

# How to Look at the Guggenheim

By Deborah Quilter

Architects talk about the “transparency” of a building, which Gyorgy Kepes noted occurs when two figures interpenetrate without optical destruction. (Colin Rowe with Robert Slutzky, “Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal,” *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays*, by Colin Rowe. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1976, pp. 160-161)

Jacob Alspector, a Manhattan architect, elevated the meaning of this term to describe the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. He defined transparency as the experience of being so overwhelmed by the presence of a building you can't remember details of it. Physical reality disappears and you are left with an emotional experience, transported from the ennui of daily reality to a timeless realm through the impact of the architectural space working on your mind, emotions and senses at once.

He had responded to a question I'd posed hoping to enliven a humdrum magazine assignment on New York City architecture. If an architect—presumably a connoisseur of such things—could choose only one building in New York to show a close friend from out of town, which one would it be?

“The Guggenheim,” Jacob replied, without hesitation.

“Why?”

There was a pause, then his voice suddenly changed. A rhapsody of impressions and details about Frank Lloyd Wright's jewel rushed out: the geometry of the structure changed so subtly that you didn't realize the ramp was twice as wide on top as it is on the bottom. Unless you were told, you might not realize the gallery walls slanted outward slightly. Wright did this so the viewer would see the paintings as though they rested on easels. Wright also intended natural light to illuminate all the paintings, so a thin, almost hidden skylight hovered above the outer rim of the spiral to allow sunlight in.

Then there was the transparency. "It's a transformative event, every time you go in there," Jacob said.

I had visited the Guggenheim, but it was obvious I'd never really seen it. Hoping he could show me how to look at it, I asked Jacob if he would take me on a tour of the building.

Surrounded by cranes, aswarm with construction workers and ignored by passing joggers, the Guggenheim Museum sat on a shattered sidewalk on Fifth Avenue. A deep trench exposed the basement wall, giving it the appearance of an oversized molar undergoing periodontal work. The museum's curved walls were riddled with cracks and badly needed paint, but despite its shabby appearance, it suffered these indignities with aristocratic reserve.

Small childhood coincidences had culminated in Jacob's current position. As a boy, he escaped the summer heat by wandering through New York's museums and libraries. During one such adventure in his thirteenth year, he borrowed a book he thought by its cover to be science fiction, only to find it was a book on architecture by Frank Lloyd Wright. Later, he visited the Guggenheim. "I remember peering into the small rotunda, wondering what all this was, what all those spaces were that you didn't have access to," he recalled.

Wright's work had inspired his own career in architecture. During his studies at the Cooper Union, his professor asked students to draw the building they liked best in New York. "I sat on a bench across the street in Central Park drawing the Guggenheim." He wrote an ambitious outline for a series of volumes on Wright's work, including who influenced him and who Wright influenced. "I was playing detective, tracking down his sources, trying to get back to the center, which was Wright. It never ended; I bit off more than I could chew," Jacob said.

"Be careful when you read his writing," Jacob warned. "It can't be taken too literally." He micro-paused. "I know. I've gone a few of those routes." Jacob had searched Samuel Butler's novel *Erewhon* for the origin of the term "Eusonia," which Wright claimed came from that author, but could not find one mention of the word. "You can analyze the Guggenheim to death, but after a while, you realize it is what it is," Jacob declared.

Now, in a development he never imagined, Jacob, at 42, has overseen the renovation of his hero's masterpiece for the

architectural firm of Gwathmey Siegel & Associates. The original structure must be brought up to modern museum standards, while an annex to house paintings too large for the original space is built. In keeping with the history of the museum, the renovation has been dogged with controversy every step of the way.

Jacob began the tour with a walk around the exterior of the building. Fissures in the seamless twist of concrete appeared at regular intervals. "The building breathes," Jacob explained. Concrete contracts and expands with age and temperature in a kind of inspiration/exhalation. The circular walls of the Guggenheim were sprayed on like a swimming pool, but the inner walls were poured, and the different methods cause the concrete to contract and expand at different rates, thus the cracks. "A building is a living organism," Jacob added. "It has needs, like a person. It needs to be maintained, expanded, renewed."

I followed the architect through a private entry, into a maze of back offices. Then, with a suddenness that made me gasp, we stood in the middle of the rotunda, surrounded by the spiral ramp.

My chin rose involuntarily to the grand skylight dome eighty feet above. The arches, which continued the vertical lines of the rib walls, strained to kiss at the top of the dome, but never embraced, creating an open center. Cold winter light sifted through the dome and outer skylights, gently filling the huge round space. The light befitted a cathedral, not a museum; and, as Jacob later explained, this presented a problem. Wright had intended to show the paintings at their best, with sunlight, which eventually damaged the art. "If it were up to the conservators, art would be preserved in dark humidified rooms," he said.

