

Adrift on the Pequod, Space out of Time:
A Trappist Monastery off the Coast of Santa Barbara

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To my wife for her support.

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To Dave and Jen for their dedication to and belief in this project.





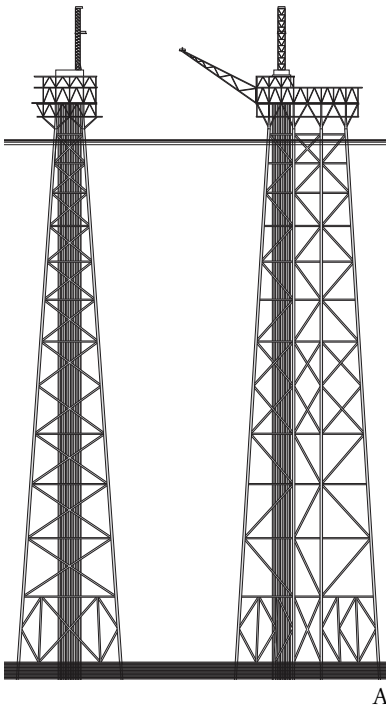
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1. Loomings

“Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses...then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.”¹

“Why upon your first voyage...did you yourself feel such a mystical vibration, when first told that you and your ship were now out of sight of land? Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? ...Surely all this is not without meaning. ...it is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.”²

-Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

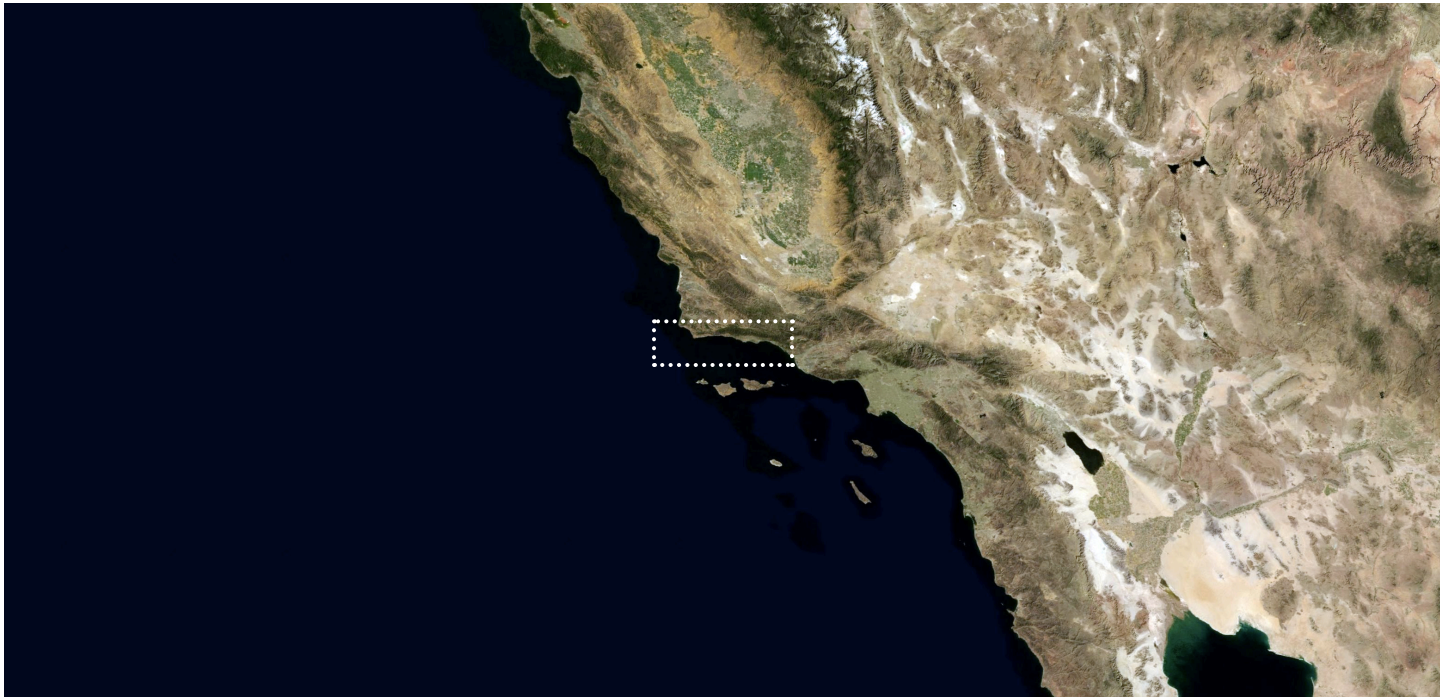


- A. Platform Hondo, existing structure
- B. Landscape of Southern California
- C. Site map
- D. Site section

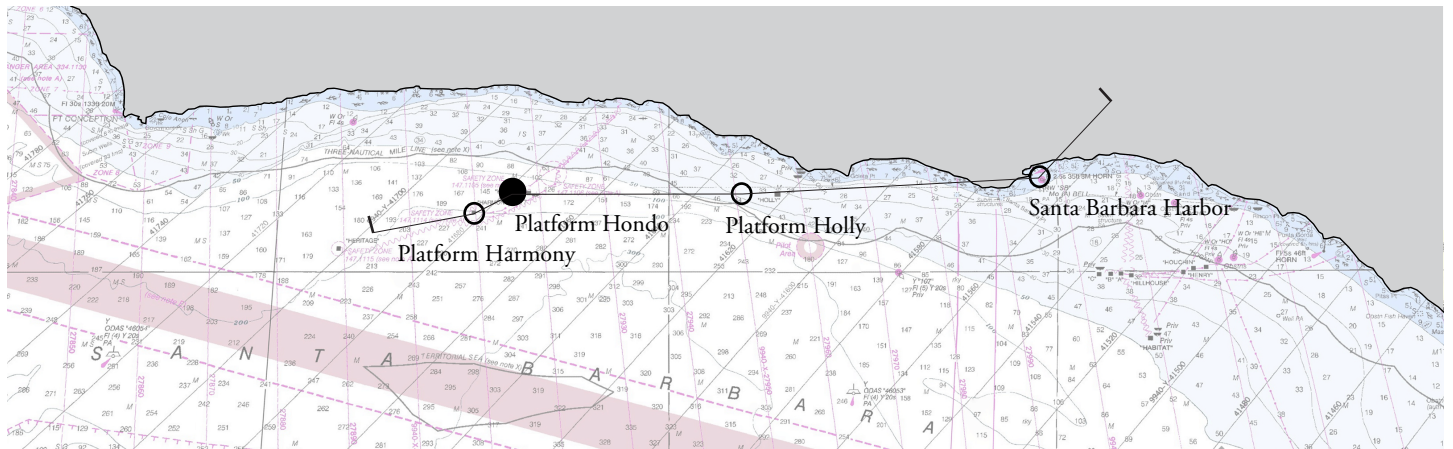
Along the western coast of the United States, the empty space of the American West meets the empty space of the Pacific Ocean. In the year 2087, off the coast of Southern California, a series of nineteen offshore oil platforms that once created outposts of human habitation and resource exploitation now lie dormant. Platform Hondo, a steel-framed, eight-legged rig, sits five miles off the coast in the Santa Barbara Channel. Located in 850 feet of water and built in 1976, the rig had a productive 75 year lifespan. It now exists as a corpse and relic of an earlier way of life.

Two qualities define the landscape of Platform Hondo: empty space and being in between land and sea, sea and sky. Within site of land, yet beyond the continental shelf, the platform is pulled between two worlds: it is neither fully of the ocean or of the land, the westernmost outpost of human habitation in the American West. Accordingly, theories relating to emptiness and edge conditions form the framework for understanding the landscape of Platform Hondo.

At its most simple, the landscape of the ocean can be understood as a reduction to two states: sea and sky. The boundary between the two—the surface of the water—can be understood as an infinitely thin, complex, and constantly changing fractal membrane.



B



C



D



E

G



F

E. Platform Hondo from sea
F. Platform Hondo from air
G. Platforms Hondo and Harmony





H



I

H. Sea as surface

I. Sea as volume

J. Desert horizon/ocean horizon

This membrane at times permits views into its depths, suggesting a volume, yet at other times presents itself as an opaque plane, suggesting a surface. To be on the edge is thus a defining characteristic of our human relation to the ocean. Between sea and sky, water and land, surface and depth: to be on, in, or above the sea is to exist in liminal space.

The Pacific Ocean has an additional, overpowering character: emptiness. Its incredible vastness and unbroken horizon overwhelms all other qualities. As Herman Melville describes in *Moby Dick*, the Pacific “rolls the midmost waters of the world, the Indian ocean and Atlantic being but its arms. ...this mysterious, divine Pacific zones the world’s whole bulk about; makes all coasts one bay to it; seems the tide-beating heart of the earth.”³ 6,000 miles across, the Pacific covers one-third of the surface of the earth; larger than all the world’s land combined, its 150,000,000 cubic miles are nearly entirely empty. The perception of the horizon, which constantly changes according to atmospheric phenomena and diurnal and seasonal cycles, is the clearest marker of this emptiness. Yet the ocean shares this character of empty space with another, adjacent landscape.

As understood by Wallace Stegner, William Least Heat Moon, and Charles Olson, emptiness can be seen as the defining character of America west of the 100th meridian. Least Heat Moon, as quoted by Stegner, notes that

The true West differs from the East in one great, pervasive, influential, and awesome way: space. The vast openness changes the roads, towns, houses, farms, crops, machinery, politics, economics, and naturally, ways of thinking.... Space west of the line is perceptible and often palpable, especially when it appears empty....⁴

Even more acutely, Charles Olson notes that “space has a stubborn way of sticking to Americans, penetrating all the way in, accompanying them. It is the exterior fact.”⁵

In this empty space the American West resembles the Pacific Ocean. Melville explores the connection throughout *Moby Dick*, and Charles Olson elucidates it in his

J



K. *Spiral Jetty*

L. *Spiral Jetty*

M. Platform Hondo

N. (over) Space out of time



K



L

book on the novel, *Call me Ishmael*. Olson writes about “a Melville who was long-eyed enough to understand the Pacific as part of our geography, another West, prefigured in the Plains.”⁶ More explicitly, Olson writes of the Pacific, “She is HEART SEA, twin and rival of the HEARTLAND. The Pacific is, for an American, the Plains repeated, a 20th century Great West.”⁷ The thesis, with its site perched between the empty Pacific and empty American West, requires further study into the character of this empty space, its unbroken horizon, and its effect on those who experience it.

