The Life and Work of Douglas Darden: A Brief Encomium

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THIS IS INTENDED as a brief encomium, a praise of sorts. It is an encomium to Douglas Darden, an architect, teacher, and extraordinary human being. The ways in which he offered himself and his work to his students, his friends, his admirers, in fact, everyone—with honor, dignity, benevolence—were remarkable, especially given his own personal and monumental struggle. His works demonstrate his generosity and his struggle and, thus, his work was able to engage architecture, as he put it, from its underbelly: "I am inclined while watching the turtle to turn it over and study its underbelly. From this unnatural position I see how this platonically solid creature makes its way through the world" (Darden, *Condemned Building,* 7). As allegory, the turtle is architecture and the "turning over" was not intended to displace the canons of architecture but to "cultivate their fullest growth" by gaining another, almost Archimedean perspective on it (Darden, *Condemned Building,* 9).

Darden's architecture is best illustrated in his 1993 book, *Condemned Building: An Architect's Pre-Text,* which includes ten allegorical projects that look at architecture "for what it is: never its own sufficient subject, nor its own sufficient end" (9). Architecture is fundamentally connected to all other human endeavors, all other forms of cultural production. Thus, all human undertakings can be explored as a part of it and architecture, in turn, can be examined to shed light on these as well: in all forms of making, we reveal some of the most important and at times intransigent questions that humans continue to deliberate. More importantly, we reveal the constant struggle with what is not there and, thus, our constant utopian desire or yearning. The ten condemned buildings take up some of these questions by turning architectural canons over to examine them from a different perspective, from underneath and even "at right angles."

Darden's description of these projects gives us an idea of the specific canons that he thought architecture embodied and what they excluded. In the *Museum of Imposters,* for example, Darden explores the question of authenticity in recent critical postmodern discourse by framing the Museum in terms of the authentic and the simulation:

> "Architecture posits the ~~authentic.~~
> Architecture posits the fake." (Darden, *Condemned Building,* 9)

Thus, architecture is implicated in both its insistence on authenticity and its complicity in the production of the fake. In the *Temple Forgetful,* the binary condition is constructed out of a fundamental observation that monuments are not only for remembering but also for forgetting. Other projects examine the assumption that architecture domesticates our fears by positing how it also locates our fears; that light is the revealer of form by demonstrating that darkness also reveals; that architecture represents an irreconciliation and a reconciliation with nature; that it displaces as well as takes possession of a place; that it confronts and accommodates; that it objectifies and fulfills desire; that "man is off-center of divine creation"; and, in the *Oxygen House,* the last project, that a house is for living as well as for dying.

Darden argues that "[i]f architecture provides anything at all, it is a platform for inquiry" (Darden, "*Melvilla:* An Architect's Reading of *Moby-Dick,*" 5). He adds his specifically architectural understanding of inquiry as a "space in which intellectual inquiry is conceived as a sectional operation, a delving down into the unfathomable, towards bottomless foundations. . . ." (Darden, "*Melvilla:* An Architect's Reading