My body turned in slow motion to follow the arc of the spiral, which seemed to undulate both inward and outward as it rose. There was a dim awareness of Jacob tracing one of the giant metal rings inset in the terrazzo floor with his forefinger, explaining that Wright kept the pattern within the square grid—rather than making an octagonal pattern with the rings—to keep it in harmony with the squareness of New York streets.

It was impossible to concentrate on what he was saying. Few people know the Guggenheim with the kind of inch-by-inch

intimacy Jacob Alspector does; he demonstrated great generosity by sharing that. But during that moment, the world stood still, and I felt an overwhelming desire for Jacob to SHUT UP and let me drink the emptiness of the naked museum. Without the distraction of art, the graceful gyre could be seen for itself: an encapsulation of eternity.

Overhead, the spiral seemed to sway. The simple line, taken from this vantage point, confused the eye. Was it going in or out? The eye, compelled to follow its orbit, could not tell. Indeed, it did not care, content to flow along, thoughtlessly mesmerized.

We began our ascent of the quarter-mile, cantilevered ramp, which held seventy-four proportionately-spaced bays on the side. As we rose, the floors buckled and walls listed. No, the walls were straight after all, but the *floor* curved. Jacob pointed out the gradual changes in scale in the picture alcoves, until we arrived at one at the top, foreshortened like Alice's wonderland house to accommodate the roof. "You can't stop a spiral," Jacob observed. Wright, a master illusionist, ends his by capping the spiral with a flat wall at the top, a trick he may have borrowed from the sea shell.

Jacob explained Wright's purpose in the dizzying lines. Representational art relates to past experience; non-objective art intends to evoke pure emotion. So Wright aimed to cleanse perception by removing one's ordinary frame of reference. He wanted to take the viewer out of his linear context, allowing a more instinctive response to the art. "When you're inside, there's no reference point to the outside," he said. "Wright destroyed references to past, references to reality to free you, transform you."

At the top, I leaned over the low parapet to view the rotunda floor. The almond-shaped reflecting pool nestled nicely to one side, in harmonious asymmetry.

"Are you afraid of heights?" Jacob asked, with a concerned look. I was about to say no, but as he spoke, the parapet didn't seem high enough, and my stomach plunged. It felt as though I would be pulled into the vortex. I stepped away from the edge.

Jacob now turned his attention to a certain geometrical configuration. He walked over to the two elegant pillar-like structures which conceal air ducts and rest rooms that rise from the rotunda level to the sixth floor. "See—" he said, with a catch of excitement to his voice. "This forms a perfect angle with that."

Something dovetailed perfectly, pleasing him very much, but whatever it was I couldn't see it. I asked him to explain it again, which he did, but I still didn't see it and felt too embarrassed at my deficiency to press the issue.

Jacob next observed that the circular floor motif that began on the rotunda abruptly switched to squares; perhaps to designate the difference between public and private space.

We re-traced our steps. Jacob led me to the outer gallery wall to see the exposed wall that remained when Gwathmey Siegel removed a patch of plaster for a lab analysis so it could try to duplicate the original material and color. As we approached, the floor curved upward so steeply I slid backwards in my shoes, feeling a child's mistrust of the cantilever. This upward curl serves a dual purpose: it allows light to penetrate the galleries on the floor below, and prevents visitors from coming too close to the art.

The spiral pulled us around in a graceful descent. My attention and eyes repeatedly drifted back to center, following the ramp from round to round. Even now, those endless bends haunt my memory.

The annex tour would have to wait for another day, and I left the Guggenheim elated and strangely disturbed. Jacob's patient explanations of Wright's gorgeous geometry didn't help me understand the Guggenheim. If anything, I knew less than before. On the street, the senseless rush of traffic and the state of perpetual busyness that is New York City made me ache for the solitude of the empty space. Perplexing as it was, I wanted to go back inside that baffling spiral and stay there until I figured it out.

What was needed was an intensive program of study. Jacob was right about Wright's writing; I gave it up as hopelessly obscure. Wright's most germane comment came during its construction: "They'll still try and figure this one out 100 years from now," he predicted. (Peter Blake, "The Guggenheim: Museum or Monument?" *The Architectural Forum*, Vol. III, December 1959) I could almost hear the architect laughing at visitors who emboldened themselves to crack its magic riddle. The Guggenheim could easily pull you into its vortex, then spew you into the ozone with one jovial belch—unenlightened.

