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The architect's dream

Biographical note:

Jo Gardiner is a poet and novelist who lives in the Blue Mountains. *The concerto inn* was published by UWA Press in 2006.

Brief

The opening phrases of a prelude arise as the architect retrieves a letter from the post, rubs her thumb across the envelope, the texture of the translucent paper. Seeking some sign of its origin, she flips it over and reads the name of her new client, an aging writer who first contacted her a month ago requesting her services. She saves the letter to read later in the evening and it tucks itself in the back of her mind, remaining there like a half-remembered fragment of music.

As darkness falls, *pianissimo*, the architect drifts through the other rooms of her house to the place she calls her drawing room. The drafting table is arranged under the window by the fireplace. On this table, beside her T-square, lies a copy of the client's novel which she has been reading in the evenings. It carries the title of a lost concerto.

An overture of wind is fluting through the eaves. The architect bends to the fireplace to set a fire. She strikes a match and holds it quite still until, with a little burst of flame, it catches the paper. She stretches out her hands to the warmth, then sits at the table and adjusts the light so that the letter is fully illuminated. As she opens it, she senses her own excitement. It's as if it were, somehow, a love letter.

Upon reading the opening lines, she sees that the letter is written by someone who is passionate about architecture, about the possibilities that lie in the arrangement and rearrangement of space. The letter possesses the attractions of a close-woven story inscribed upon leaves of silk in an ancient manuscript. Its distinctive handwriting appears as a graceful calligraphy. She stokes the fire before addressing the brief.

'I'm seeking an interpreter, asking you to design a sensation, to construct a shelter for the words I have collected over my lifetime. I wish to have a house for my books, my manuscripts, papers and dictionaries. I want a place of repose where I can work at a desk that looks out over the valley down to the hanging swamp. My wish is to bring the landscape into the structure, so that mists move into its rooms and birds fly through the overhanging eaves, mistaking them for branches.'

As the architect sits before the fire with the letter in her hand, ideas sift through the night. She thinks of the building as a small cathedral dedicated to language, a place from which the music of words will float. She contemplates the construction in her mind, engaged by a chimera, a *passeggiato* of ideas, seeking a visual coherence. Her task will be to awaken the music within the building and make it eloquent. Intent upon marrying form with air she engages in a choreography, an experimentation in performance and form. She travels through the winding dark to the realm of dreams.

In the territory of sleep she takes the old writer's words and makes her own shape. She will build a space to house ideas where writing has materiality in text, the architecture attempts an analog in space and light. From the novel she understands, deeply, the architectural skin and tissue of the writer's work and discerns that once a space is loosened, the dual questions of how to construct a work, and how to construct a life, emerge.

She seeks to build a shape from ideas in close response to concerns of light and proportion. She will give ideas rooms to speak in, move across, doors to pass through and windows to gaze from.

She dreams of a shimmering building made of rich, woven glass and the rarest fragrant foreign woods. It has gateways to the east, the north and south and is arranged in two storeys with a flight of stairs linking the upper and lower chambers. The rooms are furnished with lamps of gold, bowls of hydrangeas, Japanese wash paintings and separated by fine veils. From each room drifts the scents of honey and oil.

Surrounded by gums standing like slender columns, the building is a complex structure designed to withstand the blight of winter, and like a wooden pagoda, to give shelter from the sun. There is movement in the closing of a shutter, the opening of a window to allow entry to birdsong. The eloquence of the building lies in the way it responds to the light and in the rhythms and harmonies of its construction. As a thing heard, it resembles a stringed instrument – a cello, a violin – and produces a new musical language of languid ascending and descending notes.

Site

The first movement opens with the architect visiting the proposed site on the eastern side of a harsh and barren valley. Here she finds feather-shaped grasses concealing tiny florets of thought. The land speaks an ancient language of geological disruption and upheaval of the different layers of the earth's crust: lava flows, basalt domes, soft shale, sandstone embedded with lizard skins, fossil seashells and beds of granite and quartzite. High cliffs are enveloped in cloud. The ground is figured. As she stands there, a site emerges from the landscape. She notices that it's already occupied by an old shed. Rather than demolishing it, she plans to take possession of it and make the new building a renovation of an existing storey, a surface alongside this other surface so they coexist with their contiguous stories, one set in the footprint of the other.

The architect sits and observes the way the light moves throughout the day across the site, imagining the texture of the building among the trees. A trail of dust appears up the road and snatches of music disturb her train of thought. She looks up from her site notes, as the builder arrives with his apprentice in a ute loaded with plumb lines, float levels and carpenters' squares. In the tray a blue cattle dog stands delicately balanced on a stack of off-cuts. The ute draws to a stop, and the builder emerges from inside, slamming the door behind him. The dog leaps from the back, and with the apprentice – a young woman in grey overalls – follows him down to the site. The radio continues to sing operatic music and voices enter the site by a stairway of fifths, rising through higher octaves, until there is a polyphony of voices, each located within the other.

