

The Department Store's Lapidary Imagination

Don Kunze

Intimacy is what we think no one else should be interested in. Private experiences are nonetheless enjoyable, sometimes intensely and indulgently so, partly because they resist description. My interest in the department store as a precedent and building type is decidedly intimate, inexplicably enjoyable, and thus hard to explain. Nonetheless, it is my theoretical obligation to explain it.

My interest in precedents is based on the belief that architectural types should be defined by the specific kinds of enjoyment involved. Enjoyment, however, is complicated. We say we enjoy something, but often—especially in relation to culture and language—it would be more accurate to say that something is enjoying us. Enjoying and being enjoyed alternate and sometimes overlap. In architecture this involves an uncanny harmony the ancient Greeks called *palintonos harmoniē*, orderliness that emerges from chaos, that turns back on itself. The simplest example is one of the earliest: Odysseus's doubly-bent bow (Fig. 1).¹ With a backwards bend, Homer's hero doubled the force and accuracy of the arrows he used to clear out Penelope's suitors.

The bow materialized the hero's problem of how to return home. To be effective, this return had to be, like the bow, a double circuit.² This involved more than a physical return to a fixed location. An adjustment of orientation was required. Heraclitus again figures in, as he did with the bow. It is a matter of how we revisit 'the same' without falling victim to what René Magritte summarized visually with his portrait of the young man looking into the mirror and seeing his back.³ To be truly home *again*, we must re-set to zero as a ground, without the nostalgic alienation that usually accompanies such repetitions.⁴ The type is this ground, but it is more a know-how than a know-that. It is a perfect memory that re-members through what we might call a 'natural synesthesia.'⁵ To complete the circuit, *to come back home*, Odysseus's final task was epitomized by the tool it required. Turn and turn again. Despite the difficulty of thinking about these relations of enjoying and being enjoyed, poetry is filled with the double circuits of

¹ M. D. Usher, *Plato's Pigs and Other Ruminations: Ancient Guides to Living with Nature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University, 2020). Odysseus's marksmanship in Book XXI of *The Odyssey* is uncanny in that the victims seem to attract the arrow in ways that symbolize their perfidy. The magnetism of the prey is an ancient folk theme based on instrumental convergence, the logic of destiny. Outward-branching free choice is centrifugal. Destiny spirals inward (Žižek Summer 2013). Žižek is commenting on Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on the Purloined Letter," in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida & Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1988).

² Odysseus was the first official character in fiction to formalize the Heraclitan problem that Thomas Wolfe would make famous as a book title, *You Can't Go Home Again* [1934] (New York, Scribner, 2011.)

³ René Magritte, *La reproduction interdite* ("Not to be Reproduced"), 1937, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.

⁴ Repetition without reset is compulsion, a return of some repressed trauma that will repeat itself endlessly unless the cause is addressed. See Freud, 1950a: 281391.

⁵ I owe this idea to Iraj Ismailpour Ghoohani, an independent researcher working in Stuttgart, Germany.

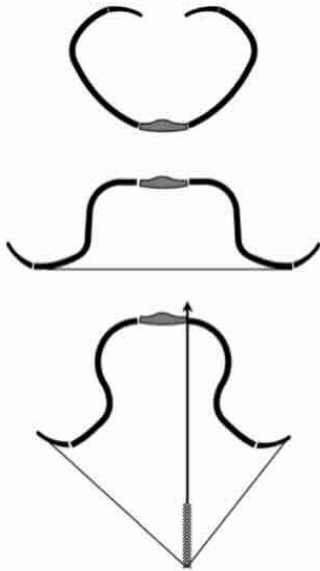


Figure 1. The bow of Homer's Odysseus was doubly bent, to combine the force of the inverted circle with bow bent by the string. Drawing by Author (2024).

palintonos harmoniē, as if to say that the enjoyment that forms the architectural type is something to be endured. While it may be impossible to understand fully, we may theorize the issue of difficulty itself.