The thesis proposes that the overwhelming empty space of the landscape causes a de-centering of space and time; that is, it creates a change in how we understand the relationship between space and time. This notion has been examined by Robert Smithson, who explored the de-centering effect of the empty American landscape in his work *Spiral Jetty* in the Great Salt Lake of Utah. Describing the vertiginous impact of the landscape, Smithson writes, “my dialectics of site and nonsite whirled into an indeterminate state, where solid and liquid lost themselves in each other. . . . No sense wondering about classifications and categories, there were none.”⁸ The landscape for Smithson has overwhelmed preconceived orders and conventions. Gary Shapiro describes *Spiral Jetty* as “a parody of the founding statement of modern philosophy, in which Descartes discovers the certainty of his own thought and existence; here [the *Spiral Jetty*] marks our position as *lost among the many time frames, adrift and without a center. . .*”⁹

The sea has a similar effect on Melville’s characters in *Moby Dick*. Throughout the voyage of the *Pequod*, Ishmael notes the strange effect the open ocean holds on his perception of time and self:

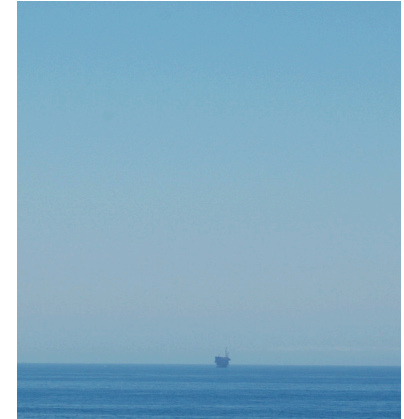
lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; in this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space.¹⁰

Here the ocean not only causes the confusion of time and space, it causes a radical diffusion (de-centering) of Ishmael's conceptions of space, time, and his very identity. The Pequod's young deckhand Pip further illustrates this effect. Thrown overboard in pursuit of a whale, Pip finds himself adrift on the open ocean. His

ringed horizon began to expand around him miserably. By the merest chance the ship itself at last rescued him.... The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes.... He saw Gods' foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it, and therefore his shipmates called him mad.¹¹

The terrifying emptiness and vastness of the sea causes Pip to go mad; his entire conception of reality has been set adrift. "For Pip by his madness had seen God,"¹² and the source of this madness is the empty sea.

Platform Hondo exists in this terrifyingly empty sea. Returning to Olson: "Melville had a way of reaching back through time until he got history pushed back so far he *turned time into space*."¹³ The emptiness and unbroken horizon render space the primary dimension of the landscape of the sea and desert. The emptiness is palpable, the horizon unwavering. Here space wins out; here space overwhelms time.



M





2. Knights and Squires

“... They were nearly all Islanders in the Pequod... each Isolato living on a separate continent of his own. Yet now, federated along one keel, what a set these Isolatoes were!”¹⁴

“The crew, man, the crew! Are they not one and all with Ahab, in this matter of the whale?”¹⁵

-Melville, *Moby Dick*

I.

The Roman Catholic order of the Trappists emerged from the Cistercian tradition in the year 1664, seeking to live in even stricter accordance with the Rule of Saint Benedict than the Cistercians from which they broke away. The Rule governs all aspects of daily life and religious practice. The monks speak only when necessary, preferring to communicate in a form of sign language.

Three disciplines define the spiritual development of Trappists. The “Liturgy of the Hours” is a series of seven daily services performed in the church: *Vigils, Lauds, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline*. While all seven are mostly composed of chanting and readings from the Psalms, the specific subject matter varies according to the time of day and the liturgical calendar. A second discipline, *Lectio Divinia*, or “Daily Prayers,” is time set aside for personal prayer and meditation. Here the monk opens himself to the presence of God. A short passage, perhaps selected from a preceding service or personal study, is repeated to quiet and open the mind. Lastly, manual labor forms a critical component of both economic and spiritual sustenance. As the Rule of Saint Benedict states, “for then are they monks in truth, if they live by the work of their hands.... Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, all the community must be occupied at definite times in manual labor.”¹⁶ The dedication to manual labor not only allows the monastic community to endure, but it is also understood to be the literal work of God.

Program

30 Monks.
6 guests.
36 cells.
Church.
6 Chapels, for individual prayer and meditation.
Chapter house, for daily meeting and maintenance of community.
Refectory, for preparing and consuming food.
Columbarium, for housing the cremated dead.
Vegetable Garden.
Tackle Room, for providing maintenance space for vessels, etc.
Crane.
Support and Service Spaces.

Similar to most monastic traditions, Trappists have historically sought to remove themselves from society, forming new communities within or at the edge of wilderness. Yet in the year 2087, retreating to the wilderness is not as simple as stepping into the next valley or onto the next mountain peak. This thesis proposes that a way of engaging with the wilderness, of moving beyond the edge of society, is to go onto the sea. Writers have long explored the idea that the ocean is fundamentally not of the human world, fundamentally other, fundamentally *wild*, and so might provide a fitting site for monastic life.

For Homer in *The Odyssey*, the sea is a source of gods and supernatural beings that continually test humans; for Tennyson in “Crossing the Bar,” going to sea becomes a metaphor for entering the afterlife; for Melville in *Moby Dick*, the Pacific’s “gently awful stirrings suggest a hidden soul beneath”¹⁷ and provide the supernatural background to the voyage of the Pequod. Most directly, the Psalms note the presence of God in the ocean: “They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; These see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep.”¹⁸ To be on the ocean, then, can be understood as confronting alterity, the non-human, or the divine. The sea might thus become a suitable site for monastic life, given the desire to be removed to the edge of the human world. Platform Hondo is an existing means to live on the sea, a relic waiting for reanimation. A monastery built on it, engaging with both the emptiness and wildness of the sea, begins to make sense.

Ideas of dialectics permeate monastic life, and so monastic life holds a relation to the landscape of the sea. Living in a monastery means living in a paradoxical state both within and out of the world, for “the religious way of life is a way of being ‘in the world but not of it.’”¹⁹ The Trappist scholar and monk Thomas Merton wrote often about this contradiction, and “Merton embraced paradox because not to do so would be to reject life in its totality.”²⁰ Once in a monastery, one does not simply forget the outside world; in his in *Genesee Diary*, Henri J. M. Nouwen describes a day “full of glori-



A. Monastery in wilderness

ous visions, glorious sounds and glorious spectacles, and it became clear that in this way we were presented with an image of the world to come. During the day, however, I also read ‘The Week in Review’ of the New York Times and was overwhelmed by the misery of this world.”²¹ To Nouwen and Merton, being a monk means being continually pulled between the seclusion of the monastery and society at large beyond the monastery; the struggle is a defining part of the nature of monastic life.

Additionally, the relationship between individual and community constantly blurs in monastic life as an emphasis on silence, meditation, and private prayer contrasts with the creation of community through the Eucharist, the “Liturgy of the Hours,” other rituals, and manual labor. Nouwen describes the relationship between individual and community in the Abbey of Genesee: “even in this protective place with many good people around me, I am afraid of being forgotten, of being left alone. Yet I chose to be alone; I wanted it.”²² Merton compares entering monastic life to a form of death for a young novitiate, yet it is a death accompanied by renewal: “the waters had closed over his head, and he was submerged in the community. He was lost. The world would hear of him no more. He had drowned to our society and become a Cistercian. ...Somebody who happened to know who he was, told me a few facts about him, by way of a kind of obituary.”²³ The individual still exists, but in an altered relationship to his community and society outside of that community. He has died and been reborn as a monk. Death and renewal intertwine, and in the landscape of the sea, the marker of death is the horizon: fixed at the edge of perception, unavoidable, absolute.

Trappist monastic life is filled with strictly defined rituals and order. Its daily schedule prescribes nearly every activity of every day. The result of such an intense emphasis on order, rigor, and ritual is an altered relationship to time, as time becomes the primary dimension and space recedes into the background. Nouwen describes this change in his diary: “In the beginning I was hardly aware of how I was being pulled slowly into a new lifestyle, *a new way of perceiving time*... it seems as if I am being slowly

Daily Schedule

4:15 AM Vigils
Breakfast
6:00 AM Lauds & Mass
7:15 AM Terce
Work
11:15 AM Sext
Dinner, optional rest
1:05 PM None
Work
4:30 PM Vespers
Supper
6:35 PM Compline
Retire

lifted up from the gray, dull, somewhat monotonous, secular time cycle into a very colorful, rich sequence of events.”²⁴ Even more directly: “Here the only cycle is the liturgical cycle, and here the time is indeed redeemed. You see and feel that the monastic day, week and year are meant to be time-bound anticipations of a heavenly existence.”²⁵ Rituals fixed in particular and regular sequences render time the primary dimension of monastic existence.

II.

If the character of the sea can be understood as space overwhelming time, then the ritual and rule of monastic life can contrastingly be understood as time overwhelming space. Thus in the combination of site and program exists a dialectic between empty space beyond time and ordered ritual grounded in time. Charles Olson understood this; he saw the contrast in Melville:

It is space, and its feeding on man, that is the essence of [Melville’s] vision, bred in him here in America, and it is time which is at the heart of Christianity. What the Pacific had confirmed for him he allowed Christ to undo.²⁶

The monks on the oil platforms exist in between the two qualities. The result is a de-centering, a weakening, and a liminal existence as the monks experience both characteristics simultaneously, drifting between them in a constantly shifting play of empty space and monastic ritual.

B. (over) Space
C. (over) Platform Hondo
D. (over) Time



B





C



D

3. The Chart

“For with the charts of all four oceans before him, Ahab was threading a maze of currents and eddies, with a view to the more certain accomplishment of that monomaniac thought of his soul.”²⁷

“Already we are boldly launched upon the deep; but soon we shall be lost in its unshored, harborless immensities. Ere that come to pass; ere the Pequod’s weedy hull rolls side by side with the barnacled hulls of the leviathan; at the outset it is but well to attend to a matter almost indispensable to a thorough appreciative understanding of the more special leviathanic revelations and allusions of all sorts which are to follow.”²⁸

“There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method.”²⁹

-Melville, *Moby Dick*

The design of the thesis focuses on the idea of de-centered and liminal architecture: the idea that spaces can be dialogical, existing in a constantly shifting state in between opposing characters or qualities. In this specific case, the dialog occurs in the dialectic of empty space out of time and monastic ritual grounded in time. The thesis thus asks: what happens when architecture occupies the liminal space between two qualities? How do we design spaces that play, drift, and meander on the edge, *in* the edge, existing in between to become a bit of both but fully neither?

