

## **An Inn For Phantoms Of The Outside And In**

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### *Almost Not There: The Ghosts of Modern Architecture*

Wandering without purpose on a late summer's afternoon through the woods in the gardens of Mount Stuart. The sun filtering down, flickering, everything swaying a little. Dreamlike already. Beautiful. Then an apparition. Perhaps. A flash of something in front. Moving closer, it turns out just to be the sun intermittently catching the metal mesh that fences off a clearing covered with gravel, like an abandoned tennis court, a ghost of the past known only to the trees. A hesitation. The sudden feeling of being an intruder, a trespasser on history, yet unable to stay back, lured in even.

The lonely court turns out to be inhabited by some strange white objects: a spare square skeletal frame of a table sits on the gravel beside the mottled slender trunk of a young ash tree; a perforated metal disc suspended high in the air turns a little with the breeze; a fireplace stands off to one side, but without a place for the fire; a diaphanous mesh curtain floats lazily away from the fence but does not curtain off anything in particular; a series of five translucent multifaceted and multilayered shapes hang from tall timber poles, their lower part painted white, like lamps but without bulbs or flame.

A table that is not a table. A fireplace that is not a fireplace. A curtain that is not a curtain. Lamps that are not lamps. Even the fence does not really fence. It does not match the gravel below, heading out into the grass at an angle, and the gravel is not a rectangle. Everything is askew. And yet all these things that are not quite themselves collaborate to produce the palpable sense of a place, even of the sound of tennis balls hitting the mesh of racquets, the swish, the grunt, the laugh, 'love', 'hold', 'break', 'let', 'fault', 'out'... Things that are almost not there construct a ghost architecture, an abandoned tennis court that might have been there, or dreamed about.

Architecture can never be separated from dreams. It is a certain kind of dream, made of things that do not work the way they are supposed to. Even modern architects, obsessed with functionality, were dreamers. And one of the repeated dreams was about tennis courts. They were fascinated by the almost not there quality of the lines, jealous of it, drawn to it. The tennis court became the paradigm of modernity.

Sigfried Giedieon, the most influential historian of modern architecture, used the tennis player as the paradigm of the modern. In his 1929 manifesto book, *Befreites Wohnen* (Liberated Dwelling), he used as an illustration the photograph, taken from the latest issue of *Illustriertes Blatt* (Frankfurt, no. 5, 1929), of a woman in an outfit of white shorts, tank top and tennis shoes smiling across the net with her racquet under her arm as if she has just finished a game. The caption refers to *Licht, Luft, Oeffnung* (Light, Air, Opening), the subtitle of the book, suggesting that tennis offers the same liberation as the modern house. But liberated from what? From history, from tradition, from the ground, from immobility, from disease?

Likewise, Le Corbusier, the most influential modern architect, carefully counted the nested right angles of a tennis court: 'forty-eight right angles, an astonishing number, given the small playing area.' Tennis was his model for the superiority of the right angle: a minimum geometry hosting maximum complexity and unpredictability. Architecture itself was a kind of game played out in the space of simply proportioned geometric figures. Le Corbusier superimposed these kinds of lines – the so-called 'regulating lines' – on the drawings and photographs of buildings to show the secret source of their beauty. He tried to thin architecture down to become more like a tennis court. The idea of geometry, of the game, of athleticism and the white sports outfits acted as an icon of modernity. His 1925 book, *Urbanisme*, features an image of two ghostly tennis players in the middle of a match. There is no difference between the dark surface of the court and the space beyond it. It is as if they are playing in outer space, supported only by the white lines of the court and the top of the net. Modern architecture is likewise built for outer space.

Modern architecture was itself ghostly: white, ethereal, evanescent, otherworldly, levitating on pilotis, as if afraid to touch the ground. It dreamed of being almost not there: 'Almost nothing', in the words of Mies van der Rohe—later mistranslated and popularized by Philip Johnson as "Less is More." But for Mies the dream is not just less of something, but something that is almost not a thing. A ghost. The fascination of Mies and many other modern architects with X-rays resulted in skeletal furniture and buildings where the flesh of nineteenth-century upholstered interiors vanished overnight and a new thin, transparent architecture was ghosted in. Even the paradigmatic inhabitant of this new architecture was a kind of ghost. Modern architecture was literally incubated in tuberculosis sanatoriums, presenting their whitewashed walls, clear geometry, horizontality and openness as medical therapy. Countless sanatoriums all over the world floated above the ground like ships nurturing the fragile convalescents who lay down for years on deck-like open-air terraces, often sailing to their death. How many ghosts were in these buildings? Or was the building itself the ghost? Did modern architecture become like the patient, fragile, almost not there?

Perhaps this is why we never left modern architecture behind, despite all the polemics against it for almost a century. More precisely, it never left us behind. It lingers, haunting the imagination and the memory: the memory of something that was never fully there in the first place. Modern architecture is the dream of something that is almost not there: a minimal almost intangible presence liberating the maximum of experience. This dream of almost nothing was so persistent and so shared that it has its own ghostly presence. It can be felt, to the bone, when least expected, just walking among the trees.