

Philosophy of Time

STANLEY ABERCROMBIE

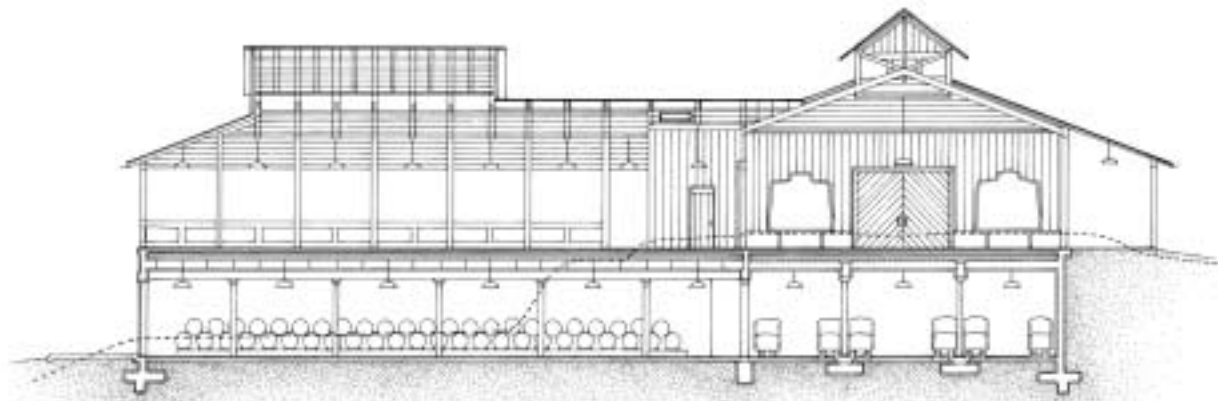
A review copy of a new book that has just landed on my desk has a dust jacket describing “an architectural world increasingly polarized between strict revivalist classicism and ‘avant-garde’ abstraction.” What a world! What extremes to be polarized between, one must think. But what of an architecture that does not force itself upon us in such categorical terms? What of an architecture not of polarizing styles, not of the world of the moment, but one that lasts? Half a century ago, philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote that “in our need for more and more rapid replacement of the worldly things around us, we can no longer afford to...respect and preserve their inherent durability.” What of an architecture that does not cater to the pattern of rapid replacement, but that epitomizes “inherent durability”?

When you first enter the Harlan Estate property, in the hills above the tiny Napa Valley community of Oakville, you are eerily aware that at no point along the way have you seen any signs mentioning the winery or passed through any gates except an extremely modest one that looks quite unassuming, but that opens automatically on approach. This degree of anonymity is remarkable in a valley where some entries seem engaged in

an earnest competition for most pretentious, as do some of the wineries that lie beyond them.

As the road climbs and winds, the 240-acre property gradually unfolds. There are grapevines, of course, in strictly level rows stacked above one another like contours on a map, but the vineyard areas, at present covering only one-sixth of the property, are irregular in outline and interrupted by copses of giant valley oaks. The rest is a collage of conifer forests, oak woodlands, hundreds of olive trees, parklands, five miles of trails, and several streams, at least one culminating in a lake. Unseen, but contributing to the total effect because they *are* unseen, are eight miles of underground utilities.

This is a private and non-commercial precinct, neither seeking nor needing crowds of new admirers. There are no tasting rooms, no concessions, no picnic grounds, no play areas, no gift shop. Necessarily, of course, there are some buildings. The chief three of these being the east compound, the west compound, and Hill House, the Harlan family residence. The buildings are generous and comfortable but quiet. They seem sturdy, manly, simple structures, more Bach than Debussy, more Gary



Early elevation rendering of east winery and cellars

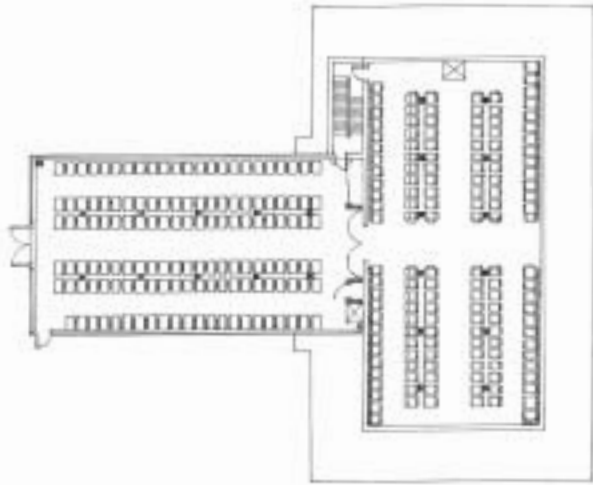
Cooper than Marlene Dietrich, more Hemingway than Proust, with a casual manner that can trick you into thinking—until you note their subtle carefulness—that they are vernacular buildings that have been here for a century.