Michael Schneider, a New York mathematician, teacher of

symbolic geometry and author of a forthcoming book on geometry, nature, art and self (HarperCollins), observed that people often think they are transfixed by the image portrayed in great art, when in fact they are responding to the power of the underlying archetypal geometry. So the clue, it seemed, lay in the spiral. The word clue, Jill Purce points out, derives from 'clew' a ball of thread used to find one's way out of the labyrinth. (Jill Purce. *The Mystic Spiral: Journey of the Soul*. New York, Thames and Hudson, 1980, p. 29) The spiral is based on the golden section, the relationship of the irrational number 1.618 . . . to one. "The spiral is self-similar: its curvature always remains the same no matter how large or small it gets; and it remains balanced within itself," noted Michael. Its elusive center, the eye or pole, can never be reached along the path of the spiral. But it teases you nonetheless: the closer you think you come to it, the more it retreats. Mathematicians call this phenomenon an asymptote: forever approached but never reached. Paradoxically, this does not mean the spiral cannot be solved: you must use transcendental numbers, not whole, rational numbers, to do so.

The brilliance of Wright's labyrinth lies in its elegant simplicity. Wright employed a Moslem idea Lawrence Durrell mentions in the *Alexandria Quartet*, "If you wish to hide something," says the Arabic proverb, "hide it in the sun's eye." (Lawrence Durrell. *Clea*. New York, E.P. Dutton, 1960, p. 223) While an English garden maze obscures your view, you know exactly where you are at any point on the Guggenheim's ramp. Yet even that understanding only intensifies the confusion: how can something so simple be so riveting?

Part of the answer may be that Wright was after all not a perfectionist. On my tour of the reconstruction in progress, Jacob pointed out flaws: the clumsy way the spiral begins and ends, the skewed proportion. Here the building teaches a lesson: its imperfections create power. According to one theory of physics, Jacob said, such imbalances explain life itself: "If it hadn't been that way, nothing would ever happen;" the universe would never move.

The inherent incompleteness of the spiral implies the lovely idea Manly Hall found in the Great Pyramid: "There is curious tendency among the builders of great religious edifices to leave their creations unfinished, thereby signifying that God alone is complete. . . . The temple is complete only when the initiate

himself becomes the living apex through which the divine power is focused into the diverging structure below.” (Manly P. Hall. *The Secret Teachings of All Ages*. Los Angeles, The Philosophical Research Society, 1989, p. 44) A labyrinth needs its Hero to solve its great puzzle.

Once you start investigating spirals, which are symbols of the labyrinth, you see them everywhere. The human body holds many of them, noted Michael. The fist contains two, one on the front, one on the back. The heart is one, as well as the inner ear (which is called the labyrinth), and they are in the ribs, cerebral cortex, and whorls of the fingerprint—all possess a maze-like quality. Outside the body, wind and water, when left to their own devices, form spirals. Pendulums, when they lose momentum, trace spiral patterns because of the magnetic polarity of the earth. Even—the most pleasing discovery of all—the shape of the question mark contains a miniature labyrinth, complete with volute and point. The quest is implied within any question.

Jung was told by a Tibetan abbot that “the most impressive mandalas in Tibet are built up by imagination, or directed fantasy, when the psychological balance of the group is disturbed or when a particular thought cannot be rendered because it is not yet contained in the sacred doctrine and must therefore be searched for. . . . The mandala serves a conservative purpose—namely, to restore a previously existing order. But it also serves the creative purpose of giving expression and form to something that does not yet exist, something new and unique . . . in most cases, what restores the old order simultaneously involves some element of new creation.” (C.G. Jung. *Man and his Symbols*. Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1964, p. 225) Wright exhorted students to rebel against tradition: “Any architect should be radical by nature because it is not enough for him to begin where others have left off.” (Edgar Kaufmann and Ben Raeburn, *Frank Lloyd Wright: Writings and Buildings*. New York, Meridian Books, 1974, p. 234)

The Hero enters the labyrinth in a initiatory test, Purce tells us, in order to overcome death at the center and be reborn to life. Wright filled his work with figures known as Vesicas Pisces, whose prototype Michael characterizes as the birth canal through which Nature’s geometry is born. The Vesica Piscis is the fish-shaped oval created by the intersection of two equal circles which

touch each other's center. From an undistorted Vesica Piscis grow perfect squares, equilateral triangles, pentagons and hexagons. Artists throughout the ages, however, have elongated or widened the basic shape. Perfect geometry was traditionally reserved for depiction of the gods; human forms were slightly off, giving them dynamism, interest and life. Also known as the Mandorla (literally, almond), this figure gains added significance in conjunction with the labyrinth: ". . . it is cognate with the spindle of the *Magna Mater* and with the magical spinners of thread" (the clew). (J.E. Cirlot. *A Dictionary of Symbols*. New York, Philosophical Library, 1971, pp. 203-204)

Wright's version is based on a squared circle, which stretches the fish shape, and it appears in stairwells, columns and exterior ornamentation. The circle-within-an-implicit-square design on the terrazzo, according to Michael, signifies that heaven (or ideal state) is hidden within earth (or matter, everything we see). Thus the building encodes a cosmic canon.