The full story about buildings requires us to see both a First Circuit of construction and a Second Circuit of destruction. This would be a sine wave rise and fall, but the trick is think how ruin is present as soon as the first stone is placed. The First Circuit involves so many designers, contractors, and permits that we postpone thinking about the Second Circuit's inevitability. Its logic of contraction would not be visible unless we were able to slow down the 'film' to see entropy at work, frame by frame. Only master-mnemonicists like Gordon Matta-Clark have bothered to do such editing. What construction had suppressed, destruction exposes. The *poché* formerly hidden inside is hung out to view, like the interior of a building suddenly bombed in two.

What Rose Macaulay called the pleasure of ruins is the building enjoying us, the Second Circuit cutting into the First to reveal a counter-clockwise twin. To know this other side of

enjoyment, we must avoid thinking of it in terms of decay and instead look for it in the sparkle and shine of buildings fresh out of the box. This requires us to configure *palintonos harmoniē* as an impossible force, where the impossibility itself is materialized. The department store not only accommodates impossibility; impossibility is its premise. What do we mean by saying this?

Instrumental Convergence of the Void

If building is about possibility and architecture is about impossibility, architecture's basis is about the central void. Since voids are indispensable to the department store idea and design, it is essential to establish the void's relation to *palintonos harmoniē* in terms that are architecturally, historically, and theoretically understandable.

Instrumental convergence produces *palintonos harmoniē* by reversing cause and effect. Slavoj Žižek has used the example of the little girl who exclaims, "Daddy was born in Manchester, Mummy in Bristol, and I in London: strange that the three of us should have met!"⁶ More familiarly, this is the perceived destiny of lovers who say, despite meeting by accident, that they felt destined to fall in love. The logic of contingent choice, which corresponds to the First Circuit of building, sees actions as branching outward. Each path taken leaves behind others not taken. The contra-logic of fate inverts this tree. Every freely made choice, every accident, is a step closer to an inevitable conclusion. Architecture's Second Circuit is this reversed causality of instrumental convergence.

The instrument in question is not a god or demon; it is embedded within the very notion of choice that coats human judgement with doubt, the inverse of desire. Its providence emerges from the inner

⁶ Žižek Summer 2013. The story comes from Michel Pêcheux, *Language, Semantics and Ideology* (London: MacMillan, 1982).

structure of free will.⁷ We associate Vitruvian *firmitas* with the First Circuit, but this misunderstands the way structure involves destiny. We cannot see structure, so we rely on the visible materials that transmit its force: columns, beams, frames, etc. As a pure flow of energy, structure can take almost any form, even literary.

In the department store, the void idea is logically implicit but sometimes literally manifests as an atrium space. Wannamaker's in Philadelphia was the paradigm exemplar, thanks to its famous organ, the largest in the world. The zig-zagging escalators of the KaDeWe in Berlin break with the grid to intensify the sense of vertigo (Fig. 2). Others, such as Rome's Rinascente, Stockmann in Helsinki, de Bijenkorf in Amsterdam, maintain untraversed galleries. But, characterizations make it too easy to miss the function of the void. *The void allows space-time to simultaneously adhere and divide.* In the spirit of the contronym of ancient languages, which fascinated Freud on account of their cultural and linguistic *centrality*,⁸ the architectural void establishes the department store as culturally and economically central, for the same reason that civic voids—plazas, parks, forums—are critical at the scale of the town.



Figure 2. Left: Escalators crisscrossing the interior void, Kaufhaus des Westens (KaDeWe), Berlin. Photo by author, December 2023. Right: Wannamaker's, now Grand Court of Macy's Centre City, Philadelphia. The pipe organ, the largest in the world, is played at daily concerts. Photograph by Difference engine, Wikimedia Creative Commons (2017).