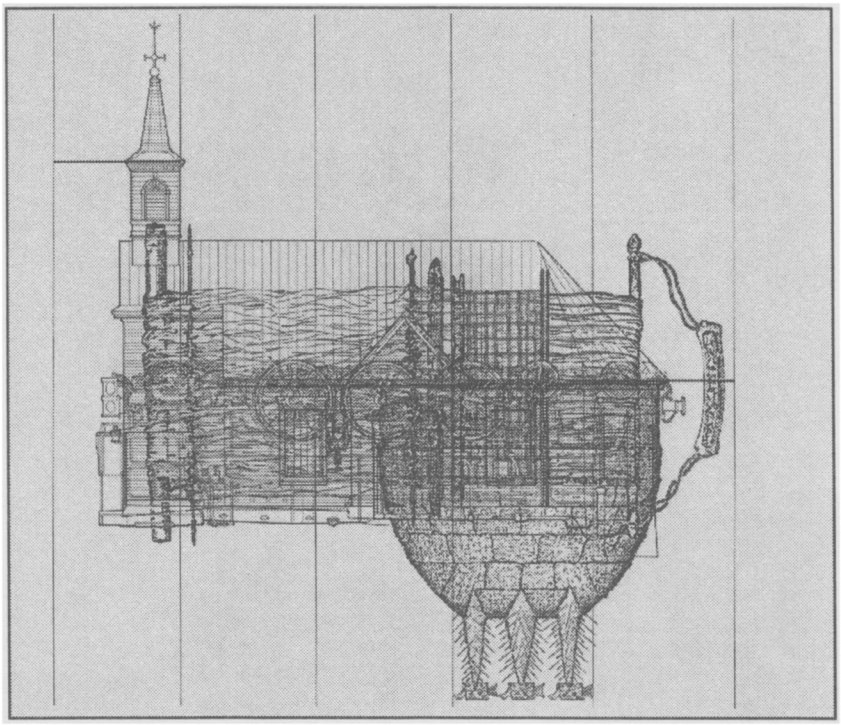

Figure 1. Dis/continuous genealogies, *Melvilla*

of *Moby-Dick*," 8). Thus, to follow his journey into architecture is "to experience through the bodily senses the sublime anxiety of *inquiry itself*" (Darden, "*Melvilla:* An Architect's Reading of *Moby-Dick*," 8).

The sublime is evident in each of his projects. *Melvilla,* for example, a project designed in honor of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick,* is one of his most epic works (Figs. 1–4). Darden considered *Moby Dick* "America's greatest novel" and suggested that it was "equivalent in scope and stature to . . . *The Divine Comedy*" (Darden, "*Melvilla:* An Architect's Reading of *Moby-Dick*," 1). Thus, *Melvilla* must be compared in architecture to Terragni's *Danteum,* a project dedicated to the celebration of Dante's masterpiece; Darden posits the relationship between these two projects himself.

In describing *Moby Dick,* Darden characterizes the spatial conditions of the novel in ways that also assist us in understanding the ways in which he constantly translated other cultural production into architectural terms: "I continue to be most enamored with Melville's epic for the numerous episodes which 'run at right angles' to the plot, episodes, that is, which both hold back and accelerate the relatively simple yarn being told. This is its art" (Darden, "*Melvilla:* An Architect's Reading of *Moby-Dick*," 1). Inquiry, as we have seen, takes place in a "space. . . . [which] is conceived as a sectional operation" (Darden, "*Melvilla:* An Architect's Reading of *Moby-Dick*," 8).

In *Melvilla* we also get a glimpse of Darden's own autobiography: "I do not read *Moby Dick* to find out if a twisted man gets his revenge; instead, I read it for