The design methodology pursued in the thesis emerged from the theoretical understanding of site and program described above in combination with an exploration of poetic logic. Logic is understood to be reasoning according to a set of defined principles; typically, those principles are highly rational. Yet poetic logic admits the possibility of using non-rational principles, rules, or parameters to guide decision making. Rather than relying on a Cartesian deduction to irrefutable truths, poetic logic admits a density

of overlapping connections, meanings, and possibilities. In an interview with Steven Holl, Jeffery Kipnis describes a form of poetic logic:

The classic example was Lee J. Cobb's preparation for the role of Willy Loman in the film version of *Death of a Salesman*. Cobb, a virile, charismatic 30 year old actor at the height of his career is faced with giving a credible performance of a character who was just the opposite – a desperate man in his late sixties whose career and personal life are at the brink of collapse. In order to prepare for the role, Cobb spends weeks studying an elephant at the zoo, imitating in minute detail how it moves, how it holds its head, how it watches its surroundings, eats, and so forth. His thought was this: I do not know how Willy Loman feels, I can never truly know the devastating, oppressive emotional weight crushing him. But, if I can capture the mass, the inertia of the elephant in my performance, perhaps the audience will feel the effect as the emotional burden of the character.⁵⁰

The elephant is a sort of poetic logic guiding the actor's performance, and it is through the audience's interpretation of that logic that the effect manifests itself.

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* forms of poetic logic guiding the design of the monastery. *Moby Dick* is a story of thirty men, unified by a shared purpose (the hunt for the white whale), creating a community of strict ritual and order (the rule imposed by Captain Ahab), living isolated from the world yet still within it (adrift on the world's oceans), with an always-negotiated relationship between the individual and the community (Ahab, Ishamel, and the crew), aboard a ship constantly pulled towards the horizon through vast and empty space, all in pursuit of an unknowable, uncatchable, and indefinable higher power (*Moby Dick*).

The novel allows a poetic logic to emerge in the design process. Without coherence, the work descends into meaningless ambiguity; yet with absolute clarity, the work admits no interpretation and thus loses its potential richness and ability to drift. It is hoped that the use of *Moby Dick* allows the design to exist—once again—in between.

4. The Ship

“She was a ship of the old school... Long seasoned and weather-stained in the typhoons and calms of all four oceans, her old hull’s complexion was darkened like a French grenadier’s, who has alike fought in Egypt and Siberia. Her venerable bows looked bearded. Her masts – cut somewhere on the coast of Japan, where her original ones were lost overboard in a gale – Her ancient decks...worn and wrinkled.... But to all these her old antiquities, were added new and marvelous features.... A noble craft, but somehow a most melancholy!”³¹

-Melville, *Moby Dick*

I.

Throughout this chapter, passages from *Moby Dick* are included adjacent to the main text. The exact connections are not articulated; the text can be read with or without the quotations: a layer of uncertain interpretation is maintained.

II.

The synthesis of the ideas explored in the previous chapters results in critical questions forming the design thesis:

How does an architecture exist in between?

How does it drift between two opposing qualities or atmospheres?

How does it create a coherent whole while remaining open to interpretation?

The response to the first query requires a definition of two elements, for without them, there is nothing to exist between. As follows from above, these elements derive from the combination of site and program: space overwhelming time, and time overwhelming space. This dialectic is then translated and articulated into the following pairs:

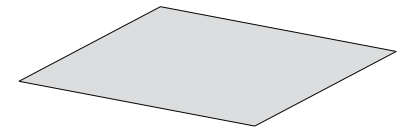
- A. Horizon
- B. Well

Space / Time
Horizontal / Vertical
Surface / Depth
Above / Beneath
Open / Enclosed
Earthy / Spiritual
Individual / Communal

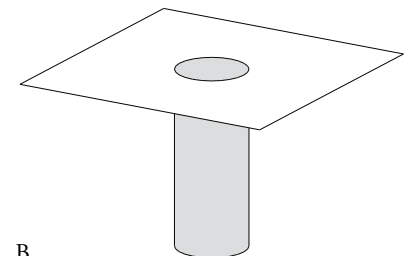
These pairs are experiences present in the combination of the landscape and program of the thesis: the monks, in a very fundamental way, live pulled between the characters of space/landscape/horizon/surface/individual and time/ritual/vertical/depth/communal.

The element of space overwhelms the landscape; it is evident and palpable without architectural intervention. Yet the element of time (and its corollaries as defined by this thesis, the vertical/beneath/enclosed) is not. From this observation came the necessity of creating an architectural foil to the space of the landscape. If space occupies the horizontal, or x-y axes, then time can be understood as occupying the vertical, or z-axis. The archetype of the well emerges as the foil. Completely removed from the horizon, a well is wholly vertical space engaging the depth of both the water below and the sky above.

While the rig can be understood as a vertical element in its landscape, the experience of being on it is a strongly horizontal one: the large, horizontal platforms frame horizontal space opening onto a horizontal landscape. A vertical experience becomes necessary: the diagram of the monastery thus takes the form of a vertical void inserted into the existing horizontal platforms of the rig. Yet the monks live in between space out of time and time out of space, engaging with both; accordingly, their spatial experience must also be *in between* horizon and well – not simply one or the other.



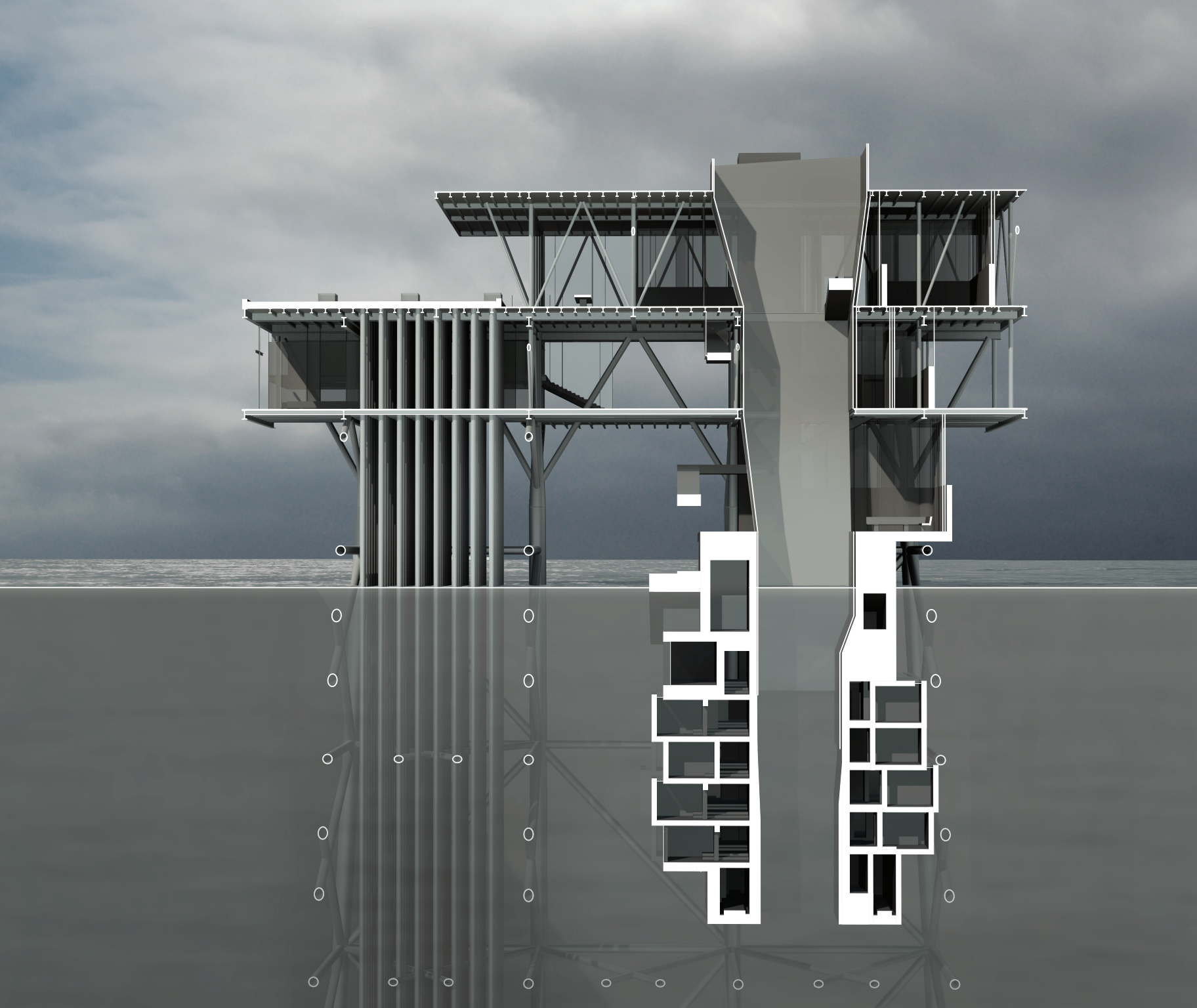
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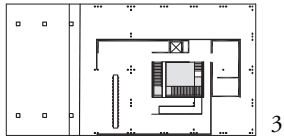


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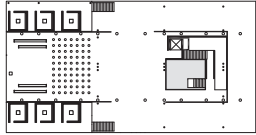
The recognition of this need to experience the horizontal and the vertical, the horizon and the well, space and time, results in a separation of program in plan and section that creates contrasting series of spatial experiences that engage both sides of these dialectics. The monks are thus continuously drawn between up and down, horizontal and vertical, enclosed and open: the monks are in a vortex. The means of drifting is a path of vertical circulation that spirals upwards within, next to, and outside of the well. Further means of blurring the boundary between horizon and well are then explored in the articulation of materials and circulation.