After several months of cracking my head against the Guggenheim's riddles, it invaded my dreams.

In one, I wandered along a spiral ramp punctuated with mirrors at even intervals. The mirrors never reflected my own image, only past or future views of the spiral. This, said Michael, connoted advanced mathematics: the constantly changing tangent along the spiral's continuum.

In another, an office building hovered several feet above a bustling city financial district. Since the structure hung in the air rather than being rooted in the ground, miniature orange trees hung off the side to provide ballast. A woman inside caught my eye: a fleeting look of terror crossed her face—then unseen forces rocked the building until it swayed and capsized. (Michael later told me that the Pyramids were thought to have originated in heaven, too: they were pictured as emerging from rays of light.)

In the most haunting dream, I visited the site of an ancient civilization on an island in Greece. This noble people dwelled inside a cliff by the edge of the sea. At the floor of their habitat lay a cavernous temple filled with treasure. A warrior clad in intricately tooled leather visor and breastplate emerged from the entrance of the cave to take me to the bottom. To reach the temple, one descended a precipitous, open spiral staircase carved in the weeping rock.

The warrior, who was about the same height as Jacob, held out his gloved hand to lead me into the maze. I trusted him instantly, but as I entered the cave's suffocatingly narrow mouth, a group of tourists crowded around. Stumbling through the pitch black was bad enough, but the thought of attempting it amid a throng of pushing people terrified me. What if the sea water rushed in through a fissure in the rock? What if I fell from the open stairway into the center? There was no banister, and the steps were rough and steep. To my sorrow, fear won and I backed out of the cave.

There was another way to view the ruins, however. Above the site, amid a noisy carnival, lay an enormous pool. I leaned over the edge, and the limpid water magnified the gleaming white sarcophagus of a goddess which graced the depths of the temple, bringing her close to view. While gazing on this beautiful mummy, a surge of vertigo swept over me. I couldn't look because of my terror of falling; I couldn't stop looking because of the compelling desire to see her.

With astonishing ease, the dream evoked deep archetypal symbols of breath-taking beauty. British geometer John Michell writes that ancient temples were often situated in underground caverns, where the magnetic current of the earth accumulates.

In deep subterranean caverns, where the light of the sun is unknown, dwell those monstrous, atavistic creatures of the underworld, the demons that watch over buried treasure and the phantom forms which haunt the night-side of nature and lurk within the dark recesses of the mind. Initiates of the ancient Mysteries, keeping vigil in the chambers beneath the earth, had personal experience of these dread images, and in some cases it overwhelmed their sanity. Those who survived the ordeal were reborn and, having outfaced the terrors of darkness and death, had no further fears in life." (John Michell. *The Dimensions of Paradise: The Proportions and Symbolic Numbers of Ancient Cosmology*. San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1988, pp. 18, 182)

Another aspect of the dream—the tourists—whimsically illustrated Manly P. Hall's concept of symbols as the language of the Mysteries. "Rejecting man-conceived dialects as inadequate and unworthy to perpetuate divine ideas, the Mysteries thus chose symbolism as a far more ingenious and ideal method of preserving their transcendental knowledge. In a single figure, a symbol may both reveal and conceal, for to the wise the subject

of the symbol is obvious, while to the ignorant the figure remains inscrutable.” (Hall, p. 20) Michael compares such symbols with “hobo marks”: coded signs left by a tramp that foretold the kind of response another tramp might expect upon knocking on a given door. In my dream, the tourists were at the famous site all right, but they would never understand the Temple’s secrets until they were spiritually attuned. (Michael fondly insists that the only sacred geometry resides within the soul.) In the dream, I feared the tourists would desecrate the experience of being in the temple, so they may represent the blind aspects of my own nature that block enlightenment. Even a kindly warrior can’t help there.

The most disturbing part of the dream was the vast, goddess-containing pool: at first offering a tantalizing view of my goal, then cruelly causing vertigo. Was this also the let-down of Wright’s building? Was it some kind of trick of the patriarchal anima, promising more than it could finally deliver of an authentic feminine initiation?