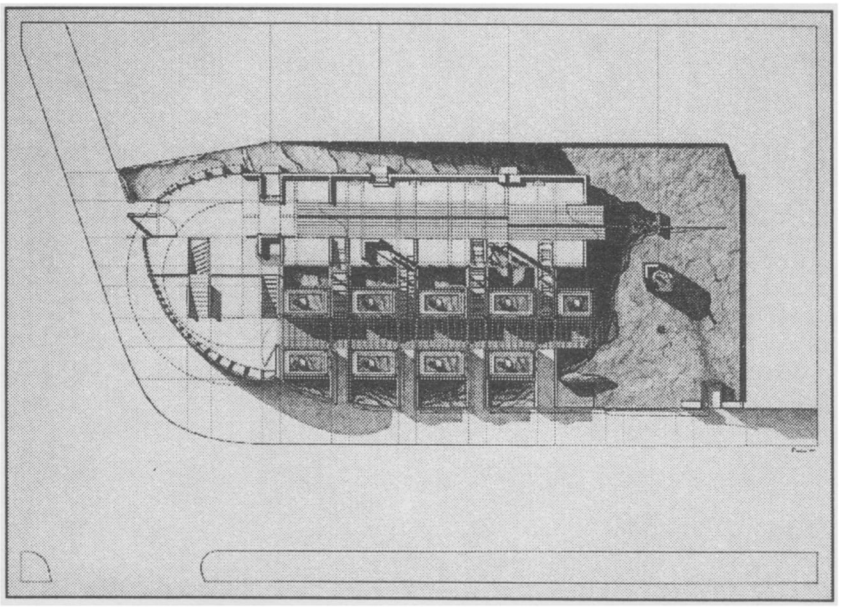

Figure 2. Plan at sidewalk level, *Melvilla*

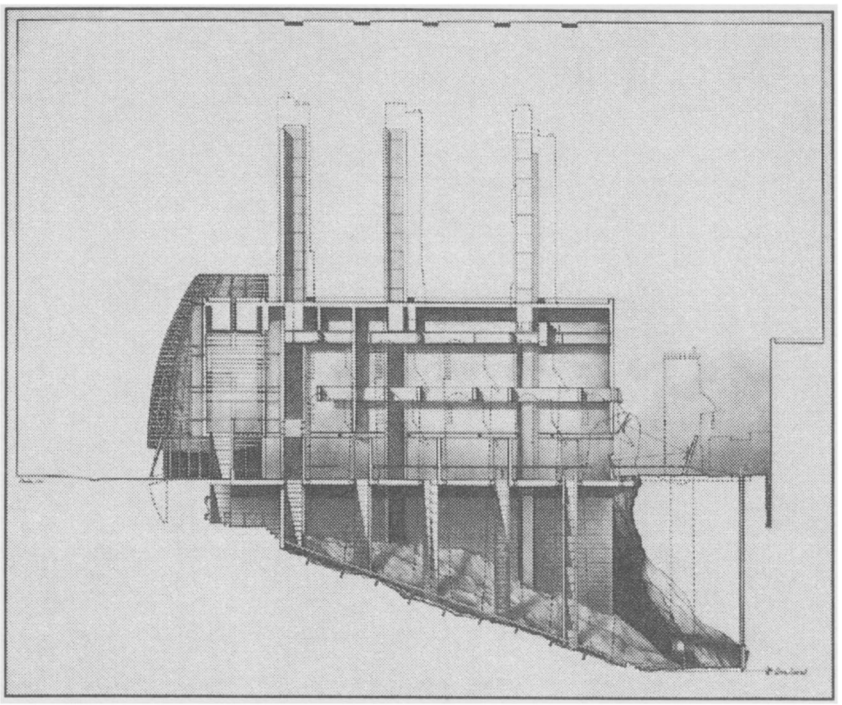

Figure 3. Longitudinal section, *Melvilla*

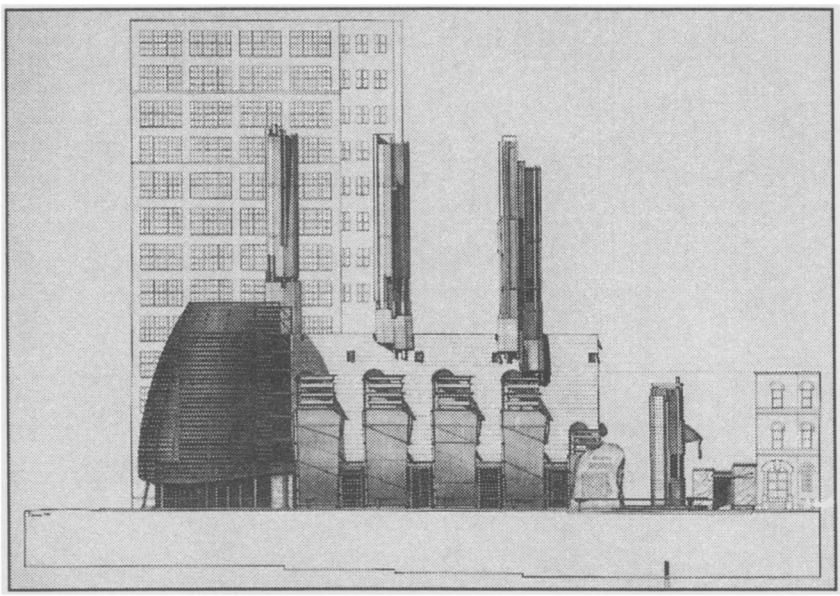

Figure 4. South elevation, *Melvilla*

the way its language inhabits the world and gives existence a texture that heightens my sense of life and the difficulty of living it" (Darden, "*Melvilla:* An Architect's Reading of *Moby-Dick*," 1–3). These comments give us an opportunity to understand the person behind the work and the values, purposes, and content that architecture can address when not restricted merely to materials, to function, even to gravity.

The issue of autobiography has been a significant part of the conversation about architecture recently and rightfully so in the face of the inability of science to fully exhaust our understanding of the human condition. In "Hook, Line, and Signature," for example, Frank Gehry describes architecture as fundamentally autobiographical:

> I've always thought that architects hide behind all the crutches of program, clients, budget, and building department and that they excuse their stuff as moves that were required by *xyz*. I think that's the weakness of most architecture, that there's so much stuff you can hide behind that you never get to the "moment of truth." You're never forced to confront who you are as a person in the equation. . . . It's that signature, that oneness, the moment of giving, of a person giving what they have of themselves. It's when you bring your essence to it, your choices. . . . Your own signature is the way you think about it, the way you make your own work, the way you engage the work. (Gehry, 186)

In studying Darden's work, therefore, one cannot avoid the drama of his own life—his struggle with lymphoblastic leukemia from 1991, chemotherapy, remission, and, finally, in the end, the return of the disease that took his life in April of 1996. I only met him in the last few years of his life and, when I invited him to come and exhibit his work and lecture at the University of Buffalo, he told me that he would love to, but that we would have to schedule a full day of rest for him after his flight; it would weaken him that much. He was a prisoner of his own body.