Three factors determine the specific placement of program: the different characters of various levels above and below the surface of the ocean, the existing spatial opportunities of the rig, and varying relationships to horizon and well. Directly engaging with the depth of the sea is an essential counterpoint to experiencing the sea as surface; accordingly, the monastery extends equally beneath and above sea level. Beneath the surface, removed from wind, sun, rain, and the human world, are spaces that foster individual contemplation and needs: the library, monks' cells, and *columbarium*. Above the surface, engaged with the horizon, landscape, and weather, are the program elements relating more directly to the maintenance and sustenance of community: the chapter house, refectory, church, and various support spaces.

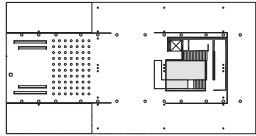




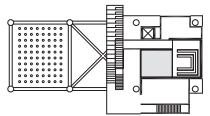
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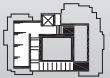


2



1

- 3. Garden and Refectory
- 2.5. Chapels
- 2. Church and Sacristy
- 1. Chapter House and Tackle Room
- 0. Daily Labor - Platform Harmony Steel Salvage
 - 1. Library
 - 2. Cells, Washrooms
 - 3. Cells, Washrooms
 - 4. Cells, Washrooms
 - 5. Cells, Washrooms
 - 6. Columbarium



-1



-2



-3



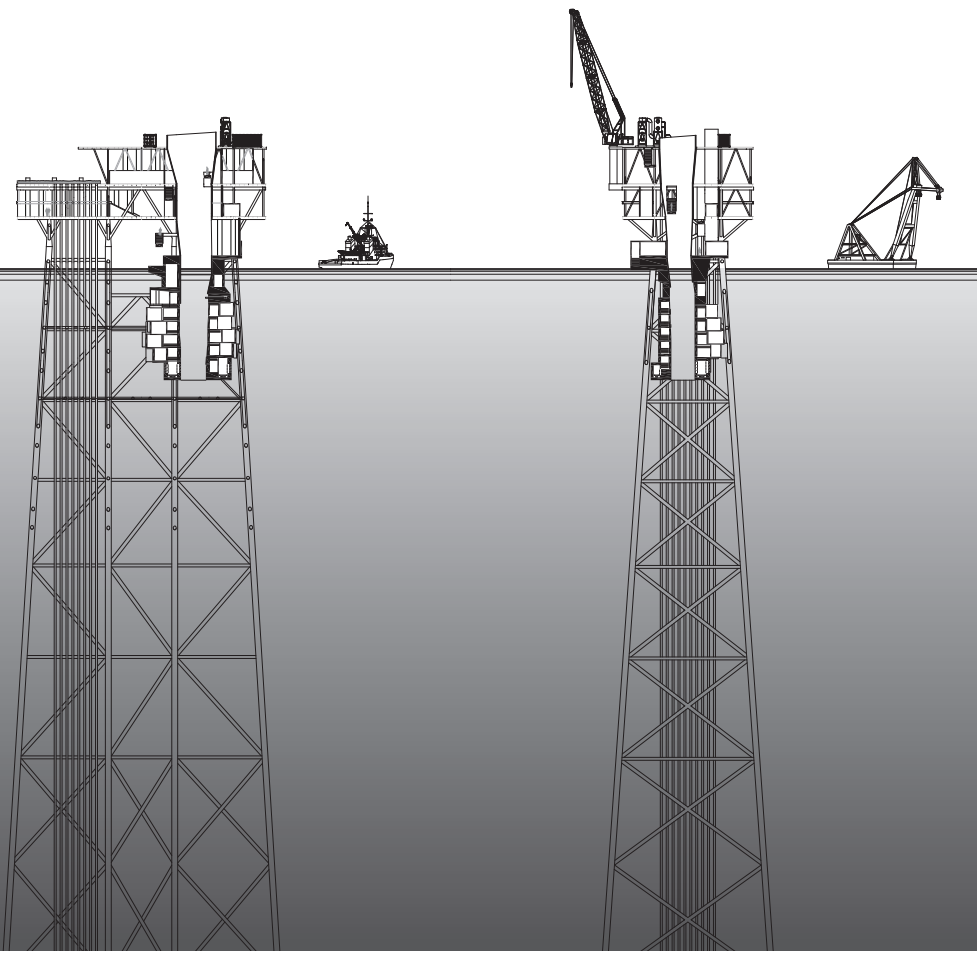
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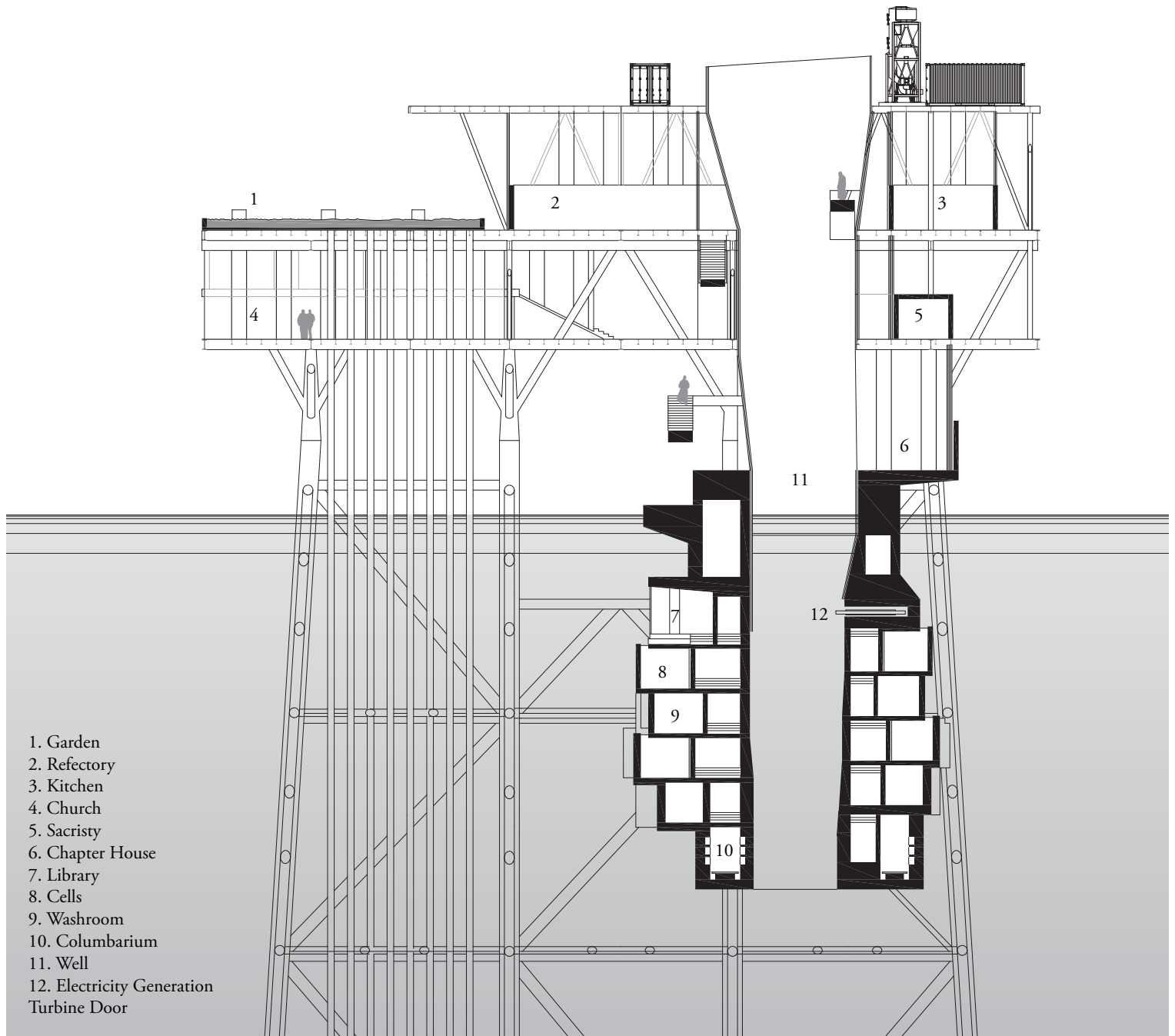


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-6





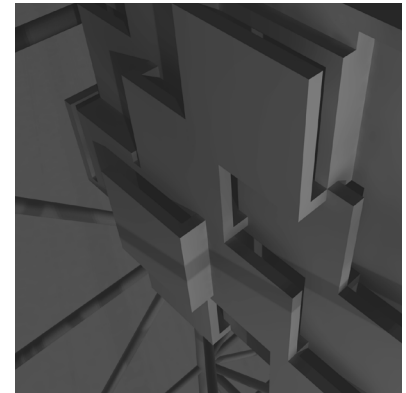


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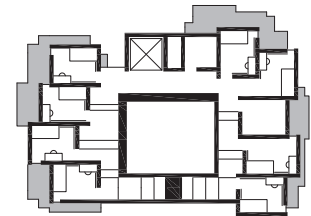
The requirements of the program elements relating strictly to the individual— to be small, protected, isolated, and quiet — works in conjunction with the structural system required to create them beneath the water’s surface. Concrete forms the structure of the monastery from above the height of breaking waves to its lowest extent. Supported by the existing steel frame, the weight of the concrete counteracts the buoyancy of the air in the spaces within it; the buoyancy of the air simultaneously reduces the load from the weight of the concrete on the rig’s steel members. As the concrete descends under the surface, the walls grow thicker and the spaces grow smaller in response to the increasing pressure of the water. Thus the more enclosed, more protected, more individual spaces lie in the concrete beneath the surface and the larger, more communal spaces exist within the open platforms of the rig.

A monk opens a heavy steel door and descends the stairway. A gust of salty air accompanies him downward. Walls, steps, and ceiling are all concrete, all one. It is dark, and the sound of the monk’s footsteps reverberates through the silence. He turns a corner; a soft blue light filters into the library. Another monk sits at a table and gazes out into the sea. A school of fish drifts back and forth in the current beyond the window. The monk continues downwards through the labyrinthine, windless, subterranean tunnel. Pools of light fall across the textured surfaces; dark corners refuse to delineate the edges hidden within.