Jacob called to say he was giving a tour of the annex to a woman earning her Ph.D. in urban planning from Harvard University. Did I want to come, too?

If the first visit to the Guggenheim was a trip to Mount Parnassus, this was a descent to the Underworld. Polyethylene curtains snapped threateningly in the wind. Stern signs forbade entry. Jackhammers and whining pneumatic drills created a deafening roar. There even seemed a mild red glow about the light today. The analogy, I found later was not too far off: there had been a fire during the renovation.

Everyone seemed under the gun to finish—a construction worker with a wheelbarrow narrowly missed hitting me on the way in. Cables and debris lay all over the floor; hurried workers had nicked the plaster of the graceful parapet. Plaster dust instantly covered anyone inside.

Jacob presided over the din with the calm of Vulcan himself. The Ph.D. candidate and I readily signed forms agreeing not to sue the Guggenheim for any injury we might sustain and were issued hard-hats.

Pausing briefly outside the entrance, the architect intoned a litany of warnings, beginning (unwittingly) with a great Zen koan. “Watch your step,” he instructed. “Don’t step anywhere

without looking. There might be a hole in the floor. Don't ever back up without looking. Look up as well as down before you enter an area because someone might be working above you."

Weaving in and out of tiny, ovoid stairways, Jacob took us first to the private offices of the Guggenheim staff, a smaller replica of the grand gallery. One had the feeling of being in a private home, I remarked to the Ph.D. candidate.

"That's what it was—a museum built for a rich man," she assured me, with a patronizing smile.

We followed the architect up utility staircases to the large new gallery space in the addition. Jacob discussed the intricacies of the heating and cooling system with the Harvard candidate. Once again, the great gaps in my knowledge of architecture pained me. Other questions seemed far more pressing than temperature control: Why are you transfixed by this ramp? Why are you compelled to peer over the parapet when it scares the hell out of you? Why do you feel a child's ecstasy with Wright's design, which makes you yearn to swerve through space to the bottom, where you'll be catapulted, enraptured, from the tight vortex through open arms of the glass roof into the sky? How could people talk about anything but philosophy in this building?

I gave up thinking and abandoned myself to the experience as we left the annex and entered the spiral. Single file, we climbed a spindly, seventy-step ladder that swayed with each step, and stood on the basket-weave scaffolding that had been erected to allow replacement of the panes of the great skylight. The old, cracked glass looked human, like the worn face of a beloved grandfather.

Then we snaked our way to the basement, through subterranean private spaces, a catacomb of storage vaults and employee lounges. When we emerged, we were in the underground theater, which sits directly beneath the rotunda floor.

Here Jacob alerted us to something few visitors would detect: a drain, smack dab in the center of the room, at its lowest point. What delight: the *Omphalos*, the Axis Mundi, the Navel of the Earth!

For the finale, Jacob saved a trip to one of his favorite places—the roof, which is off-limits to visitors. On the way up to it, he stopped abruptly, noticing something. He lightly touched a wall, frowning, thinking. "They can't read a blueprint," he said finally. As had occurred many times during the

tours, Jacob seemed more like the museum's lover than its steward.

We reached the roof quickly. The weather was freakishly warm for March. Thousands of beams of sunlight danced off the water in the Central Park reservoir and a bracing wind whipped through our hair. For a languid moment, Jacob, the Ph.D. candidate, and I silently beheld the view. We were smiling.

Subsequent months of mostly fruitless—if fascinating—reading increased my despair over my ability to comprehend what Jacob saw, no matter how hard I studied. I knew I was missing something, but I couldn't figure out what it was. Jacob sympathized: "Ask anyone who gets involved with this job; they'll tell you the building drives them crazy."

What finally freed me from the notion that I had to see the Guggenheim Jacob's way was my coming to an understanding of an aspect of the warrior dream I had previously misinterpreted. It hit me in a flash one day. I was utterly mistaken in thinking the water in the deep pool magnified the image of the goddess so that I could see her. What had really happened was this: because I could not enter the cave to find her, *she had mercifully risen from the bottom of the depths to come to me*. I realized, you don't solve the labyrinth; it absolves you.

Like an instinctive archetypal communication, the Guggenheim's message spans the gap of the intellect by reaching directly into the visitor's psyche. The soul instinctively knows what the tongue-tied mind cannot articulate. As Hilla Rebay, whose driving force to create a "Temple of Non-objectivity" brought the Guggenheim into being, said of non-objective art, "Its message needs no pretense, no translators, no explanations; it speaks for itself and for the cosmic life of which it is part." (Joan M. Lukach. *Hilla Rebay: In Search of the Spirit in Art*. New York, George Braziller, 1983, p. 144)