter Walker, who is probably the greatest Landscape Architect alive, generously gave me an extended interview describing his concept behind the landscaping and formal site planning created for the Clinic. He also talked about everything from the exquisite refinement of the French garden master Le Notre, to the minimal art of Don Judd and Carl Andre; three highly sophisticated artists from whom he has drawn inspiration. The ideas he expressed, laced with insight and artistic references, are truly gorgeous and I will append this blog with excerpts of a transcript for you to enjoy.

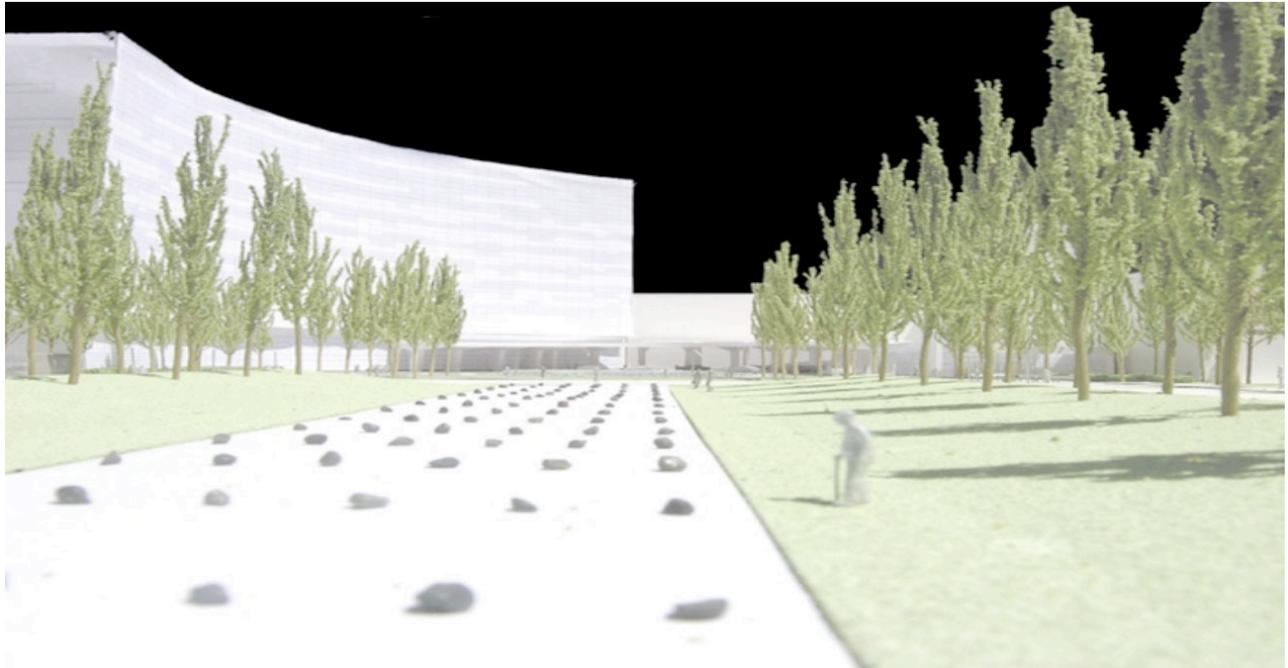


*Landscape Architect, Peter Walker, talks with Cleveland Clinic CEO, Delos M. Cosgrove III, about the minimal art fountain at the Clinic's new front door.*

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You can imagine my astonishment when, unprompted by me, Peter Walker launched into a lofty discussion of negative space. When he started down this delightfully spacious and elegant road, my jaw practically hit the floor! I don't think he had a clue how passionately interested I was in his comments and how eager I was for his ideas, after thinking about the many comments and shared experiences written and posted on the blog over the past month.



*The initial concept of the water, stones and trees garden creates a minimalist new entrance to Cleveland Clinic*

Here is a taste of what Peter Walker had to say:

“This business of having nothing show, is true of most of our work. Because we tend not to make objective things, we'll make a fountain or something, but typically we work in the negative spaces. We work in the space that the building sits in, or the space that somebody plays baseball, or it's a space for other purposes and whatever beauty you bring to that, you bring to the space itself, not some object within it. It's almost the opposite of architecture in that sense.