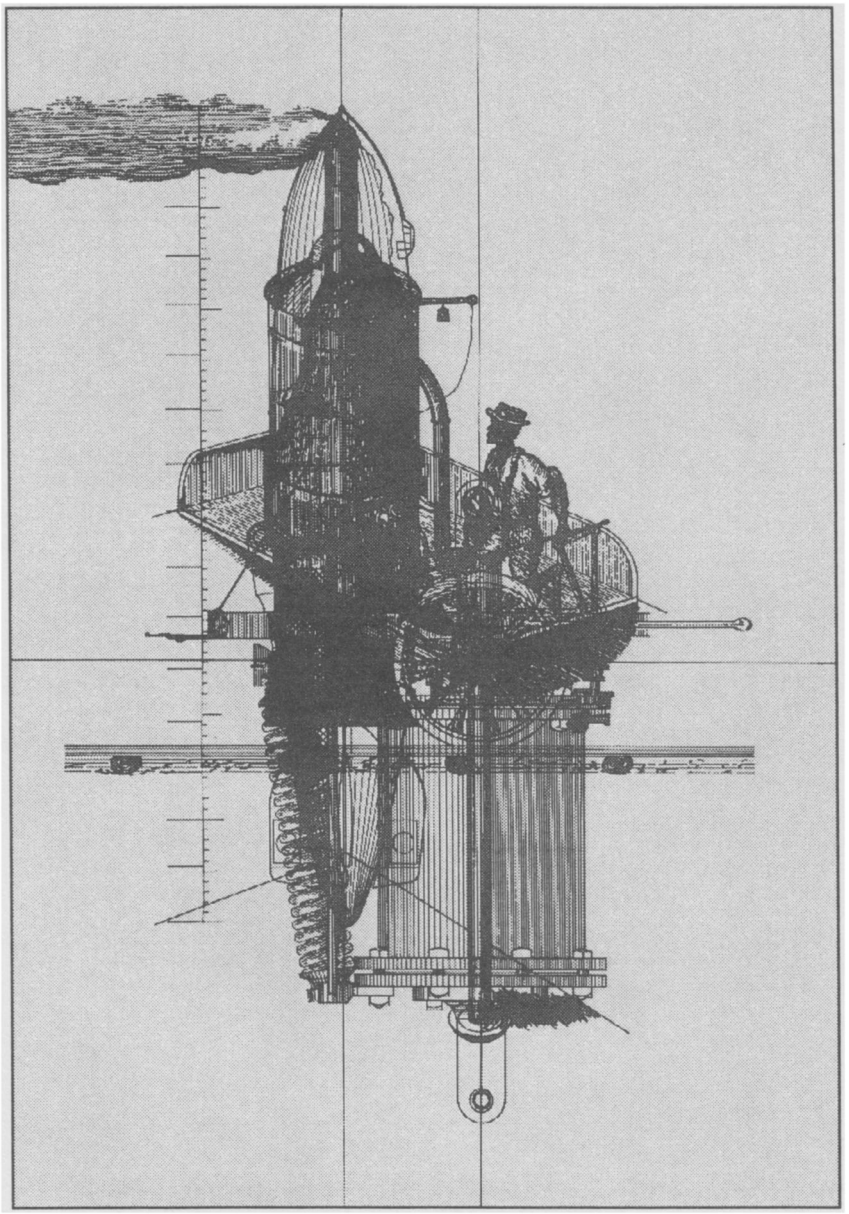

Figure 5. Dis/continuous genealogies, *Oxygen House*

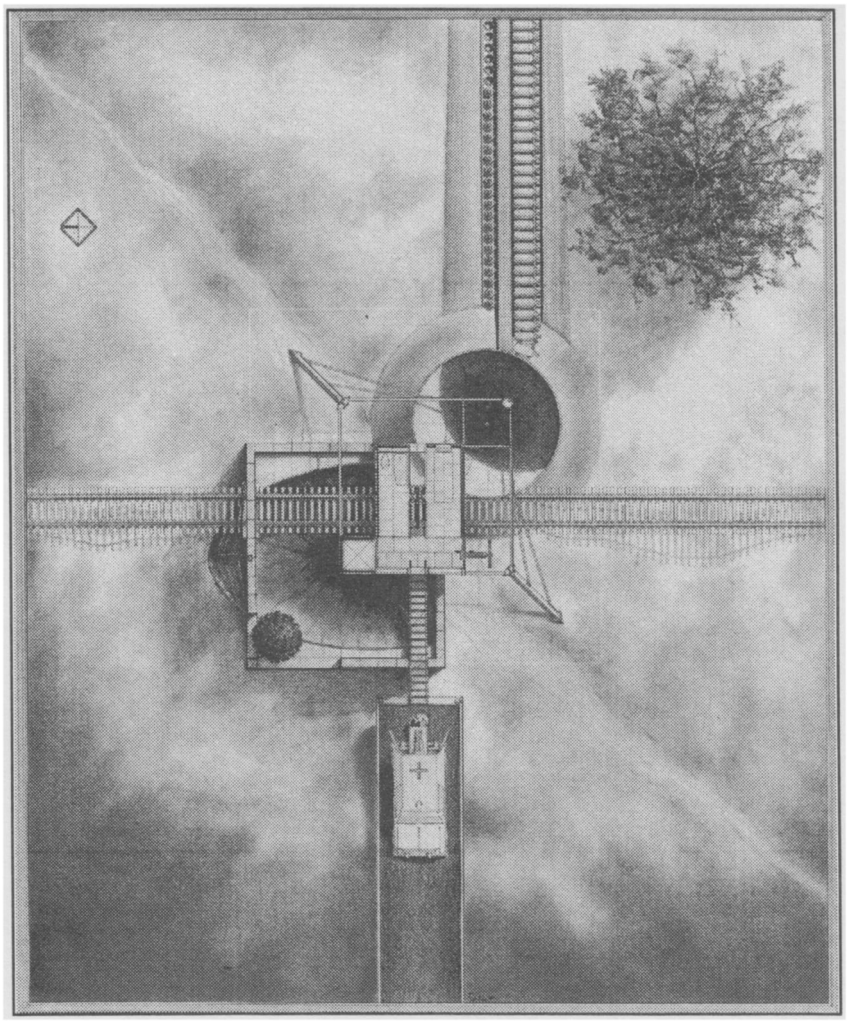

Figure 6. Plan at nurse's level, *Oxygen House*

Assuming that architecture tells us something of the values, ideas, and concerns of those involved in its production, then the *Oxygen House* becomes one of the more important projects for us to examine (Figs. 5–9). *Oxygen House* makes a place for the drama of life at the edge of death. This place is located on the site where the resident invalid was injured, almost fatally, and paralyzed for life. Living on the site where the almost fatal wound occurred would have been like living at the door to another world, at the opening to a transcendental existence. This, in large part, opens up a door to the utopian dimensions in Darden's work, and to the architect's "dive" headlong into that which is "fathomless." This was the source of what he would later call the sublime anxieties of inquiry.

