

## How Big Is a Whale, Mr. Melville? Space and Knowledge in *Moby-Dick*

Vítor Alves<sup>1</sup>

Centro de Estudos Arnaldo Araújo  
Instituto Superior Manuel Teixeira Gomes  
ORCID: 0000-0001-8206-3336

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My object here is simply to project the draught of a systematization of cetology.  
I am the architect, not the builder.  
—Herman Melville

In 1996, the *Chicago Tribune* reported on the traveling exhibition at the Mary and Leigh Gallery, (today known as the Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Illinois) where the influence of *Moby-Dick or, the Whale* by Herman Melville was visible in a collection of 86 objects created between 1927 and 1994. The exhibition's starting point was Elizabeth Schultz's book, *Unpainted to the Last: Moby-Dick and Twentieth-Century American Art* (1995), in which the author followed the effects of Melville's seminal work on a variety of artists including Jackson Pollock, Frank Stella, and Richard Serra: creators employing aesthetic languages ranging from realism to abstract expressionism and minimalism. Their generic means of expression were equally diverse: cartoons, painting, sculpture and even architecture attempted to translate the power of the novel into their particular mediums. In this regard, the case of *The House at Martha's Vineyards* by Steven Holl, also known as the Berkowitz-Odgis House (1988-2013), is particularly eloquent, mainly due to the disparity between the literary inspiration provided by *Moby-*

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*Dick* and the architectural achievement of the structure that stands near Vineyard Sound. In the short text that serves as a description and justification of the work, the architect explains how Melville's words helped him build a "house as a kind of a primitive hut,"<sup>2</sup>

In the locally inspired novel *Moby Dick*, Melville describes an Indian tribe, which made a particular type of dwelling on the island. Finding a beached whale skeleton, they would pull it to dry land and stretch skins over it, transforming it into a house. Inspired by this practice, the house is an inside-out balloon frame structure, elevated over the landscape. The wooden "bones" of the frame carry an encircling veranda affording ocean views.<sup>3</sup>

Although Steven Holl referred to the wigwam, like the one Ishmael observes on the quarter-deck of the *Pequod* before they set off on their journey in the chapter "The Ship" (ch. 16), it is also possible to see in this house resonances of other passages in the book. In fact, Elizabeth Schultz had already observed the way in which the construction is implanted in the dune landscape "is perceived as a whale or a ship,"<sup>4</sup> or how the rhythm and tone of the wooden porticos are close to the bleached skeleton, allowing Holl, "as does Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, to create, if not the whale itself, then, a 'Temple of the Whale,'"<sup>5</sup> as described in the chapter "A Bower in the Arsacides" (ch. 102).

However, perhaps less evident is the relationship between the Berkowitz-Odgis House and the type of construction and spatial organization of the "Spouter-Inn"—which follows the typology of traditional 19<sup>th</sup>-century buildings in the Northeastern United States. In this chapter, the moment before entering the inn's public room, Ishmael crosses the "low-arched way—cut through what in old times must have been a great central chimney" (a place where the fire was extinguished to give way to men?). From Melville's description, one can understand the size of the element—large enough for someone to cross it—but also that, despite its function no longer being the same, it was not removed, suggesting that, whether for reasons of stability of the building or spatial arrangement, the demolition of the chimney would

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<sup>2</sup> Steven Holl, "A Conversation with Steven Holl," interview by Alejandro Zaera Polo, *El Croquis* 78, 1996, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Holl, "Projects: Houses: House at Martha's Vineyard: Description," Steven Holl Architects, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://www.stevenholl.com/project/marthas-vineyard-house/>.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Schultz, *Unpainted to the Last. Moby-Dick and Twentieth-Century American Art* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), p. 320.