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If you think of architecture as interior space, which people don't today as much as they perhaps should, it's very much the same. But if you think of the great buildings of our period that put so much emphasis on the outsides, their sculptural form, it's the opposite of that, because we have no sculptural form. Often when you plant things, people look at them and they're just green – it's like looking out the window when you're driving around – you know, it's just green. It has no meaning, it has no specialness, you don't even focus on it. It's simply the background for other things, activities of various kinds and so over the last twenty-five years, I've tried very hard from an artistic point of view, to try and find more ways of making these places special while still performing the same functions that landscape generally performs – which is a setting, and to some extent an empty place.”



*Demetri Porphyrios explains the roots of Collegiate Gothic in front of St. John's Chapel – a paragon of Gothic Architecture at King's College in Cambridge University.*

The second Architect gave me an enlightened tour of Cambridge University for the documentary we are producing about two very different buildings recently completed at Princeton. This documentary is called *Extreme Visions*. (See [In Production](#)). Demetri Porphyrios, whose offices are in Great Portland street in London, is a traditionalist and describes himself as a classical architect. He is every bit as impassioned about

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Architecture as is Mr. Walker and since both of them are excellent teachers, I feel as though I have been through an intensive crash course in Architectural thinking. Demetri Porphyrios was born in Greece and his father was a scholar of Homer who felt that Architecture was too much of a trade where his scholastically brilliant son might get his hands dirty. Demetri, therefore, studied Art History, for a while, before going to Princeton to study Architecture against his father's wishes. His teacher at Princeton, in the early 1970's, was a young Michael Graves. Demetri's eyes twinkled behind his stylish purple eyeglasses as he qualified his professor by explaining this was Michael Graves filled with the white box ideas of Le Corbusier, rather than the Michael Graves who became known for a certain kind of geometric post modern buildings and designer products sold at Target.

Demetri's buildings at Princeton are defiantly traditional Collegiate Gothic buildings with a crenelated castle tower and a "moat" filled with trees and striking courtyards setting off his buildings with (you guessed it) sublime green negative space. See him now at Cambridge telling me to stay off the lawn.

"We don't walk on the grass here in Britain." I stare down at my idiot feet and wonder where they came up with the moronic notion that lawns were places for vulgar sunbaths and litter strewn picnics or playing frisbee with the dog? How did those stranger's shoes at the end of my long legs get over here on the lawn next to the trespassing tripod? Have I lost my mind?

The impact of the courtyard here hits you like a very old brick. It is a sublime effect which "centuries of care has wrought from the turf of England." Later in the day, we saw the gardeners simultaneously mow and roll the living green fabric, creating a checkerboard in the nap of the lawn, sort of like rubbing your finger the wrong way across velvet.

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*Digital Cinematographer, Martin Hampton, on location at Kings College at Cambridge University for the Telos documentary, Extreme Visions.*

We came to Cambridge to find the origins of the Collegiate Gothic style as adopted and transformed into something American by the most prestigious universities in the New World. What we found, of course, was not one thing but many things. What is this need to search for style and expect that style to be a single, easily understood thing? Isn't anything worth examining more delightfully complex than something you can name with a single word?

It is totally irrational to expect a small city constructed over a period greater than 500 years to be homogenous like a developer's *Ye Olde Englishe* scheme.

At Cambridge we saw enormous, richly-detailed, Gothic masterpieces both religious and profane. Kings College Chapel, a fully religious Gothic wonder, sitting right next door to the grand entrance of the (secular) King's College were the primary demonstration of this important idea. Our first long shots of the day were taken across a meadow showing "the backs" of the chapel and college buildings. The King's own cows were in evidence lounging near a canal complete with punter moving slowly across the frame in the early morning light. The porter was kind enough to let me know the cows are rare, only 350 of this breed remain, and they are also

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important for another reason. Without the cows upon it, the ownership of the land would be ceded from the King, to the people of England.