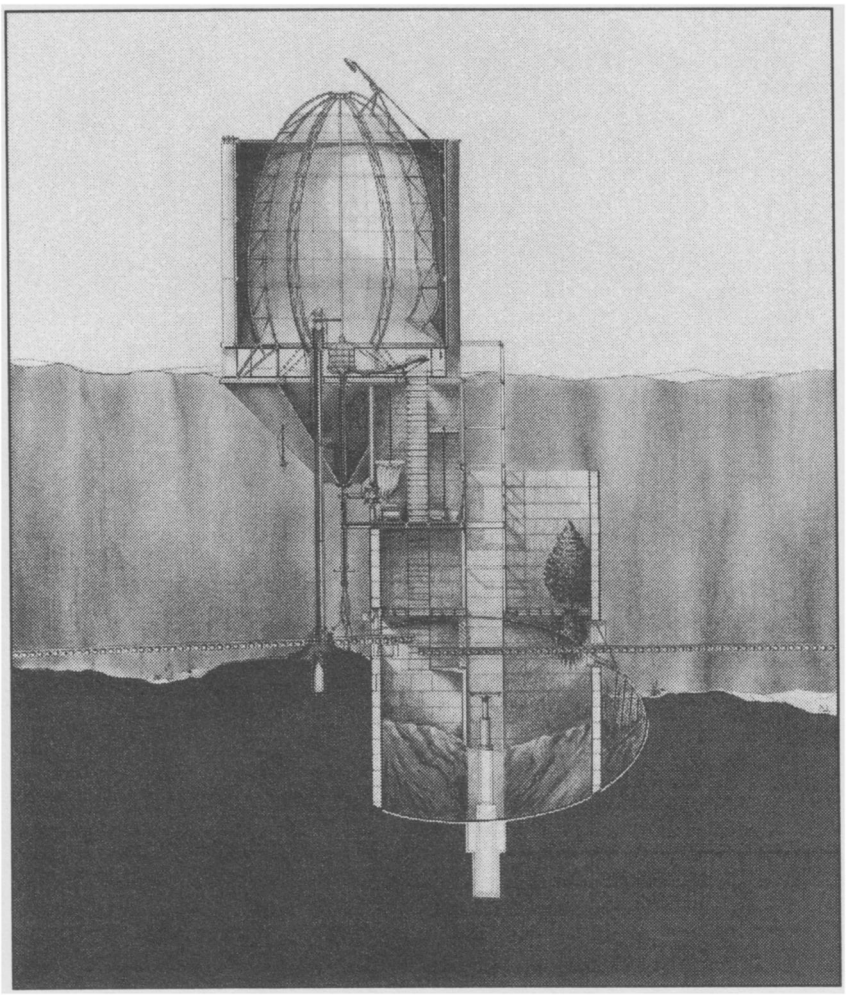

Figure 7. Anatomical section, *Oxygen House*

Oxygen House is perched on a depressed flood plain north–northwest of Frenchman's Bend, Mississippi. The structure is designed for Burnden Abraham, an ex-train signalman, who must live in an oxygen tent.

In the early spring of 1979, after torrential rains, the railroad tracks on which Abraham worked were flooded. They were never fully repaired. That following summer during a routine operation, Abraham suffered a collapsed lung when a train jumped the track and sent metal debris puncturing his right lung. Three years later the railroad company put the property up for sale. Abraham purchased the plot where he had once worked. He requested that his house be built over the scene of his near-fatal accident. Abraham also requested that he finally be entombed in the house (Darden, *Condemned Building,* 143).

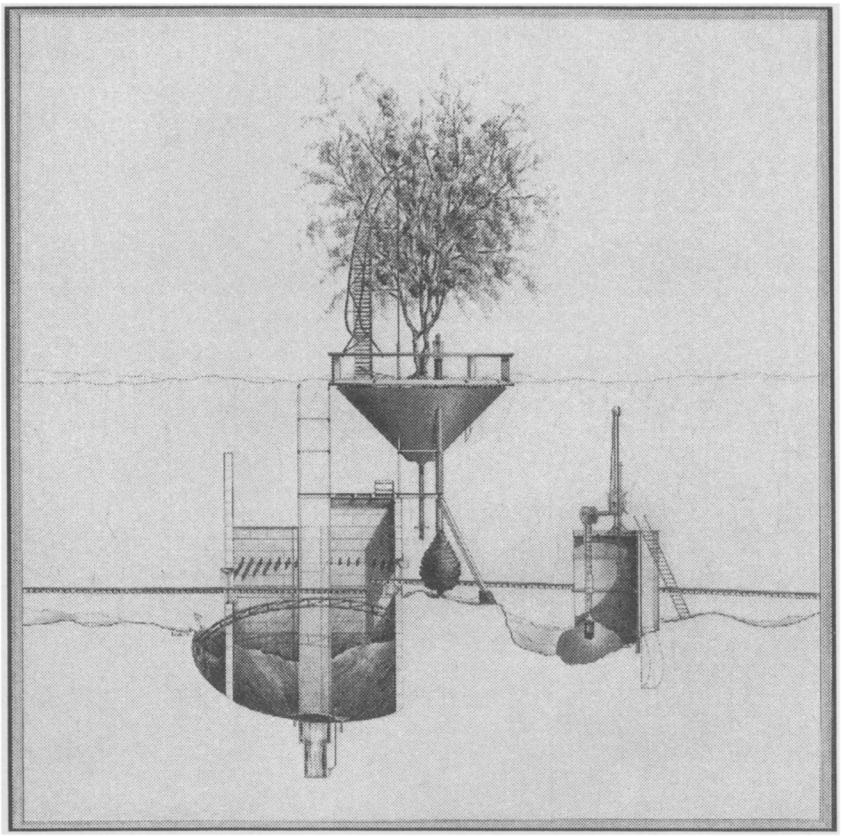

Figure 8. Post-mortem section, *Oxygen House*

In the end, with Abraham's death, the house would transform from a "residence" to a burial chamber: the oxygen "tent" would collapse, the resident would finally be wrapped like a shroud in the membrane of the tent and would be buried in the base of the lift; the willow would be uprooted, raised, and replanted in the drum base. The architecture, therefore, would allow for the transformation which, like a conceptual mobius strip, replaces death with life and life with death.