<sup>5</sup> Schultz, p. 317.

not be necessary or possible. In the next sentence, in the public room, Melville talks about the “low ponderous beams” and the “old wrinkle planks,” a squat, wooden space, similar to a ship’s chamber. These two elements—the chimney and the adjacent compartments—function as the basic components of this type of construction: the farmhouse. Usually, the chimney, in the center and in a more robust and perennial material such as brick, crosses all floors of the building and functions as a hinge between the two wings of wooden compartments. Just as it happens in the Berkowitz-Odgis House—with a slight adaptation in the chimney that is built with locally gathered stones set in concrete instead of bricks—allowing Holl, through spatial arrangement and materiality, to anchor the house to the place not only in historical terms but also literary ones.

In this sense, it is possible to interpret the chimney of the Berkowitz-Odgis House as an architectural device to organize space in the same way that the chimney of the “Spouter-Inn” functions as a narrative one, endowing it with spatial qualities and a human scale. But it is in Melville’s short story “I and My Chimney” (1856) that this architectural element acquires greater relevance, both in the house and in the narrative itself. Here, the chimney is the protagonist, not only because of its spatial arrangement and physical qualities that survive the deterioration of the materials that make up the rest of the building, but also because it contains a metaphysical dimension. According to Anthony Vidler’s interpretation, the chimney, in addition to providing warmth and stability to the entire house, its pyramidal geometry highlights something funereal about it; it is a kind of Egyptian tomb, the place where the symbolic fire of life burns.<sup>6</sup> But perhaps more interesting is the way in which Vidler establishes the link between architectural elements such as chimneys and the Freudian notion of the uncanny—as nothing new or strange, but something familiar and sedimented that becomes alienated through a process of repression—and which perhaps finds in the house, a place of intimacy and protection par excellence, one of its most intense and unsettling manifestations. Melville’s chimney, hiding mysteries and dark secrets, viscerally connecting the narrator to the architectural element, transforms one into an extension of the other. For Vidler, “Melville’s reflection on the secret recesses of domesticity leads to a discussion of the role of the uncanny in the fantasies of burial and return that were inseparable from the historical and archeological self-consciousness of the nineteenth century.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> Vidler, p. xi.

The relationship between Melville and architecture seems particularly intense, having been the subject of prolonged attention by Vicky Halper Litman in the essay “The Cottage and the Temple: Melville’s Symbolic Use of Architecture” (1969). Here, Litman shows how Melville establishes analogies between the architectural elements in his writing and his protagonists, showing how Melville establishes metaphorical connections between certain buildings, materials, and colors. In general, according to Litman, it is possible to distill Melville’s practice here to two architectural typologies—the temple and the farmhouse—, following the nineteenth-century architectural historian Andrew Jackson Downing’s interpretation of “absolute beauty” and “relative beauty,” respectively. The first, where architecture materializes forms that express ideas of perfection, and the second wherein buildings reveal through architectural forms the temperament of their occupants in an almost physiological way. Such architectural symbolism also conditions *Moby-Dick*’s representation of U.S. antebellum racial demography when, for example, the “block of blackness, not houses” anticipates “A hundred black faces turned round in their rows to peer” (ch. 2).

Therefore, it’s important to highlight the effects of architectural analogies or relationships between certain everyday objects in *Moby-Dick*, that allows Melville to establish, starting from a set of references that anyone will be familiar with, a spatial association between the reader and an animal of massive dimensions. This correspondences span, for example, from vehicles where “the vast arched bone of the whale’s jaw, so wide, a coach might almost drive beneath it” (ch. 3), to furniture where “the Right Whale’s mouth would accommodate a couple of whist-tables, and comfortably seat all the players” (ch. 83), and architectural elements such as “roof,” “ridge pole,” or “Venetian blinds,” as described in “The Right Whale’s Head” (ch. 75). As literary mechanism, spatial analogies humanize the ferocious monster, that is even incorporated, physically, by Ishmael through the tattoo of the cetacean skeleton measurements (ch. 102). The human’s approach to the immeasurable takes place, therefore, in a tangible way through the knowledge imbued in space and architectural elements. Which means that there is a form of spatial knowledge that Melville still does not want to give up, even after Victor Hugo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831) decreed that with Gutenberg’s invention “This will kill that. The book will kill the edifice.” It is this quality of architecture as a form of knowledge that makes Garrett Urban, basing his contentions on Jacques Derrida’s conception of the archive, justify Ishmael’s archival anxiety in retaining and accessing knowledge: “through the medium of architecture, history is directly encoded within the architectural form, obviating the