*"The Backs" at King's College in Cambridge. The King's cows insure the land remains with the King.*

Cambridge is not just Gothic, Religious Gothic, Neo-Gothic, or even Collegiate Gothic. There are Palladian arcades, Tudor facades, Round 20th Century squat towers made of glass, and Victorian porticos. We saw modernist buildings make brutal juxtapositions of cheap 1960's concrete against flourished cut granite. Medieval fortresses with rubble stone walls frame castellated towers with almost drawbridge style entrances. Punctuating all this are gargoyles, gilt clocks, knights in armor, monstrous chimera, giant granite orbs, miniature greek temple cupolas, sundials, purple ivy, carved stone lace, obelisks, perforated tracery, and heraldic rampant lions squaring off against rearing horned horses. Look closely and you'll find two seventeenth century Renaissance facades sandwich a red brick filling from the 12th century! The red brick building has the look of a monastery and in a profound respect for its old architectural bones it has been preserved and still functions to this day.

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*A red brick "filling" from the 12th century between two gorgeous Renaissance facades at Cambridge.*

Through all of this sensory overload, is the courtyard. The single unifying idea. An elegant, important gesture of negative space in a cluster of hugely varied architectural styles. These courtyards are filled with serenity. They are at once timeless and relaxing. In Cocteau's phrase, they "pluck naked beauty from the thin air in which she resides."

I grew up in suburbia. All the houses on my street looked exactly the same. We were proud to own the "model" home of the developers project but any time I went down the street to my friends houses I knew just where everything was because the plan of my house matched theirs exactly. The only variable was that the planners created a break in the tedious "ticky tacky" by making every other house a mirror image. Every identical house had a lawn. A patch of green setback (ours was mostly crabgrass) which was the length of the double wide driveways. There was nothing interesting about these lawns – they were just there begging to be mown. They were the banal essence of the drive-by meaningless green Peter Walker described above. If you were really lucky, you had a newly planted spindly tree trying to grow as fast as possible in a vain attempt to give character to an otherwise ugly cookie-cutter landscape. The

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tenuous conceptual connection of these lawns to the grandeur of the English courtyard seems much more than half a world away.

Is the purpose of the courtyard merely to frame the building? Or, is one of the usually unthought of purposes of the building to frame the courtyard? When seen from above, as a bird in flight, the courtyard organizes an otherwise chaotic landscape. It provides definition and clarity. It provides the physical and psychological distance for architectural appreciation. It provides the expensive-but-worth-it vantage point, a calm space for reflection in an otherwise crowded city.

Demetri Porphyrios explains,

“When you look at the organizational principles of Collegiate buildings at Oxford and Cambridge the main idea of the spatial organization is the idea of the court. In Italy, there was the *cortile*, the small *piazzetta*. In England, it appears as the gathering place of initial settlements, literally cut out of the forest where humans could be together. Courts are simple things and are totally trans-cultural and trans-historical.

The open space varies in size but it allows the hierarchies in the surrounding buildings to be seen and appreciated. (In this case, a Chapel, the President’s building, The Great Hall, and the “Bread & Butter Buildings – dormitories.) A court is a minuscule image of the city. What for me is fascinating about the typology of the courtyard is that it provides the intensity of the city. It allows you to see and appreciate the intensity of urban habitation.”

For Cleveland Clinic, a large urban project in search of coherency, Peter Walker’s design provides the entry way, the vista, no less than the ceremonial introduction to the institution. It borrows from the formal French garden and modern minimalist artists at the same time. Between a long allée of trees, two massive shallow pools contain rocks and water. The rocks are set in an unnatural geometric pattern like an orchard.

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*The fountain in front of the new buildings at Cleveland Clinic. Conceptual minimal art meets medicine.*

In front of the main building is a stunning fountain. Unlike a normal sunken pool, Peter Walker creates a “piece of water”—an acrylic donut holding up the water with no visible means of support. It is at once astonishing sculpture and fountain, and Peter Walker wanted it to be a fountain with everything extraneous taken away. It is sophisticated and daring. If seen in the context of minimal art, it becomes a metaphor for medicine. What do I mean? In minimal art Peter Walker explains, “How much can you take away before this thing falls apart?” He says this with a hint of irony. I’m reminded of the first principle of medicine from Hippocrates, “First, do no harm.” The doctor always has to be concerned about unintended consequences, however well intentioned. Sometimes, in the treatment of the sick, less is more.

If Walker’s art is conceptual, how does this memorably serene gesture, which literally “runneths over”, connect to the broader mission of medicine? I’m not sure why I think both of these concepts draw force from the same well, but I feel as though they do. Perhaps your comments and insights can point me in the right direction.

Until next time with much love,  
Tom