

Haystack: Modernism in a Forest

The encomium I am about to deliver is a congregation of my thoughts about Haystack gathered over the years. Most as far back as the early 1960's. You may not find the Haystack you know in them. If so, don't blame me, blame Edward Larrabee Barnes. He dazzled me.

The great American arboreal forest rises in Alaska, whips across much of Canada and ends a few feet from where I am standing. It doesn't quite reach the perfidious Atlantic. Nature has provided a thin ribbon of granite to shield the dark trees from that equally dark sea. This building floats a few feet above an extension of that ribbon. It is not in itself remarkable, but it incurs virtue from the structures that float fraternally down behind it. If you're going to hobnob architecturally, choose your companions well. If they are granted a long applause, they may confer some of it on you.

It is an anomaly of culture that architecture, the most physical and costliest of the grand arts, is endowed with the shortest of lives. I think of that when I think of Haystack and when I think of what Edward Larrabee Barnes provided here. Architecture is the most mortal of the arts, asks the most of us and after we have obtained it, is the achievement with which we are first to part.

At Haystack we catch the impulse of the architect in all of its freshness – somehow, close to the moment of its birth – without the pulling and tugging that go with works that require months of heavy labor on the part of the architect. There is an immediacy to his concept. In aesthetic terms Haystack is a light sketch about the forest, wind, moving water, clouds and the fragile intersections with them of geometry. Haystack must have been quickly achieved because all, even its geometry, are fugitive, perpetually mobile, perpetually performing. Barnes' pencil seems to have moved quickly across the paper and so do clouds. If you pulled Haystack up and carted it away, Barnes never would have been here.

It is ironic that Haystack, Barnes' most thrilling achievement, should predicate its immortality on an aesthetic that embraces transience. These are the least substantial of Barnes' structures and they make a virtue of their fragility. In an architectural sense, the structures here at Haystack are almost ephemeral. In their light untreated fabric, they suggest themselves as informal pavilions, here for a limited purpose and for a limited time and cavalier about what the climate has in store for them.

And it is through his approach to ephemerality that Barnes weaves his magic. "Weaving magic" is not a term of art criticism – it's a resort of cowards – but the conception of Haystack is, in its essence, magical. Barnes' choice of fabric, his choice of forms and his response to the site are so congenial to one another – so embracing of one another - that they seem to exclude any other expressive solution. In architecture, that is rare. To produce a result that lifts you up, tugs at your heart and assumes a permanent place in your sense of aesthetic triumphs is the result of what Kenneth Clark called a "moment of vision". In that moment Barnes had intensified physical perception. It was a moment of illumination, of an impression that became intensely clear.

I allow myself to use the term "magical" in place of Lord Clark's concept because of the confluence of forces that made the doing possible. That joining is the magic. It all came together somehow within his persona. What about the results – Haystack itself – are they magical too? They are for me. I know of perfect places, when harmony and edge are in exact balance. Haystack is at home among them.

There is a metaphoric quality to Haystack but this is not nostalgia for simpler times. There is no coyness in it. It's not pretending to be anything that it isn't. As a metaphor, it stands for what takes place within its precincts, viz, the acquisition of artisanal skills and the accommodation of them to current views on aesthetics. It is an architecture that, rather than embracing power, embraces the virtues of things made by hand. It looks like it was made by a group of Maine carpenters – and it was. If you'll

allow me to be sentimental, it's architecture that's concerned about what's taking place within it without patronizing it.

I have mentioned Barnes' choice of fabric, choice of form and attention to the site.

I'd like to talk about some of this in more detail. First the fabric. Most of what we see in the structures around us is native soft wood – coniferous wood – white cedar, spruce, maybe some hemlock, maybe not. It could have and might have come from the site itself and thus there is a common biology between the buildings, the walks, the galleries of stairs and the forest that embraces them. In that sense they play to one another. To put the matter in another way, they are united tactility. But their relationship is not an easy one. The structures have intruded themselves into the forest and the forest would obliterate them if it was allowed to. The forest is a force and not simply a canopy of compliant trees. Thus there are two forces at work, the biologic relationship of the wood – similar feeling substances - and the uneasy truce between the trees and structures forced among them. The resulting tension is almost palpable; you can almost feel it with your skin. This confers a sense of animation to Barnes' grand scheme. Few parts of it seem totally at rest. There are other aesthetic tensions at work at Haystack and I'll mention them as I go along.