The architect soon learns that the builder is a blowhard. He holds one eye closed to the sun as he offers his experience in making materials and structures perform to their limits. He reveals a mind geometric in its construction, and like his hero, the architect Dave Hickey, he is wary of theory and opts for 'palace architecture'. His voice grows low. She can smell the scent of sweat and wood shavings floating from his shirt. He smiles to himself, his face flushed with self-importance.

'Dave says Vegas is like Venice in that it's a continuous architectural environment and a slut. It loves you whether you like it or not. It gives you everything it has and breakfast, for \$2.98.'

The apprentice looks away from the builder. Her gaze finds the cliffs at the edge of the site. The architect is uneasy. She frowns. She dislikes what she hears but she has seen the way the lines of his buildings fold into their landscapes. Her attention is caught by the apprentice who stands a little way off, detached, watchful. Over the coming months it is the apprentice whose misreading and mistakes will cause both the builder and the architect perturbations and prove invaluable. It is this silent young woman who will show them both that in essence, life is what is capable of error. Without a word the architect turns away and starts setting out stones on the ground, making the first marks of the map her plan will become.

Plan

With sudden leaps of intuition the architect plots some internal elements and on a plan specifically designed for instability, sketches an ambiguous play of volume and space. She dwells in it, and as the night deepens and the building unfolds from east to west, she organises the space around a central room – the existing shed. In a reconfiguration of multiple stories, each of which succumbs to the desire for repetition, she constructs strongly figural forms out of a thick assemblage of scrawling, scratching-out. Each part performs a specific structural role. She seeks a synthesis of rhythm in her temporal order, and geometry in her spatial order. There is soon a density of additions and subtractions, an interplay between atmospheric zones and strict geometries. The inherent beauty of the construction lies in the gathering of its parts, in the converging of its lines, the alternation of materials. She creates a structure woven from a gently rhythmic unfolding of ideas. The emphasis is upon the horizon and the horizontal, bringing the mountainous landscape into the structure. She collects ideas from her boneyard – the journals and notebooks where for years she has kept diagrams and shapes in soft residues of ink, to be dug up when required.

Seeking a harmony of elements she works slowly through the night, weaving solid and space together, designing from the inside out, with each opening expressing the entrance to a new interlocking interior space. When she is finished the plan, she determines that it will be read as a musical score. She composes an ornamental concerto of fast, repeated notes and structures them temporally in a complex of recurrences until the main melody returns again and again in decorated form.

Section

In her dreaming sleep, the architect hears a wistful, foreign music, a recurring passage varied in length and by transposition into other keys.

The strata of the construction resemble geographical layers or layered textures of musical planes in a concerto created by coalescing differing tempos and rhythm patterns.

She finds herself spending more time at the site than she would normally allow, and when not present, believes she can hear the sounds of the hammering of secret nails. One evening she visits the site and becomes aware of the building's stillness. The sense of a temple is present. The roof glistens in moonlight. A thick skin of marine varnish over the wood adds a layer of luminosity. As she renders the plan in section she can see a network of brushstrokes.

She hears a small sound and comes across the apprentice rousing from sleep in the half-constructed library, the builder's dog at her side, its head upon its paws. It seems that the apprentice is occupying the site. The architect sits down beside her, spreads out the section and elevation drawings and, deciphering multiple perspectives, they examine the plans together.

Glass

As the night shifts and the dream deepens, the library evolves in a movement that is a nocturne, a night song. It emerges from the site rich and harmonious. Following the architect's design, the builder constructs an elegant pavilion, a summer palace. The treatment of the elliptical curved roof objectifies its presence. It floats above the body of the building now cleared of anything superfluous, and sheathed in glass. From within, the windows construct the landscape outside.

The architect invites her client to taste the sweet, crumbling cake of memory. Step outside memory, to accompany her on an inspection of the work-in-progress at the site. The apprentice follows them closely. The old writer shows her stories inscribed on the exterior of the lofty walls of the library. Her voice is soft. The apprentice hears an incantatory song. When she lifts her head she sees that the building culminates in the floating roof that envelops the whole construction. It resembles a curving, floating wing. She does not blink.

Each room resounds with their voices, their footsteps and the sound of their breathing. They pass along walls into corridors, up steps, past niches. They imagine they see a glass staircase. They follow the fluctuations in light until they come to an idea that is offered like an extended hand.

The library is constructed almost entirely from glass which gives multiple interpretations. Here the glimpse of an illuminated hand reaching for a teapot floats in the garden. A lamp, unattached to its wall, appears in the darkness. These overlays, superimpositions are created in the reflections of the glass, like the drafts of a novel. These reflections involve the client in a process of turning, folding back. The glass invites her to fix her thoughts on a meditation, a remembrance, a recollection.

Interior

The music begins again – a long elegiac, slow movement that ends in a silence ushered in by the beating of wings. You can feel the breeze made by these wings. The architect leads her client deep into the interior of the library until they come to a locked door, the entrance to what was originally the shed. Thus the building conceals

a hidden interior structure, a covert narrative.