The library is located just beneath the surface of the sea, the water outside its large panes of glass softening the strong Southern California sun. The rig has acted as an artificial reef for 112 years, attracting sea life to its protecting frame. Seals, kelp, urchins, and fish become visible in the blue abyss beyond the glass. The monks arrive at the library via a descending, circular path that continues downward to the monk’s cells. Three cells and a washroom are always at the same level as the elevator to allow wheelchair access; all other cells are two steps below the preceding cell. The result is a continual spiral of cells downward into the depth of the sea. Each cell pushes inward or outward slightly, and strips of glazing occur where the cells slip away from one another in plan



E

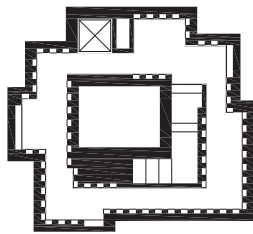


F

“The isolated subterraneousness of the cabin made a certain humming silence to reign there, though it was hooped round by all the roar of the elements.”³²

- D. Monk’s cell
- E. Cells from sea
- F. Below sea level plan

and section, so that each cell has a piece of glazing that wraps from wall to ceiling. The individuality of each cell is professed by this arrangement, yet the cells combine to create a single spiral into the depths – a community of sleeping monks under the sea. The cells are neither connected to the well nor the horizon; their isolation from both archetypes reflects the individual nature of the cells' purpose.



The monk reaches the bottom of the spiral path, beyond the reach of the cells. He steps off the last stair and a surprising texture greets his feet: wood. A dock-like path extends out of sight around the corner. The path never touches the walls, appearing suspended between. At the very bottom of the well, at its very deepest extent, an ungrounded path floating on darkness. Along the walls small alcoves house the dead.

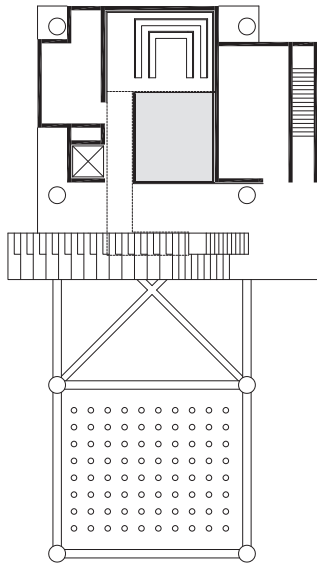
At the bottom of this spiral, seventy feet beneath the surface, lies the columbarium. Here the spiral path comes to its end. Yet it does not simply stop; it wraps around itself to form a loop. The walls, nearly three feet thick, have alcoves that hold the cremated remains of past brothers. The long spiral downwards terminates in a loop; the path can continue without end. The floor of this loop is composed of wood laid in the manner of a dock. The edges of the wood do not meet the walls, instead pulling away to reveal a black space between the two. This space seems endless – its bottom cannot be seen. The path appears to float on a dark abyss.

*"...till at last...the hollow hull
echoed under foot, as if you were
treading over empty catacombs"³³*

G. Columbarium plan
H. Hallway leading to cells

H





I



J

- I. First level plan
- J. Platform Harmony, 2 nm west of Hondo
- K. Approach from the west
- L. Looking into well

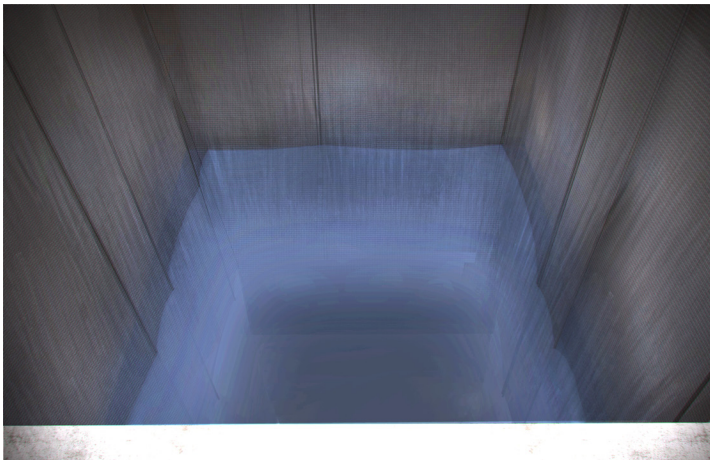
Later, the monk returns from the nearby rig where he's been salvaging steel to be sold on land. He steps of the dinghy and ascends a set of concrete steps. Barnacles cling to the walls of the concrete platform; a gradient of algae demarcates the tides. The underbelly of the rig frames a flat gray sea merging with a flat gray sky. At the top of the steps, another brother cleans fish on a concrete table covered with a slab of blood-stained wood. Above, gauzy layers of fabric extend upwards, cutting through the rusted steel platforms of the rig and vibrating in the wind.

Above the surface, the concrete mass continues upwards to form a platform fifteen feet above mean high tide. A series of concrete steps extends from this platform down to the water, permitting access to and from vessels at all stages of tide. This level supports the ocean-going activities of the monks: fishing, kelp harvesting, vessel maintenance, and their daily labor. To financially support the activities of the monastery, the monks slowly dismantle the neighboring Platform Harmony and sell the salvaged steel. Platform Harmony also stopped producing oil in the mid twenty-first century; it too has lain dormant and neglected. Trappists have traditionally sustained themselves through manual labor: farming, logging, brewing, making. The monks of Platform Hondo engage in this tradition, using heavy-lift barges and torch cutters to gradually bring down the thousands of tons of steel contained in the corpse of Harmony. Beyond economic incentive, the labor allows the monks to travel on the sea, directly engaging with its empty space and impenetrable horizon.

The level immediately above the surface also holds the chapter house. Adjacent to the vertical void, the chapter house has concrete walls on three sides. The fourth side of the chapter house opens into the well, allowing light from above to trickle into the space. Rain drifts down, creating patterns of concentrically expanding circles in the water below. The sea water filling the well undulates up and down according to the tides. Here the monks peer into the depths of the sea. The chapter house is removed from the horizon but connected to the well – it is a place exclusively for the maintenance and formation of community and ritual, and therefore has a relationship to the vertical well of the monastery while excluding the horizon.



K



L

“The sea had jeeringly kept [Pip’s] finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes.... He saw Gods’ foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it, and therefore his shipmates called him mad”³⁴

The monk continues upwards from the chapter house, ascending a set of concrete steps. The steps extend out over the surface of the sea before wrapping back inwards and around the well. He runs his hands against the fabric panels that form the boundary between path and well, peering through the translucent layers into the void beyond. He steps onto the steel platform. A narrow, tall hallway presents itself, enclosed by layers of fabric glowing in the late-afternoon light.

As the monastery continues upwards into the existing rig, its materials transition from concrete to fabric. There is no longer a structural need for the concrete, and with no requirement for acoustical or thermal insulation, there is also little need for conventional walls or partitions. The fabric, woven of carbon fiber, varies in thickness, permeability, and tension according to the requirements of its location. It is translucent, and hangs between the platforms of the rig. The rig serves as mast, tent pole, body. Sail technology and its strategies for creating highly tensioned fabric panels resisting large wind loads are employed in the attachment of fabric to rig.

Yet the use of fabric has resonance in the context of the monastery that far surpasses the utilitarian considerations of its selection. The rig is strong, literally welded into a singular whole; the concrete is also strong, literally poured into a singular whole. Yet just as the horizon needs a counterpoint, so too does the solidity and strength of the rig and concrete. The fabric is that counterpoint: it is composed of many strands, flexible, layered, weak.

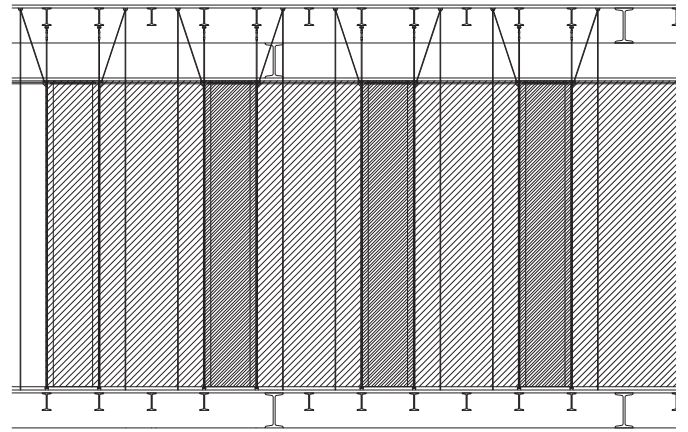
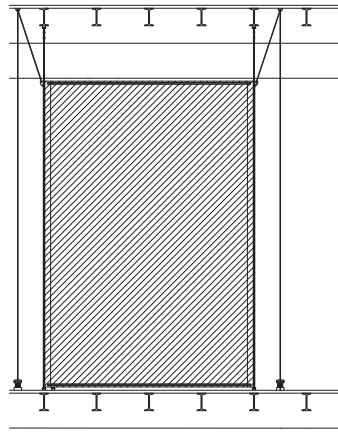
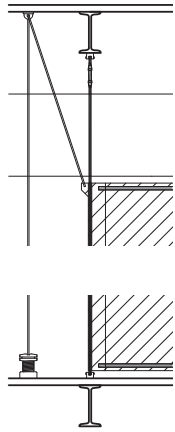
The monk follows the fabric-lined hallway wrapping around the well until it throws him out onto the open platform. Unbroken horizon greets him to the west; a coast obscured in haze lies to the east. He looks back to the fabric wrapping the well. Other monks emerge from the layers of fabric, their shadows playing upon each layer. The wind animates the fabric, causing shadows from steel columns to undulate along its surface.