I've strayed a bit from the subject of fabric. It was audacious at the time. The buildings are covered in an almost seamless flow of cedar shakes - 5 inches to the weather. It may seem odd to think of this as a fabric, but fabric, I think, was Barnes' intention. These buildings for whatever nod they may make to the vernacular architecture of Maine are strictly conceived Modernist structures. They descend from the Bauhaus, from Walter Gropius, from Marcel Breuer and the Harvard Graduate School of Design of the late 1930's-early 1940's and are of high sophistication. Modernist buildings were to be rigidly geometric, rectilinear or in precise divisions of rectangles, have ribbon windows and thin two-dimensional surfaces tightly drawn as well as a sense of the pristine. Modernist buildings must remain forever pristine, forever new, beyond time.

Barnes' design adheres to part of that prescription. The lines, the perfect angles, the ribbons of windows are all there; finite, immaculate, in exact response to what Modernism – at least as it was understood on the East Coast in the nineteen fifties - asked of him. Their orderliness offers us intense satisfaction. Their concepts are easy to grasp and seem irrefutably logical. They appear to be just what they ought to be. To achieve this, Barnes worked mass down to an elemental form – he carved it from blocks of cedar - and kept that form in tight control.

Thus far I haven't said much about the surface of the structures. I've referred to their cedar cladding as fabric and I'll pick up on that point. In classic Modernism (here I mean the 1920's, 30's, 40's) the geometry of the mass was held in place by a visually tight membrane. That membrane – the skin of the building – was often stucco. It is smooth, seamless, can read as thin and appears to have the tensile strength to hold the structure in a permanent form. It also prevents the contents from tumbling out. Glass and even brick, if deftly handled, can produce the same effect – an illusion of a thin, tight, all encompassing skin. May I remind you what I have said about the sense of the pristine, the feeling of forever new. Modernist buildings do not welcome patination – they should not acquire patinas – the dings, scratches, dents, the age marks and the discoloration of time.

But what about cedar shingles? Haystack is a radical departure from the classic white smooth boxes. When applied, the skin is textural; it's rough, not smooth, especially when it's raw. How did Barnes convert textural into an even, tight membrane? He didn't, but he appeared to. By eliminating eaves and starting the rows at the lowest horizontal part of the building and then marching them upward up and over where the eaves would be, up and over the peak without recognizing the peak and firmly down the rear wall to its base he created a sense of continuous pulling with any extraneous wrinkles eliminated. The secret lies in the elimination of any accommodation for eaves or the peak. They are ignored and the flow reads like a great smooth sheet, part Barnes and part our willingness to join in. There isn't much flexibility in this scheme. It must be executed and maintained as planned and, I

suppose, it eliminates the use of the buildings in the winter. A heated building with a pitched shingled roof and no eaves would be asking for serious hydraulic trouble.

I've just added an ingredient to the Haystack mix. The season. These are summertime buildings. Because they don't have eaves, they declare themselves to offer limited usage. This plays somewhat to what I have said about frailness, patination and impermanency and adds to their appeal. Buildings dedicated to seasonal use, particularly when they are called cabins (as some are here), imply less substantiality and a greater willingness to allow time and the weather to take their toll. That the toll might include their demise endows them with an elegiac quality, a sadness that their perfection might not endure. Buildings made of stone could perish, but that is not a component of their personality. Buildings made of untreated wood declare their infirmities and that is part of their personality. Here, at Haystack, this becomes even more wistful. That Barnes would offer exquisitely conceived forms to materials that might last scarcely longer than a human life makes his masterpiece all the more remarkable. Perhaps that fact accounts in part for his undertaking the project. It is a winsome poetic concept and Barnes was an English major or so I have read.

It is strange to think of Barnes in connection with the use of the organic in architecture. His forms are as finite as architecture has allowed and yet, in contradiction, his materials have been ripped from nature and nature is invited to reclaim them. If you're looking for an example of tension in architecture, Haystack is a good one.