Theories about the emptiness of cities and buildings have focused on attributes rather than structure, partly because the contronymic void is difficult to describe. A precedent should be defined *structurally*, and its relation to subsequent examples can then be *structurally* related. The principle of the void, to be a principle, must be translatable to other media. The advantage of this is that new aspects come to the surface; these can be used to uncover hidden features of the original architectural case. The department

⁷ The subject of emergence is immense and complex. In my view the most comprehensive theory first appeared in the theory of history put forward by the eighteenth century philosopher of culture, Giambattista Vico, who theorized a providence ('ideal eternal history') based on the metaphoric thinking of the first humans. James Joyce applied the ideal eternal history to everyday experiences, condensing the entire sequence into encounters lasting a few minutes. Vico 1948: §§114, 349, 393; A. M. Klein, "A Shout in the Street. An Analysis of the Second Chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*," *Literary Essays and Reviews* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1987), doi.org/10.3138/9781487589325-081, accessed June 30, 2024.

⁸ Freud 1950b.

store makes some things theorizable, and these can be found in other media. There, other aspects come to light, to serve as confirming checks and to open new routes of research. With corroboration comes refutability, and with refutability, a science of the precedent becomes possible.⁹

Theorizing the Void

The void essential to the department store idea cannot be described in Cartesian XYZ space. It is topological, meaning that the relation of forces defining voids must fit within two dimensions. To describe them we must add a third, our point of view, compromising the topology. This intrusion imposes a question-and-answer structure, but the many of the questions are due to our necessary intrusion. Our three-dimensional relations to two-dimensional forms inevitably encounter some combination of opposites (non-orientation), which refuses to resolve. This is the essence of *palintonos harmoniē*. Non-orientation reveals that our question, our theory, is on the right track.

Cleavage: we say that the department store void severs a space, but that this is also the way the diverse elements of the space cohere. Non-orientation is in the word ‘cleave’ itself, which means both to divide and hold together.¹⁰ Something deeper in the void is revealed by this word relation. Cleaving is one way to think of non-orientation, both as contradiction within a single word but also the need to embody contradiction as such, in experiences where synaesthesia, *déjà vu*, and *lacunæ* are the rule, not the exception. Cleaving makes it possible to rethink the zig-zag elevators of the KaDeWe in Berlin or Wannamaker’s wall of sound, zig-zagging across audiences during daily noontime concerts.

The condition of non-orientation can be modelled by (Leonhard) Euler circles in a relation called ‘union without intersection’ (Fig. 3). While Venn circles can be made to do anything, Euler committed his circles to tell only the truth. The lozenge shape that refuses to intersect refuses on account of the void’s refusal. Is there theoretical value to this?

⁹ I rely on Karl Popper’s assertion that what can’t be refuted is tautology or belief. Refutation does not exclude speculation and, in critical theory, addresses the relations of ideas. Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁰ Mark Nichol, “75 Contronyms (Words with Contradictory Meanings),” *Daily Writing Tips*, www.dailywritingtips.com/75-contronyms-words-with-contradictory-meanings/, accessed July 27, 2024.