*“Ahab is forever Ahab, man.”*³⁵

*“I, Ishamel, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs...”*³⁶

M. Fabric Panels
N. Looking into hallway and well

M



N



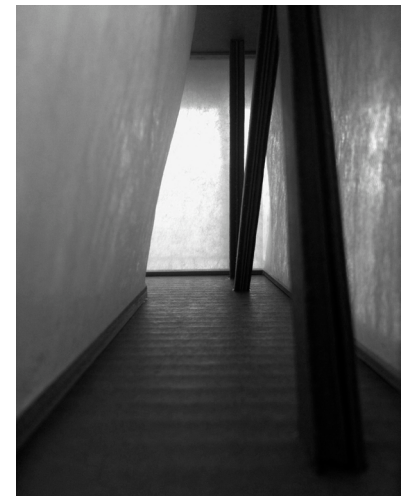
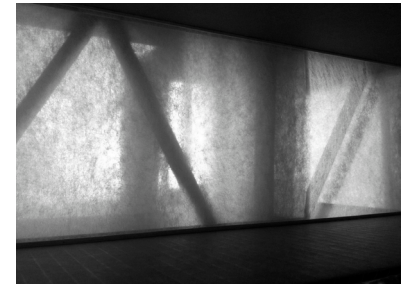


The fabric's physical qualities create a thickened, varying threshold between spaces. It is only in its layering that full division is achieved; a single panel creates separation but allows visual and acoustic penetration. The effect is a blurring of the boundary between horizon and well. That is, the fabric creates an inhabitable liminal condition: between layers of fabric, between the vertical well and endless horizon, between enclosed and open. The spaces enclosed by the fabric are not one or the other, but rather are a bit of both.

The fabric also acts as a register of its environment. In the sun it is translucent; under an overcast sky, the fabric becomes more opaque. At times it lies still, at other times the wind makes it vibrate. Shadows pass through its layers. At night, it glows to reveal the activities occurring within. It catches sun and wind (the inhabitants of empty space) and makes them visible, haptic. In this quality a relationship to Catholicism emerges: the fabric is the blood and flesh of space made incarnate.

And ultimately, the fabric endures through acknowledging its weakness: in a severe storm, each panel can be pulled downward and gathered in a bundle affixed to the floor. Only the concrete elements remain exposed; they are successfully able to resist the storm through their strength. These house the service elements of the program: washrooms, kitchen, storage, tackle room. The altar, dining table, and pews are also concrete. In a hurricane, the monks secure the fabric panels and descend to the safety of their cells beneath the surface while the concrete weathers the storm. Part of the monastery endures through strength; part endures through weakness. The whole endures through both being strong and weak; again, in between.

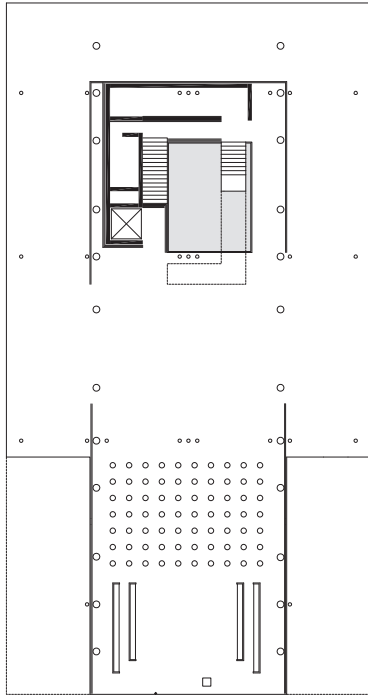
“And heaved and heaved, still unrestingly heaved the black sea, as if its vast tides were a conscience.”³⁸



P

“But the sea will have its way. Stubb, for one, can't fight it.”³⁷

O. Monastery in hurricane
P. Fabric as haptic register



Q

...Other brothers join the monk on the open platform and they enter a field of drill pipes. The density of the steel pipes evokes a hypostyle hall, the columns extending to the bottom of the platform above and plunging nine hundred feet through the ocean and into the abyssal muck below. Bells ring. Southern light penetrates the field of pipes and pulls the monks into the open space of the church beyond. They approach the altar at the very edge of the platform. The monk takes his place in his pew. They open their prayer books and begin to chant, the sun sharpening the horizon to a fine line.

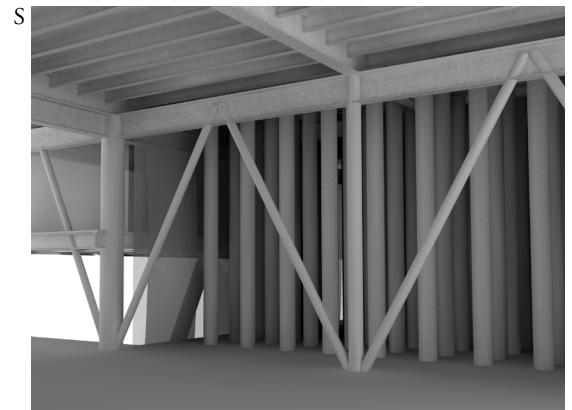
The church itself sits on the far southern edge of Platform Holly. It is the program element most visited by the monks in their daily routine and furthest removed from the vertical core of the monastery. Seven times a day, the monks spiral upwards around and in and adjacent to the vertical space of the well, then move across the open platform, through the array of drill pipes, and finally out to the church on the platform's edge, confronting the horizon. In this procession the monks experience both the empty horizon and the enclosing well.

*"...in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God."*³⁹

- Q. Second Level Plan
- R. Church during *Lauds* (8am)
- S. Field of drill pipes



R



S



T

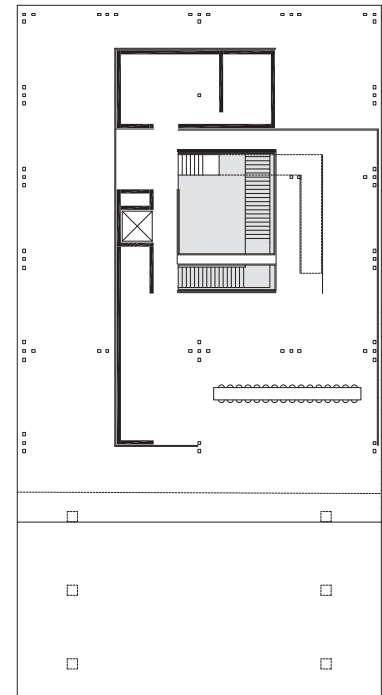
The monk leaves the church and ascends to the refectory, once more spiraling upwards. Here the stairs penetrate into the vertical well; he looks over the railing. Sixty feet below, protected from wind and the reflection of the sun, the sea lies still in the bottom of the well and reveals its great depth. The fabric extends into the water; the monk traces its edges as they disappear downwards.

He passes through another layer of fabric and emerges onto the platform above. Now nearly seventy feet above the sea, he takes a seat at the table and looks at the horizon stretching beyond the garden in front of him.

The second platform of the rig holds the refectory and garden. The concrete core housing the elevator expands to enclose the kitchen, pantry, and cold-storage areas while layers of fabric wrap the dining space. A single, long concrete table lined with wooden chairs run down its middle, framed by the steel members of the rig. The dining space lies between well and horizon, attached to both. In good weather, the monks hoist up the fabric to dine in the open air.

A large vegetable garden fills the southern edge of the platform. Working in the garden is an experience far removed from the insular cells beneath the surface: wide open, fully exposed to sun, rain, and wind, high above the surface of the sea. The garden also exists as a reminder of ephemerality, and as a bit of the earth extended out onto the otherness of the sea. The monks grow a portion of their own produce in the garden, and catch a portion of their own fish. Yet they, and all contemporary monks, still rely on the outside world to sustain themselves.

The monastery produces its own power and fresh water: in the well, located at the low tide line, a door slides across the well at high tide to seal the water in the well. At low tide, a hatch opens and gravity pulls the trapped water back into the sea, turning a turbine on its way. It is a well drawing electricity, not water. The electricity powers desalination processes and the other systems of the monastery.



U

“It was my turn to stand at the foremost-head: and with my shoulders leaning against the slackened royal shrouds, to and fro I idly swayed in what seemed an enchanted air.”⁴⁰

T. Refectory

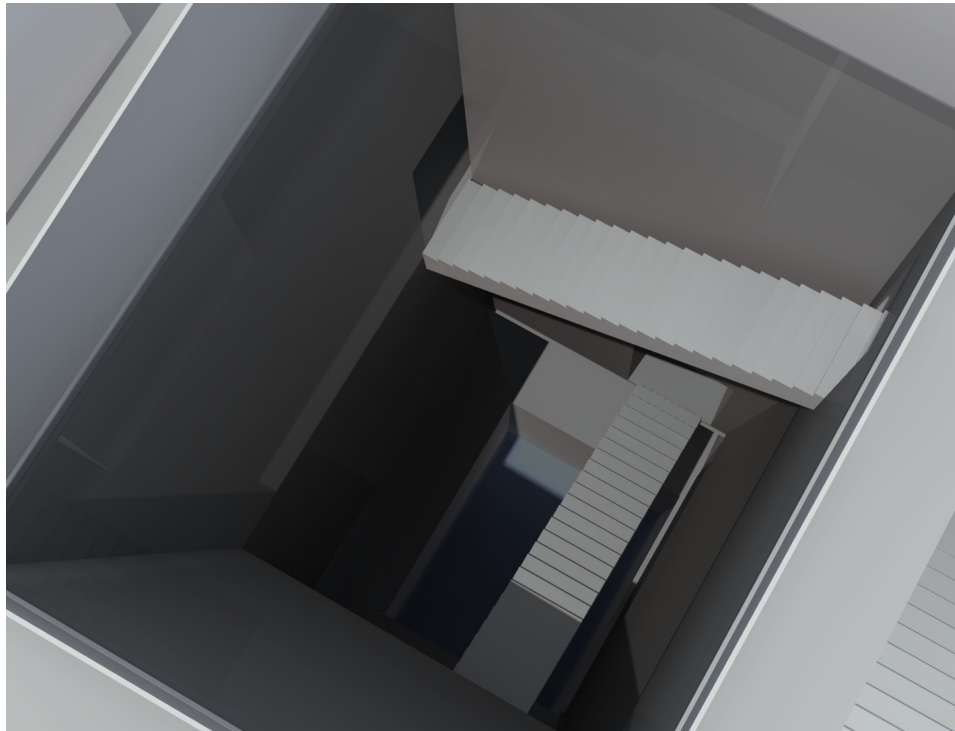
U. Third level plan



V

Far above the turbine, the top of the well opens to the sky above. The path upwards crosses through the well once again and emerges onto the top of the rig. Here the path ends. Industrial detritus, repurposed to serve the needs of the monastery, lies scattered on this uppermost platform. The crane, sitting on the edge of the platform, still unloads supplies from passing ships. This is wholly open space, exposed to the horizon and without protection.