When I asked him about the level of detail explored in the design of the *Oxygen House,* Darden insisted that he knew where every nut and bolt was. He clearly had thought through every piece, every physical condition. This particularity is clear in the crisp quality of his drawings as well. And the architecture, thus made real, even more fully brings us face to face with the sublime questions of life and death, of dying with dignity, of a poetics of death as well as of life. This is the "project behind the project" of the *Oxygen House*: to address the questions of architecture in relation to life and death. *Oxygen House,* therefore, more eloquently than any other project, speaks about his own struggles with the "difficulty of living life" as he put it.

Darden was born in Denver, Colorado, in October of 1951, and graduated with honors from the University of Colorado at Boulder and the Harvard Graduate School

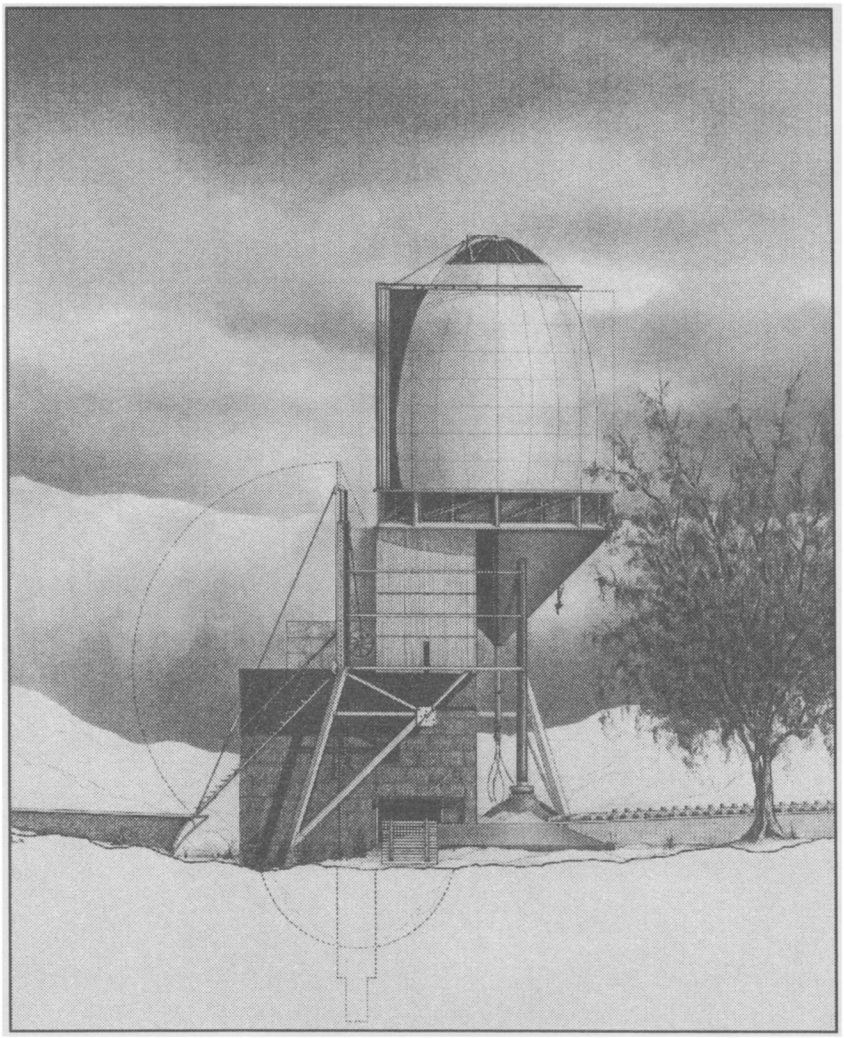

Figure 9. South elevation (drum-torso retracted), *Oxygen House*

of Design. He also attended the Parsons School of Design. He was awarded the Prize for Architecture from the American Academy in Rome in 1988 and went on to lecture, exhibit, and publish extensively nationally and internationally.