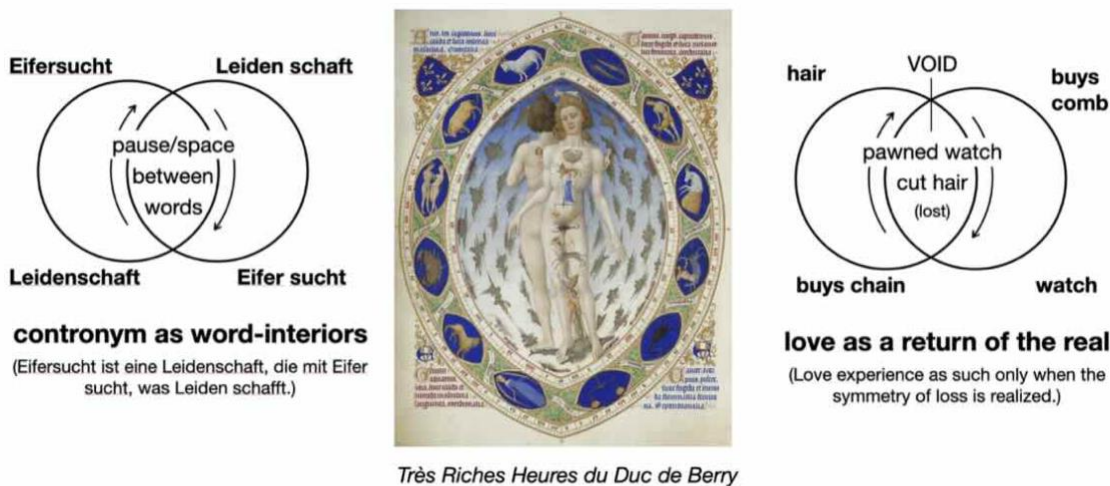


Figure 3. The vesica pisces used in religious iconography was later Euler's condition of union without intersection, the symmetrical difference between two entities with matching losses. In Schleiermacher's joke, the void is the space that, inserted into two words, reveals a hidden self-created unpleasantness for which there is no cure. In the O. Henry story, "The Gift of the Magi," the couple find love not in gift-giving but in the invertedly symmetrical sacrifice. Sources: "The Anatomical Zodiac Man," Limbourg brothers, 1411. Wikimedia Creative Commons. Other drawings by Author.

Consider this miniature demonstration of the void as a teller of truth. This joke, attributed to Friedrich Schleiermacher, is hilarious in German: *Eifersucht ist eine Leidenschaft, die mit Eifer sucht, was Leiden schafft*.¹¹ In English, it is nothing more than an unfunny truism: "Jealousy is a passion that seeks with zeal that which creates suffering." The funniness lies in a double cleavage: dividing *Eifersucht*, 'jealousy,' into (*mit*) *Eifer sucht*, 'seeks with zeal,' and *Leidenschaft*, 'passion,' into *Leiden schafft* (makes suffering). The spacing effect has the same effect as Bela Legosi's famous line in *Dracula* (1931): "I do not drink ... wine." The logic here is that, by inserting a short pause, meaning as well as physical words break apart and re-seal. Out of this second nothing springs the *truth* of the first. The cut between two words has created witty, universal value. Destruction has led to reconstruction at another level. Euler's overlapping circles specify a void that turns out to be both effective and astonishing.¹² Instrumental convergence, working even in this brief example, treats impossibility as inevitability, known through retroaction. Once a void separates appearance into two parts, a Janusian observer can see things from both sides, joining and dividing. Janus a chiral view, a pure turning that is both inside and outside, both the mystery of the interior and out difficulty in reaching it.

Euler's circles are not Venn's. They refuse to certify combinations or resolutions that cannot be experienced. Around the void, circulate two circumferential motions, $A \rightarrow B$ and $B' \rightarrow A'$ (Fig. 3). Euler's veridical standard is proven by Schleiermacher's joke, but an even more solid case for the universality of

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious" [1905], trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 8 (New York: Random House, 1938), 35. Friedrich Schleiermacher's original is difficult to trace. It may have come from an older source, the master of *Don Quixote*: "¡O zelos, zelos! ¡Quan mejor os llaman duelos, duelos!" (O jealousy, jealousy! How better they would call you duels, duels!). Miguel Cervantes [1615], *Comedias y Entremeses*, IV, "Entremes, de la Guarda Cuydadosa," (Paris: Baudry Librariá Europea), lines 10, 70. I am grateful to Iraj Ghoochani for pointing out this example.

¹² The lipogram is another example too complex to discuss here. Read a novel written entirely without the letter 'e' to watch meaning flow over the voids. Georges Perec, *A Void*, trans. Gilbert Adair (London: Vintage, 2008).

the void can be found in one of the most widely read short stories of the early twentieth century, O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi."¹³

A poor couple at Christmastime wish to gift each other something to augment the other's most precious possession: her, a chain for her husband's inherited gold watch; him, an expensive comb for his wife's famously beautiful long hair. But, each has had to sell this very object in order to afford these gifts. The symmetry of the differences created a void (the preposition 'for'), which became the essence of love. This accurate version of Euler's void was paradoxical but readily grasped by the millions of readers of this story, who had not studied mathematics or symbolic logic.