The client pauses a moment before entering and the apprentice detects in her a shiver of desire or fear. She is watching her carefully. Her face is grave; she seems older, vulnerable, as if ill-health or adversity will carry her off. The architect produces a glass key from her pocket and they enter the interior room where language lies in wait in a strange diffuse light. This part of the building is like a walled village in the heart of a large city. Here, nothing is as it seems. It's a construction full of mazes that seem to offer a way out but box one in instead. The subtle gradations of light and dark confuse. Everything here is at the level of symbol, emblem, sign.

Passage

A short musical passage links the darker mood of the previous movement with the full-throated response of the next one. As the piano's right hand is followed by a calming passage of tremolando, then a gentle counter melody, the air becomes the colour of manganese violet. The sharp, metallic smell of rain comes. The room darkens as a storm rises and breaks over the building. The rain sets up a pattern on the gently sloping roof which collects the cold water in gutters shaped like cups, and conducts it into pipes and away from the roof. The wood creaks as it shivers and contracts in spasms. The rain slides across the darkened glass.

The three women pause, waiting. Suddenly there is a rapid sequence of notes, and a narrow seam of light appears at the top of the roof. The sun emerges and the washed glass glistens in the light. It is here in this passage that a transition from one state to another occurs, for it is via the passageway that together they escape the prison room of language, leave the gendered space of the locked room, and enter the writing room.

Writing room

The composition unfolds in a rich, musical language. It is clear that for the client, writing is life itself. The apprentice watches her move quickly, smiling, into the light and airy scriptorium, a place she will remake herself through writing. She glances around. It is an awareness of the importance of this process that informs the undercurrent present in everything the architect has created. For the client, language is a doorway. When she steps across the threshold she finds herself free from the practices of expert knowledge. It will be in this room that the meaning she makes will constitute her life. She pauses at the entrance, entranced by the power of possibilities here on the edge of meaning, each limned with a new thought. It is in the writing room that the client apprentices herself to a richly illuminated manuscript inscribed upon velvety smooth vellum. The text is bordered with gold chiaroscuro scrolls, cameos, pearls, and images of musical instruments. The frontispiece is designed as an architectural entrance into the book. As the pages are turned there is the graphic unfolding of a journey far across the reaches of a world. Inscribed there is the Chinese character for poetry composed of the character for *temple* and that for *word*.

Garden

Towards evening the architect and the client hear the simplicity of a pastoral movement as they enter the garden. As she follows them, the apprentice feels her hair lightly brushed by the wings of a low-flying bird.

A secluded, exterior room, the garden offers stillness. Animated by light, it is the most open of rooms. Here, engaged in the production of her own life, the writer will become other than who she is and, transformed by memory and desire, slip out of the story that self is.

The building is grateful to the garden in which it rests. It stands burnished and gleaming after the rain shower. The pond appears as a large basin of polished silver like those used by alchemists to collect and condense moonlight. It offers its face to the sky.

A breeze arises and they hear the movement of trees and see petals falling or birds dropping from the white limbs of ghost gums. They glance at each other, their faces so warmly lit they appear like lamps in the dim. The light moves. The evening star appears. Darkness will soon come, and long after the music of it unfolds, when night arrives like an animal settling down upon its nest, the apprentice will remain in the garden navigating the night by the stars like a mariner.

Completion

The final cadence of her dream finds the architect still at her drafting table amid a synthesis of form, line and colour. Surrounded by blueprints, specifications, scale drawings, elevations, sections, she is contemplating the illusion of completion. The library can only be conceived of as being completed when it has had bestowed upon it the texture of difference and incompleteness. In the end, her building stands like an unsolved enigma, an unheard piece of a concerto with an inclination to suggest something other than what it is – a shed.

In her dream the night is steeping, and the air is growing colder. The fire has died down. Just at the point of revelation of the confluence of the geometry of architecture and the structure of writing, there is a slippage in meaning. The architect rouses from her reverie a little and turns towards the fire for warmth. She becomes aware that the plans of her unbuilt ideas are slipping from her knees onto the embers. As the possibilities of meaning drift away from her, she knows that her dream has stirred her consciousness with infinite possibilities by approaching the brink of meaning, yet never falling over it. In sudden combinations, she has glimpsed a melange of images in the laceration, the slaughter of sentences. She smells paper burning. She senses the disintegration of the figures in her mind and before she can wake herself fully, the plan catches alight. Its secret cohesiveness is revealed and continues on as a line of thought that disintegrates. The distressed surface of language bubbles and cracks in the heat of the flames. A strange mood passes through her. As an endnote to her dream she hears the concerto commence a long, slow decay into inaudibility. Fire overcomes the building. Words spark above the bonfire and writing at last becomes possible. In just a few seconds the architect's plans burn and exist only as an

afterimage. They disintegrate and will be interred in Hejduk's cemetery for the ashes of thought.