Former Director of the Graduate Program of the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado at Denver, Peter Schneider, supported the autobiographical interpretation of his work: "His teaching was always dark until he started in remission recently. The early work had to do with death, etc. but not in a morbid way: he had very profound and poetic ways of engaging this and other such subjects. Recently, he took up a project called *Laughing Girls.*"

Thus, we can ask ourselves more about the titles of his works. Why, for example, the title of his book, *Condemned Building*? Why "Condemned"? Because they expressed hopes and dreams that were marginalized? taboo? excluded from what was considered mainstream and, thus, proper subjects for architecture? Because of their utopian concern for what isn't? for what might be? for that which and whom architecture excludes?

Darden explored the margins, the underbellies of things. Each of Darden's projects emerge from his desire to "peer into the gaps, irregularities, shortcomings, and failures of modern empirical reason" (Darden, "*Melvilla:* An Architect's Reading of *Moby-Dick*," 3). As Bachelard states, "With poetry, the imagination takes its place on the margin, exactly where the function of unreality comes to charm or to disturb —always to awaken—the sleeping being lost in its automatisms" (Bachelard, xxxv).

Darden did this most evidently by introducing his "dis/continuous genealogies," his "ideograms," his diagrams of ideas (Figs. 1 and 5). Each project is based on an ideogram which is a palimpsest of objects of cultural production that are relevant to the project. Each element of the ideogram—the dirigible as container for gaseous substances in the *Oxygen House* and the train and the loom in *Melvilla*—refers to a) direct or literal and b) indirect associations related to the person(s), place(s), and canon(s) on which his projects focus. These associations give us access to the "elements" that he used to generate his architecture, the pieces out of which he created his world, out of which he built his architecture.

Darden expanded the elements of architecture that twentieth-century empiricism had eliminated from legitimate consideration. Functionalism had reduced architecture to a simplistic determinism based on minimum behavioral conditions and, thus, had depleted architecture, exhausting its ability to speak about or assist us in engaging more important issues concerning life in general and our imaginal participation in the world in specific. Darden added another set of elements to architecture, a storehouse of life, drawing from architectural assemblies of materials and spaces as well as the objects and artifacts which surround us in our daily lives. He tapped into those elements that haunt our dreams and nightmares, our fantasies, and our memories. His is an oneiric architecture. Although bricks and boards were important to him, these imaginal elements are the basis of the palimpsestic problem or challenge that he set himself: he drew on the marginalized to bring it "at right angles" to the normal, the mundane, the conventional and the quotidian. He takes us on an adventure by means of the references and associations overlaid in ideograms to the detailed and sublime architectural constructions/environments that he is able to glean from them and presents them with the power, grace and dignity of an architecture in the tradition of the romantic architects of the eighteenth century. This is one of the more significant dimensions of his signature.

But, more importantly, we can see in the topics and themes he explored a certain autobiography that brings us face to face with some of his own concerns and fears. The general tenor of the darker of his works, for example, parallel his own struggle with himself, his body, his life.

Yet, this cannot be explained away as simply as that. Darden had that poetic urge to explore his own demons and, more importantly, to engage in an architecture that did not exclude the other conditions of being human—our fears, our hopes, our dreams, and the necessity for resolve. Thus, he legitimates the marginalized, the dream, the other, that which has been excluded, that which isn't and that which might be. He let in the light of darkness.

The human condition includes both light and darkness. For architecture to exclude the one in support of the other is, on the one hand, to employ architecture to

manifest the desire for the exclusionary practices which it has been called on to embody and represent throughout history. On the other, it denies the human condition, does not reflect who we are but who we would prefer to be. Thus, in some sense, any exclusionary practice would disparage the "difficulty" of life which Darden lived and which becomes the source of power in his work. He reminds us, in the end, of our own flesh, of its materiality and of the threat that follows life itself. For architecture not to address this and the other powerful issues that Darden dared to and was driven to examine is to leave architecture as hollow as Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*—an incomplete person, physically as well as metaphysically—an empty shell, as Darden called him.

This architect, Douglas Darden, had a brief although sufficient time to demonstrate his genius, his courage, his dignified invention of a way of thinking about architecture that enlarges the practice and the discipline for all. His engagement with material production and the ways in which he teased out of his palimpsestic ideograms a rich architecture also testifies to the more important questions that most architecture, at least in the twentieth century, rarely addressed.

In the end, Darden extends architecture, makes it larger than it was before him. He does so by demonstrating how architects can successfully draw on a much wider array of artifacts for inspiration and guidance in the design and production of the material world. All forms of cultural production—from dirigibles to looms—can become the source for architecture. He adds, therefore, a rich array of fantasy and offers us greater imaginal possibilities than, perhaps, without him would not exist: *sine qua non.*

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