The alliance of common sense and symmetrical difference may make its topology a bit easier to comprehend. It is essential to theorizing the department store's value as a precedent. It would not be far off to compare department stores, especially those with a literal central void, to a torus. If we think only of a three-dimensional torus (donut, bicycle tire, etc.) we would be missing an important point. Within the 3-d perspectival torus lies a 2-d topology of symmetrical difference. If one makes a full 360° cut while rotating the knife 180° in relation to the tube, the 1:2 ratio produces two Möbius-shaped faces.¹⁴ These chiral twins are evidence of non-orientation due to the fact that a cut made through the tube need make only one crossing of a circle drawn at the perimeter, tracing an interior 8 (720°) while it completes its 360° circuit. The two-for-the-price-of-one deal is also the result of a diagonal slice through the 3-d torus: a line-for-line duplicate of the Euler circles' symmetrical difference.

The secret of the 2-d torus hiding inside the visible 3-d one is found out by thinking of the tube of the torus intersecting itself in the fashion of a Klein bottle (Fig. 4), where the two ends of the tube of the torus are modelled as an interior non-orientable and chiralistic void, duplicating the Euler circles' union-without-intersection. From the void inside this join, radically cleaving in both senses, Janus looks both ways, and finally we understand the relation of this god to war. *Harmoniē* can only be the product of a *palintropic* fold of forces, degenerative and regenerative at the same time.

¹³ Porter (1905). I have treated this story and its topology elsewhere. See Donald Kunze, "Hamiltonian Finishing: The Global-Local Architecture of Projective Geometry," in Paul Emmons, Marcia Feuerstein, and Negar Goljan (eds.), *Finishing: The Ends of Architecture* (Abington, OX, UK: Routledge, 2025).

¹⁴ This example was taken from an experiment conducted by Carlo Séquin, "Topology of a Twisted Torus," *Numberphile*; www.youtube.com/watch?v=3_VydFQmtZ8&t=114s, accessed July 18, 2024.

Symmetrical difference is not just the logic behind the spatial voids we find in the KaDeWe, La Samaritaine, Wannamaker's, Stockmann, De Bijenkorf, or Rinascente Roma. It is the structure of every exchange, where the buyer must believe that the price is a bit lower than the actual value, and the seller must believe that it is higher. Without symmetrical difference nothing would sell; the economy would collapse. Yet, to describe it accurately we need Euler circles and toruses. A proper void design requires a sufficiently complex paradigm able to support all the themes and variations. We must accurately map enjoyment to space, time, and material effects, but these are not understandable in a Euclidean or Cartesian framework. We need to refer to the hidden structures of topology. We must engage the idea of