I note in connection with patinated Modernism, his August Heckscher House, further up the coast, which he designed about a decade after Haystack. It has physical similarities to Haystack – cabin-like structures, a unifying deck, linear geometry, cedar shingled skin. More engaged with the sea than the forest, it is a small paradise, detailed and intended for the ages. Its apparent permanency in contrast with Haystack adds substance to the lyric in my thoughts about Barnes and Haystack. Heckscher is exquisite, thought-through, worried over down to the last inch and as sophisticated as any urban

residential structure might be. The terms “camp” or “lodge” don’t suit it. It has outer walls of glass that slide into pockets and disappear. It has flashing extreme enough to overcome the absence of eaves, engineering that converts the buildings into trusses and the articulation – the matching of shingles to architectural features – is exquisite. Every inch begins or ends precisely where it should. The impression of finesse is Japanese. Age is an invited ingredient. It was the haven of a connoisseur and an embodiment of his own ideals.

It does not have the rhythm that repetition gives Haystack. The repetition of forms – their flow from structure to structure – is an endowment of the landscape and beyond what the architect could bequeath to Heckscher.

I might say something at this point about the small, vernacular sheds and shops of Maine. The terms are sometimes interchangeable and can also be replaced by “house” and even “shack”. They are the product of function and, I suppose, emulate the grander structures around them. Writers have remarked that the Heckscher House has some evolutionary relationship to Maine’s sheds and shacks. I don’t think so. It is sufficient to say that cedar shingles, exposed and defiant, are wonderful; they gracefully uphold a vernacular tradition and establish a kind of tension in their own right. The sophistication of his forms at Haystack and Heckscher would, by expectation, call for other forms of cladding and Barnes has used white stucco, vertical wood and even stone for other residential and outbuilding uses. Cedar shingles would be the least anticipated and the most difficult to handle if the purity of Modernism was to be preserved and in using them he performed brilliantly. To see the ambitions of Gropius and Breuer translated through thin wedges of cedar that would be left to patinate in the aggressive climate of Maine was dangerously heretical, but at Haystack and at Heckscher an amendment to the traditions of Modernism settled in with ease.

I have repeatedly referred to tensions – it’s an element I see throughout architecture; tugging and pulling that contributes intensity to a scheme – I mentioned this when I spoke of the tension between

harmony and edge, between the forest and Barnes' knife-edged geometry and here between surfaces that are expected to be smooth to compliment the geometry of the overall design, but instead are substantially textured and visually porous.

One more thought about the shingles. Residential Modernism was, with less than a handful of exceptions, non-existent in Maine in 1960, the nominal year Haystack was built. In recent years, Modernism has made itself felt in these parts. I don't want to overstate this, but a number of handsome, authentically Modernist houses now exist in Maine. Some have engaged the vernacular tradition by using shingles or even clapboards, but the tailoring in Heckscher remains notable. There every ingredient necessary to the production of notable architecture was present. That does not happen often in Maine.

How do Haystack and Heckscher stack up against one another? Heckscher is a flat Monopoly board with Monopoly game hotels sitting on it. It is an exquisite performance, but it lacks the intensity that inspired Barnes to design Haystack; perhaps here I mean "impulse". It is very self-conscious. Haystack is looser, more spontaneous. More thrilling.

Thus far, I've talked about fabric and form. But what about the site? Barnes' employment of the rocky plunge to the sea is so ineluctable as to seem destined. That statement is probably amusing to those who played a role in bringing Haystack as an institution, the site and Barnes together. Destiny sometimes needs a helping hand but as a scheme to commend a site, maintain it intact and provide structures – the grand staircases, bridges, plazas, streets and alleyways that float above it – is so convincing that it is difficult to conceive of it as otherwise. It is as if it was destined to be.

I mentioned Barnes' winsomeness and poetic bent in designing in vulnerable materials. I'll allow myself a touch of whimsy as I wind down this talk. When I walk along the plankings of Haystack, cross its bridges and plazas and negotiate its tight passages, I am somehow prodded by Venice. I am not taken to Venice, but I am nudged by it. Probably only a person who is from Maine and accepts its

rawness as the usual would obtain Venetian proddings at Haystack. Both are up on wooden posts and fragile, both depend on passageways, bridges and stairways, both offer unexpected plazas and unexpected vistas, both appear to float and both are sea conscious, although both are not sea threatened. At times of high water, Venice joins Haystack in providing planks upon which to walk. And both are not entirely real. In a physical sense, they're there. But in a better sense, each is there as an ideal. Venice, a tawny brushstroke where a pewter sky and a pewter sea touch. Haystack, sharply whittled and carefully bumped down the side of the State of Maine. That bumping is what invited Barnes to achieve distinction.

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