problem of the lack of first-hand access to the past.”<sup>8</sup> To the idea of archive considered by Urban via Derrida, Suzanne Conklin Akbari advances the notion of encyclopedia through the way Melville’s novel systematizes and orders knowledge about whale anatomy, where the chapter “Cetology” (ch. 32) is its greatest evidence.<sup>9</sup> It would, however, be equally legitimate to consider it as a kind of manual or treatise on how to hunt whales, due to the way it describes the terms, activities, procedures, principles, values, categories and characteristics of its object of study. But also due to the intimate relationship between the size of the cetacean and the size of the folios in that same chapter, presupposing a question of scale and representation so that cetacean knowledge can be correctly organized and transmitted, as happened in ancient architectural treatises.

However, if, as we have seen, the relationship that Melville has with architecture allows him to explore particular narrative effects, it is no longer clear why he uses the figure of the architect as the one capable of organizing knowledge, especially when he attributes some fragilities such as the inability to completeness and perfection (ch. 32). In fact, this is a question that causes some perplexity, which Akbari also mentions.<sup>10</sup> Her explanation lies in the architects’ own planning capacity and not in their qualities of finalizing objects that are more appropriate to the skills of the builders—even though it is these same builders who left the Cologne Cathedral unfinished at the time of the novel’s publication (ch. 32). Yet, one could insist on considering the use of the figure of the architect due to his inclusive and widespread vision or the consistency of his organization with which he is usually recognized. But even so, this recognition would be uncommon when Melville wrote his novel—or at least not as common as today—which would mean him knowing closely how it works. Certainly, Melville’s proximity to the English Art’s and Craft’s movement, as demonstrated in Urban’s study, and his sensitivity to architecture, especially Greek—quite evident in the poems *Greek Architecture*, *Greek Masonry*, *The Parthenon*—, explain his awareness and ease in this universe. However, the long and curious look, the dedicated attention, the desire to find meanings in objects other than their short functionality, the understanding that they are repositories of knowledge, require a

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<sup>8</sup> Garrett Urban, “In the Belly of the Whale: Archive and Access in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*” (MA diss., University of South Carolina, 2016), p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Suzanne Conklin Akbari, “The Encyclopedic Genius of Melville’s Masterpiece. On *Moby Dick* as a Way of Seeing the World,” Literary Hub, accessed April 24, 2024, <https://lithub.com/the-encyclopedic-genius-of-melvilles-masterpiece/>.

<sup>10</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Erin Sellner for bringing this issue to my attention.

specific devotion from those who want to find them and which is not easily conveyed by circumstantial expertise.

If the relevance of a work is measured by its persistence over time and the impact it has on others, then *Moby-Dick* is undoubtedly just such a work that not only continues to be read and taught, but that also inspires artists working in other media. Melville's relationship with architecture illustrates a rich and multifaceted intersection between literary narrative and architectural practice, offering significant perspectives on both disciplines. It is important, nonetheless, to mention that Melville's attention to architectural elements and the affection he derives from them is that of a poet and writer and not that of an architect, despite his acute and unusual lucidity of what he understands by architect's task and underlined in the introductory quote. This craft, according to the author, involves more the spatial organization of knowledge than the construction of buildings, even contradicting the more traditional view of the discipline. This is what is contained in the idea of a project, this launching into the future from the present, the outline of a possible reality to come, realized with and by others, collectively. And this may well be a precious lesson that Melville has yet to teach us.