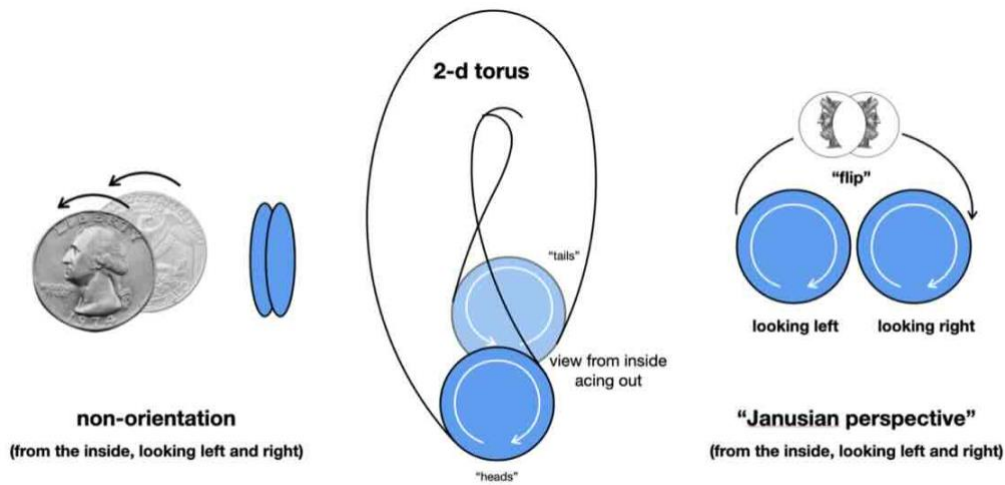


Figure 4. The topological (2-d) torus, unlike the 3-d torus, involves self-intersection that is non-orientable. It is possible to configure this by describing each section of the tube as a cut that faces itself. The 2-d torus creates a symmetrical difference for a Janusian observer in the same rotational position as O. Henry's couple, in Janusian love. Drawing by Author.

repetition, time-travel, and the embedded retro-logic of suppression and return. We cannot rely on the concentric model of Aristotle, that promises to end in the bad infinity of the Firmament.¹⁵ We must shift instead to the idea that the void is active, palintropic; that its incorporation of non-intersection is essential. Astonishment is not just an affective response. It is the real, doing what it likes to do best: enjoying us.

Green Architecture

Sticking to structure allows comparisons of architectural conditions to other media—we have already involved jokes, fictions, and even archery—to establish that structural effectiveness is both universal and portable. Shall we conclude by carrying the model of instrumental convergence to a film that includes an undeclared department store? In the 1939 film, *The Wizard of Oz*, the entirety of Emerald City is structured like a department store. When the refugees—Dorothy and her magical companions, the Tin Man, Straw Man, and Cowardly Lion— arrive, beauticians and wellness staff attend to them in comfortable, well-equipped salons. Tin is polished, straw is stuffed, and claws are treated to a manicure. The magical friends, who all complain of lacks (love, intelligence, courage), are restored, but with a curious symbolic argument. They have, notes the wizard, never lost what they feel is missing; all they need is certification: a clock for the Tin Man, a diploma for the Straw Man, and a medal for the actually courageous Cowardly Lion. This underscores the department store's ability to recognize and confirm, in its patrons, their status as un-needy but smart and stylish enough to shop anyway. The circulation of

¹⁵ Lacan January 5, 1966: 63.



Figure 5. Following the Renaissance tradition of arraying the saints and angels concentrically around the resurrected corpse, Dorothy awakes from her death dream, where the saints and angels are now back into their mortal guises. We see her in this still having emerged from the other side of the pharmacological coma/void of Oz.

goods, capital, and manners in this system is green and lapidary. Its distinctly Eulerian claim is this: what seems to be lost has been there all the time. The appearance of loss was good for generating self-recycling of desire and demand, which require nothing from the outside. In Oz, no one ever seems to leave. Even the Wizard seems stuck in town.

Dorothy doesn't actually leave Kansas. She lies in bed recovering from her concussion. (Fig. 5).¹⁶ It finishes her return to home in a double register. She awakes from the dream of Oz, only to see the same cast and crew arrayed around her bed. The Euler circles have satisfied Dorothy as they satisfied Odysseus, with double meanings for everyone and every thing. The economy of her wound involves the double meaning of *pharmakon*, both a dangerous risk and a return to safety.

The city/emporium featured in *The Wizard of Oz* could be called the first cinematic green architecture, not only because of its reference gemstone. The Emerald City offered Dorothy and her magic friends asylum and restitution by making a Eulerian claim: what seems lost has been there all the time. Isn't this the message of green actions today, that we have all the resources we need, if we can only find a way to recycle them?¹⁷

Ecological self-containment is suitably represented by the crystal, whose hardness is a perfect structure, whose colour is the flag of good intentions, and whose transparency proclaims a democratic

¹⁶ Richard Bernheimer, "Theatrum Mundi," *The Art Bulletin* 38(4): 225–47; doi.org/10.1080/00043079.1956.11408342.