Simplicity is seldom simple. One reason for the apparent timelessness of this architecture is that it does not flaunt the latest industrial technology or any of the latest fashions. Of natural materials, including stone from Carson City, Nevada, quarries and redwood, they seem at home here. Axial and often symmetrical, focusing on ample, high-ceilinged, skylit spaces, with many walls sliding open to verandas carefully placed for views, this architecture has a sense of order, but no sense whatever of pomp or pretense. Handsome as it is, the architecture remains secondary and complementary to the landscape and the wine, but just as expressive of what the land has and wants to say. A talented winemaker in an enlightened winery can produce a wine that conveys the character of the soil, the sun, and the weather that has formed it: a landscape in a bottle. A talented architect with an enlightened client can do something similar.

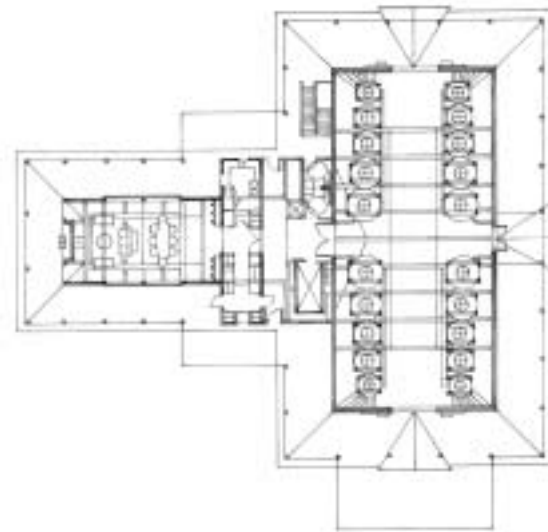
It was Mies van der Rohe who famously refused “to invent a new architecture every Monday morning.” As un-Miesian as these buildings may be, they seem to have been imagined with the same intention. Yet perhaps, except for their materials palette

and their detailing—as studiously natural and woodsy as Mies’s were studiously industrial—there may at their heart lie a Miesian simplicity, one just as painstakingly achieved. Here is critic Peter Blake writing about Mies’s work habits: “In his office he is likely to sit and examine a scale model of one of his latest buildings, asking an assistant to shift walls around very slightly—or back again just as slightly. (This process may consume several weeks or months; the ‘simpler’ the building looks, the longer it is likely to take.)”

The great room above the west cellars (the first structure) is composed of five modules, each about eighteen by thirty feet, a composition that in itself gives these quarters a rare cohesiveness. Two modules at one end comprise the living room; the central one, serving as a dining area, has two opposite walls that can be entirely rolled away to open it to through-the-house breezes and views; the other two serve for cooking and sleeping. Downstairs, the winery gets to work with crush pads, barrel wash areas, fermentation rooms, and—the most spectacular element, yet invisible—a ninety-foot-diameter cave buried in the hillside, designed in the shape of a three-spoked wheel and pampering hundreds of oak barrels. This cave, unlike many others that snake their ways in paths of least resistance among stone outcroppings or underground streams, has its own majestic order, with just a hint, because of being so unexpected, of otherworldliness.



Floor-plan schematic of east winery, underground barrel cellars



Floor-plan schematic of east winery, ground floor (including fermentation hall, lab, kitchen, and Flag Room)

The second structure, on another hillside but visible from the first, is the east winery. It repeats the same natural materials and the same plainspoken vocabulary, but it is less obviously modular in plan, somewhat chapel-like in its axiality and in its high ceiling supported by exposed wood trusses. Adjoining this “nave” are a kitchen and a wine testing laboratory, and beyond those a fermentation hall. Here the monumental vats are not the usual stainless steel (impressive enough in a sleek industrial way) but French oak, so that whole rows of them on their stone footings constitute a wondrous temple architecture of their own. On the level beneath these is the cool, capacious (6,500 square feet) barrels cellar.

Hill House, employing the same materials and the same quasi-agricultural vocabulary as the two wineries, continues to evolve. The house would make a very large impression if some idea of the scope could be realized at once, but that has been intentionally made impossible; like the property as a whole, the residence does not maximize its extent and importance, but only reveals itself element by element. Looking at a site plan of the house and grounds, with its multitude of axes, courtyards, and pavilions, one might mistake it for a fragment of Hadrian’s Villa, sprawling with the hills of Tivoli as backdrop, but in reality the effect could hardly be more different: this is a sizable and extremely comfortable house, but it never poses for us. Hadrian

had his colonnades and pedestals, his arches and vaults, his malachite and lapis lazuli; Harlan prefers his lap redwood siding and his corrugated metal.

There is just one element in this architecture that might have been lifted straight from the imperial architecture of second-century Rome (or from ancient Greek or Egyptian architecture before it, or the Renaissance, or any neoclassical style in France, England, or Russia), and that is the principle of clarity achieved through axiality: the motion, by eye or by foot, along a straight path, perhaps through an enfilade of spatial events, but always with the reassuring sense that all that lies about us falls away from our path equably and symmetrically on either hand.