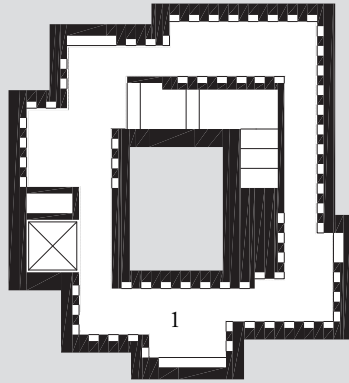
Its edge extends towards the edge of perception, towards the infinitely thin and shifting boundary between sea and sky. Yet thrust through the middle of this platform, the well—with its wholly vertical, enclosed space—plunges into the abyss below. The path connecting them spirals upwards, downwards, inwards, outwards. The horizon pulls the monks ever outward; the well gathers them ever inwards.



W

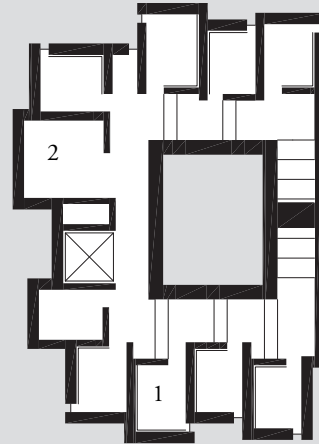
“There you stand, a hundred feet above the silent decks, striding along the deep, as if the masts were gigantic stilts, while beneath your legs, as it were, swim the hugest monsters of the sea.... There you stand, lost in the infinite series of the sea, with nothing ruffled but waves....”⁴¹

V. Top deck; horizon
W. Down the well



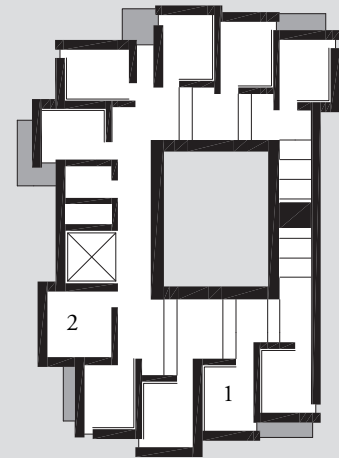
Level -6

1. Columbarium



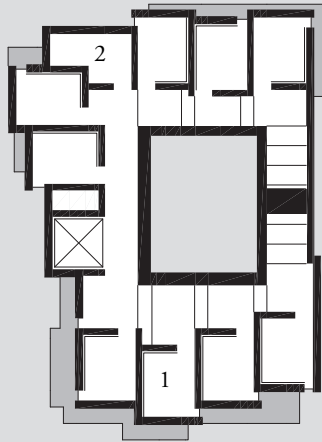
Level -5

1. Cell
2. Washroom



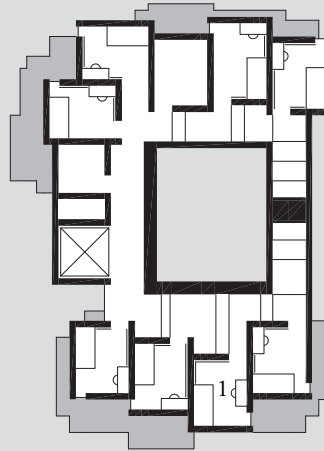
Level -4

1. Cell
2. Washroom



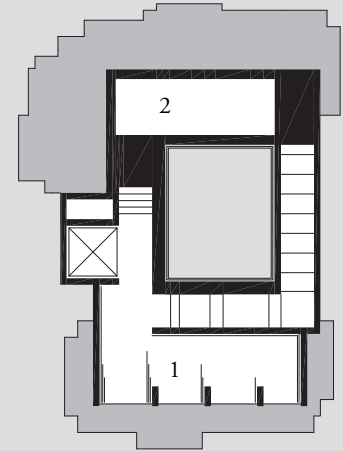
Level -3

- 1. Cell
- 2. Washroom



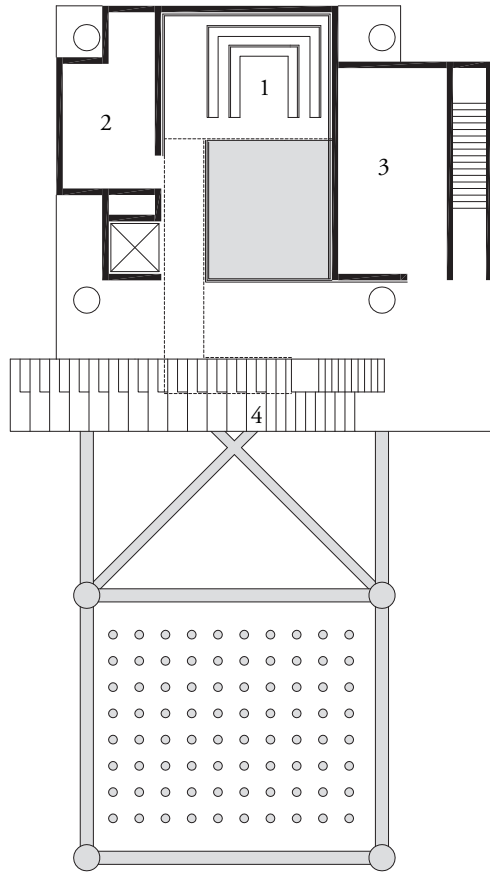
Level -2

- 1. Cell
- 2. Washroom



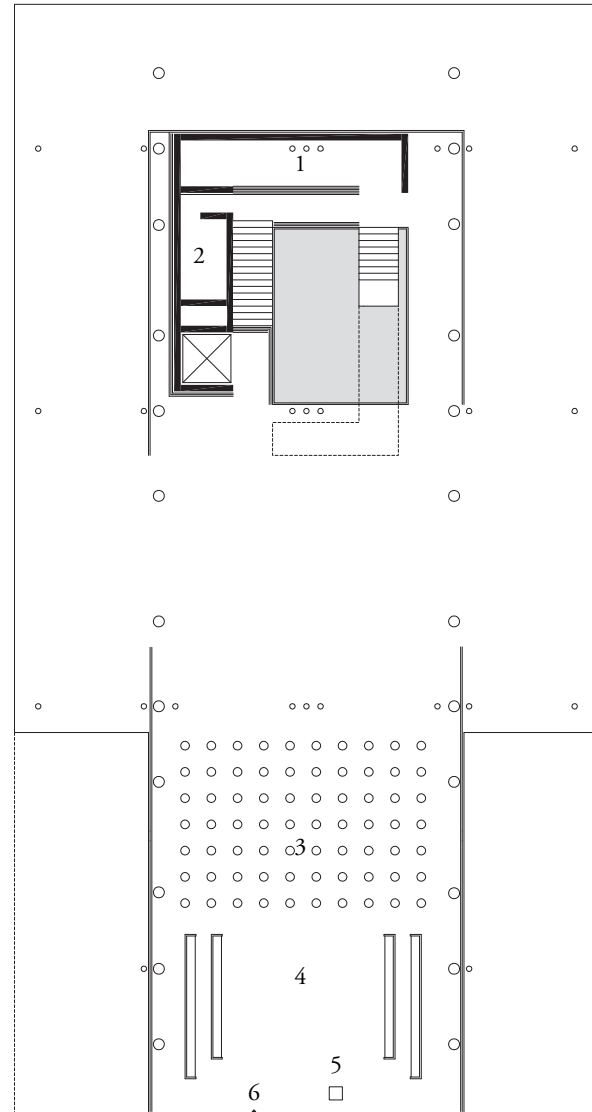
Level -1

- 1. Library
- 2. Turbine Housing



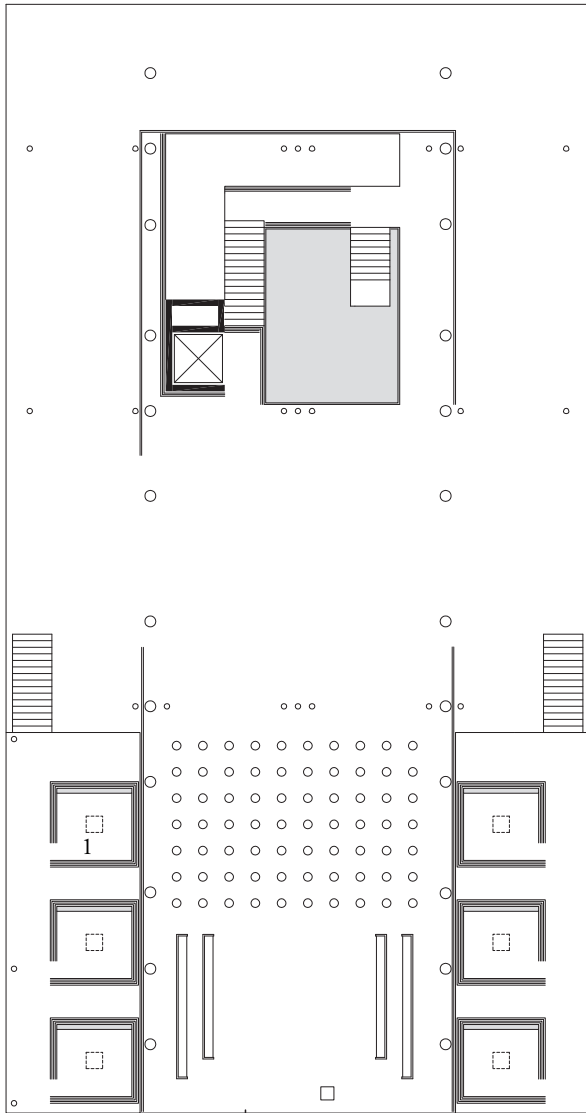
Level 1

- 1. Chapter House
- 2. Storage and Changing Room
- 3. Tackle Room
- 4. Stair Access to Water