¹⁷ This ideal is nowhere better expressed than in the Indian film, *3 Idiots* (2009), whose hero flunks out of engineering school to found an academy where students develop ingenious devices made out of found parts.

attitude.¹⁸ We could call architecture ‘lapidary’ when it meets these ideals that, in the department store, are provided in a building that offers to exchange any purchase at no charge.¹⁹

The Emerald City wasn’t a city with a department store; it was a department store. When the newcomers first encounter the Great and Powerful Wizard, his face is projected by an apparatus rivalling the Wannamaker organ. What does the film add to the department store model that we can return to the original, more literal case?

The green jewel returns a reality that has been recovered and refreshed. But, Dorothy is undergoing a more general kind of crisis. She had been injured by a flying window-frame (how appropriate!) during the tornado and rendered unconscious. Her coma was medically therapeutic, but we can surmise that her death dream was equally restorative. Her magical friends were none other than the farmhands, dressed in magic. The Wizard had been the kindly travelling performer who had counselled her to return home at the opening of the film.

This double world, reflected within healing green crystal, points to the department store’s function of spatial inversion. The term ‘microcosm’ does not do justice to the topological powers of what is called the inversion circle, where everything outside can be found on the inside.²⁰ La Samaritaine in Paris once sported a railing on the terrace of its rooftop café, with painted illustrations of landmarks in the distance, a literal model of the inversion circle. As city landmarks, department stores function as tempiettos; in turn, tempiettos miniaturize the department store’s atrium functions by being (1) a chronometer, (2) a column of ideal proportionality, and (3) a theatrical space. The Emerald City returns these hidden features to the general model. Its completely contained public spaces point back to the inversion strategy of the courtyard, presenting interior façades as if they were exterior.

If all of the ideas packed into the Renaissance tempietto were sold separately, we would find them in the store departments carrying GPS devices, cameras, computers, and fashion wrist-watches. The ceilings of the atriums would open to the heavens or represent the firmament. The building itself would be a monument on the landscape and a means of determining distant locations. There would be a big clock.²¹ The most spectacular feature of the tempietto, its idealization of the well-proportioned column, would be the atrium void, whose ratios are represented by the criss-cross marketing relations of goods arrayed in the image of an ideal consumer-subject, re-enacting a cinematic boom-shot sweep of the whole with every escalator ride.

The question of type uses the lapidary Emerald City as the middle term connecting the department store to the tempietto. Like all middle terms, it turns from predicated to predicator in a Janusian rotation. The department store, in this precision-jewel pivot, is a re-orientation of the tempietto, architecture’s

¹⁸ See Daniel Willis, *The Emerald City and Other Essays on the Architectural Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1999), 87–98, the first major treatment of this fictional city in architecture literature. Willis has given a deductive account of why green should be the colour of Oz’s capital city, comparing green to other options and their associations.

¹⁹ The practice of refusing to refund purchases motivated John Wannamaker to establish his store’s policy of unconditional full returns. He had apparently discovered the lapidary atom of department store vitality.

²⁰ See “Inversive Geometry,” *Wikipedia* (December 2005); en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inversive_geometry, accessed July 16, 2024.

²¹ Donald Kunze, “Theorizing Beyond Joan Copjec’s ‘The Strut of Vision’,” in John Hendrix and Francesco Proto, *Lacan+Architecture* (London and New York: Palgrave, 2025). See also James Alan Egan, *Elizabethan America: The John Dee Tower of 1583, a Renaissance Horologium in Newport, Rhode Island* (Newport, RI: Cosmopolite Press, 2011).

atomic-level shopping experience. That middle, that void of union without intersection, perfects the rotation idea: orientation that includes (re-)location, Dorothy as the sick girl cured by rotation; but, Dorothy didn't have to go anywhere. Kansas did.

Conclusion

Dorothy the Janusian provides us with a research kit. Returning to the department store, we need to study the function of the therapeutic coma, the hinge-function of the void, and proportionality as synonymous with the double circuit. In all cases, symmetrical difference and instrumental convergence ask us to consider the (James) Joycean 'twone': the two-for-one deal that makes every circuit a double circuit. There is every reason to believe that these two cases both point to undiscovered aspects of the tempietto. As research agendas go, this reveals a lot but asks even more.

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