One example of such axiality (and also of the subtle carefulness mentioned earlier) is that, upon arrival, having passed through a variety of outdoor spaces, you suddenly face directly ahead but perhaps a hundred yards away, carefully framed in an open gateway, a flume emerging from a wooded hillside and emitting a great stream of water. This falls into a lake that, from this height, is not yet visible. Turning toward the more private part of the complex, passing through another courtyard, one finally sees that the house itself, following the contours of the hilltop, is skewed at a thirty-degree angle to the elements already experienced. On this angled axis through the house, one end terminates in a grassy croquet court that, with the wickets



removed, can double as a helipad; turning back, one sees that the other end of the axis terminates with a different view of the same great flume of water emerging from the woods.

Except for that croquet court, which is visible only from the privacy of the house, there are no mown lawns on the estate, nor are there as yet any formal gardens. The vineyards, of course, are in orderly rows for the practicalities of maintenance, but the vines themselves display all the forces of nature, their rootstock gnarled from long, hard lives. The buildings, too, show a natural face, prepared to weather like the earth and the vines that support them and give them reason for being: nothing is painted or should ever be. There is nothing jarringly unnatural here, but neither is there anything accidental or unconsidered. Much of the land is still wild; some of it is cultivated; none of it is manicured. All of it is beautiful; none of it is pretty.

The context seems as natural as the buildings but has been equally studied. All the plants brought to the property have been personally scrutinized for their forms, their textures, and their colors (with blooms restricted to white and shades of purple). Interiors, too, appear casual but leave nothing to chance. While they cannot be said to have been decorated, the rooms in all three buildings invite you to settle with good books or good friends: furnishings are simple and uncluttered, every chair vetted for comfort, every side table and lighting fixture positioned for practicality.

Not only are all these elements well conceived and executed, but all of them—woods, vineyards, plants, water, paths, architecture, furnishings—combine and interlock into a single seamless whole. It is a composition in which every element, in one way or another, is in service to the miracle of the grape, and in which the grape is never upstaged. The property was assembled, painstakingly, bit by bit, with the character of the vines and the quality of their fruit the prime considerations, and it is natural that they remain the dominant visual features of this landscape.

Yet the built elements are not arbitrarily scattered or even picturesquely placed in this landscape. There are subtle links and correspondences. Looking out the central door of the Harlan winery's fermentation room, the one blessed with those oak vats, one sees, down a set of pergola-covered stairs, a welcoming circular platform for viewing the vineyards below. Ninety degrees away, looking through the rows of vats and out through a larger doorway, one sees—on axis, of course—a rectangular pavilion for viewing another vista. These buildings may be understated, even modest, but they are silently telegraphing a near-invisible network of human intelligence and purpose.

One reason the entire complex appears so comfortably attuned to its setting is that its owner knows every square foot of the site intimately, having spent years investigating its topography, its soils, its sun and shadow, and its vegetation. One thinks of Thoreau tramping for miles around Walden “to



keep an appointment with a beech-tree or a yellow birch, or an old acquaintance among the pines.”

Travels farther afield have contributed, too: a campanile admired here, an enormous fireplace there, and eventually an image of the two combined in a single chimney/bell tower structure. In Morocco, the sight of dugouts used as roofless rooms like sunken patios. In Granada’s Alhambra, an observation of the virtuoso treatment of water courses, rills, and fountains. In Bali, an experience of low-key luxury, unmarked entrances, and non-air-conditioned but interestingly shaded spaces.

Another major contribution to the estate’s success has been a remarkably close relationship between client and architect, Howard Backen of Backen Gillam. Backen lives within walking distance of the estate, and he and Harlan have met virtually every Thursday for thirteen years to discuss the land’s development. Never have they considered limitations because the goal has always been to build for many generations. Never has a display of ego interrupted their discourse. But there have been serious philosophical investigations of every step: nothing done without proof of rightness, nothing allowed that is not perfect for the site. And perfect both artistically and practically. As architect, theorist, and author Christopher Alexander has written: “The central issue of all art... is to make things which have this luminous spirituality in them and which actually take your breath away.... And when you actually pursue that, and learn how to do it, with full seriousness,

it leads you into matters that are completely discussable and straightforward and where both artistic and scientific problems merge and where you do not have to maintain the split between the two.”

But what seems both artistically and scientifically perfect on one Thursday may be reconsidered the following Thursday. Thomas Jefferson said of his own long-continuing efforts at Monticello and the University of Virginia that “building up, and pulling down, are the delights of my life,” and the same may be true here. Backen says that when he was first called to look at the site for the house there were two existing foundations, but no house on either, evidence of earlier changes of mind.

Change is evidence of life, of course. Some changes have come to the estate because of evolving knowledge about the art/science of viniculture, others because of changes in business and living patterns, still others simply because a better solution was found. Change and improvement will undoubtedly continue, and age will add patina to the built-in quality of agelessness.

In any case, as it exists right at this moment, Harlan Estate is a place of infinite repose, reticence, rightness, and grace. And grace, William Hazlitt wrote about those who possess it, is “the outward expression of the inward harmony of the soul.” It is, also, in this case, the outward expression both of the nature of these 240 acres and a harmonious vision and untiring inquiry, over the course of 600 Thursdays, into the possibilities and responsibilities of building with that nature.