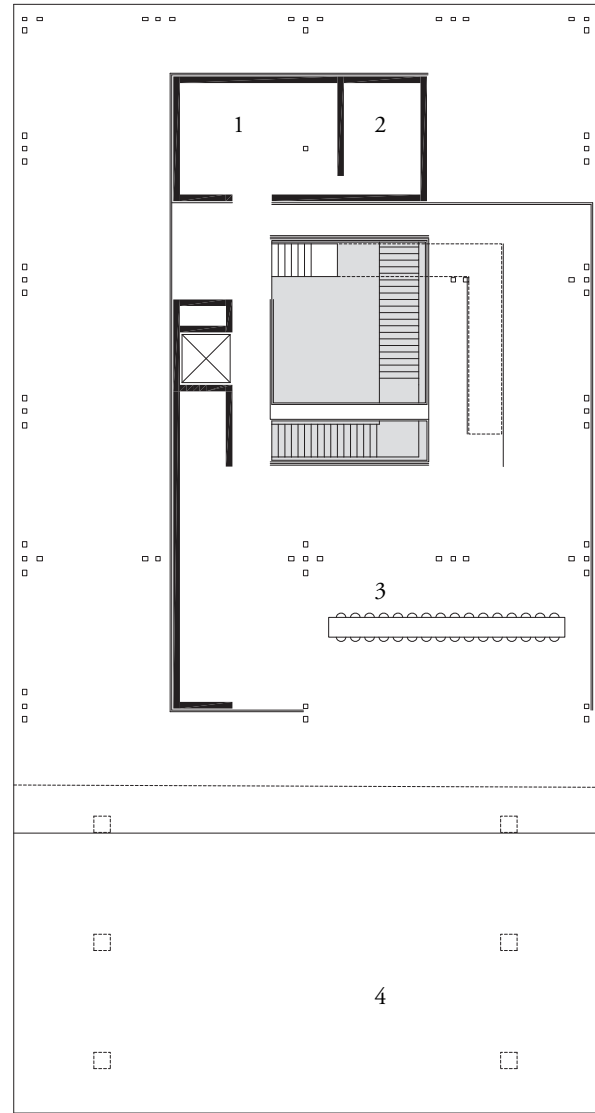


Level 2

- 1. Sacristy
- 2. Washroom
- 3. Drill Pipes
- 4. Church
- 5. Cross
- 6. Altar



Level 2.5
1. Chapel



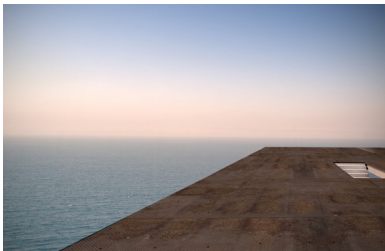
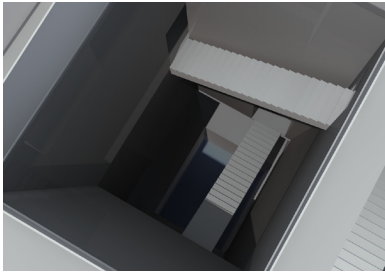
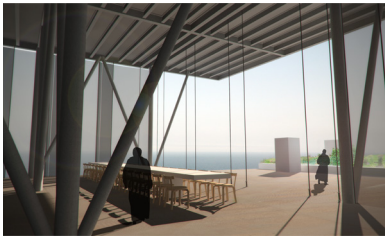
Level 3
1. Kitchen
2. Pantry
3. Dining (Refectory)
4. Garden



5. Surmises

“And all this mixes with your most mystic mood so that fact and fancy, half-way meeting, interpenetrate, and form one seamless whole.”⁴²

-Melville, *Moby Dick*



The sum of these experiences is an existence in between. From cell to church to refectory to Platform Harmony beyond, the daily rituals of monastic life pull the monks through spatial experiences that drift from enclosed to open, horizontal to vertical, horizon to well. The monks constantly engage with both sides of these dialectics. The material and structural articulation of space furthers the liminal quality of the monastery. The strength and haptic qualities of concrete and steel mix with the weakness and haptic qualities of fabric. Layers of translucency create a thickened and constantly shifting threshold between inside and out, horizon and well. The concrete extends up into the steel platforms of the rig while the fabric extends beneath the surface, shifting from cladding to lining. The monks experience all of these qualities, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes in sequence, the resulting whole always setting the monks adrift in the in-between.

The liminal space of the monastery refuses to proclaim what exactly it is or what exactly it represents as it plays between space and time, horizon and well: it is part one, part the other, never fully defined or clearly stated. And so it opens itself to interpretation. Part horizon, part well, the monastery exists as neither one thing nor the other, but rather as some of both. Shifting environmental and perceptual phenomena create further ambiguity as the spaces appear differently at different diurnal and seasonal moments. Experiencing these spaces thus becomes a form of dialogue, as the relationship between person, space, landscape, and time is constantly changing and negotiated.

The significance of this uncertainty and opening into dialogue has been

explored by post-metaphysical and hermeneutical philosophy. The writings of Gianni Vattimo and Hans-Georg Gadamer suggest the significance of architectural space that invites interpretation through existing in a liminal state – the sort of space in the monastery on Platform Hondo.

Gianni Vattimo looks to Gadamer's exploration of the role of interpretation in art. To Vattimo, the dissolution of metaphysics—of the belief that we can appeal to fundamental and unchanging axioms and beliefs—has significant implications for the ontological existence of art (and architecture) and its meanings.

Deducing irrefutable and essential truths was the Cartesian and Kantian agenda of metaphysics. Yet Gianni Vattimo proclaims that this metaphysical project of Modernity has come to an end. As Dario Antiseri describes, Vattimo is aware that “a unique, final, normative foundation – the specific claim of metaphysics – does not exist.”⁴³ Being, or existence, can no longer be thought of in foundational or irreducible terms; further, reality is multivalent, neither singular nor static: “The multiple layers of reality can no longer be reduced to the oneness of a sole first principle, so the possibility has also vanished to think of Being as a stable structure.”⁴⁴ The “strength” of a rational appeal to simple first principles, logical paradigms, and inviolable Cartesian grids yields to an understanding of Being as a historical opening in a horizon characterized by multiplicity and interpretation.

In rejecting these axioms, post-metaphysical philosophy concludes that art can no longer ascribe to fundamental truth for legitimation or enduring significance. In *Art's Claim to Truth*, Vattimo suggests that an alternative lies in a form of de-centering or weakness. In the book, Vattimo argues that dialogue and interpretation determine art's appearance in our consciousness:

“The discourse on the work (or to put it better, discourse with the work starting from the work) is no longer a contingent or superfluous addition to aesthetic enjoyment.... Instead, discourse becomes the fundamental way in which the work of art can be encountered and enjoyed, and all the other acts constituting an approach are merely preparatory.”⁴⁵

Thus it is in a plurality of interpretation rather than a strength of singular concept or appeal to a fundamental truth that gives art its enduring significance. The monastery is neither all well nor all horizon, either of which would be appealing to the strength of a singular concept. Instead, in its existence in between the two qualities, it creates a negotiated and shifting middle ground. As Vattimo writes, “the work can be introduced into our consciousness only if it becomes an object of discourse or better a partner in dialogue.”⁴⁶ In his introduction to *Art's Claim to Truth*, Santiago Zabala carries this idea further. Vattimo, following Heidegger:

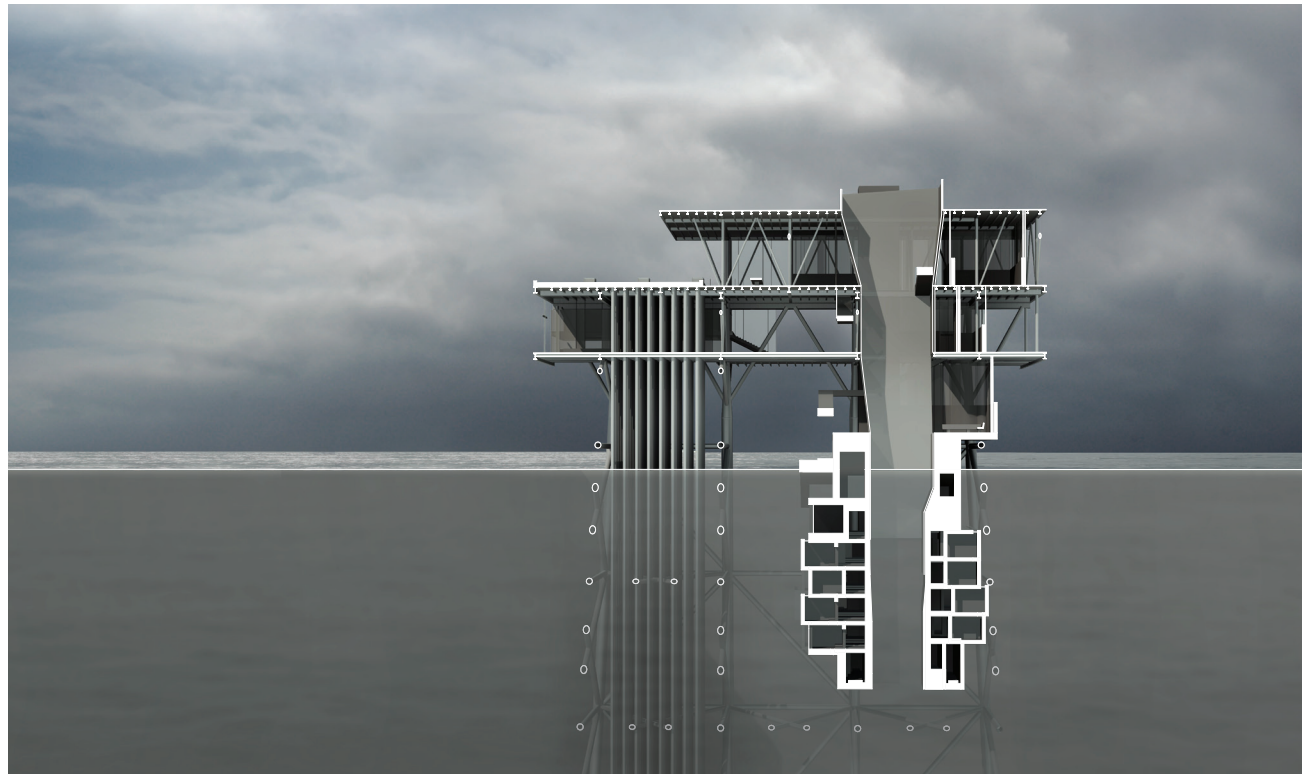
has not only allowed us to ‘question the very *fact* of art,’ but most of all [has] demanded an *interpretive process* that is required to enter into dialogue with the work. In this process, where the work of art becomes a point of departure rather than a point of arrival, we can finally stop asking what art means.⁴⁷

An architecture that exists between two qualities opens itself to interpretation, as its relationship to each opposing quality is dependant on complex and continually changing environmental, perceptual, and personal phenomena. This is exactly what is at work in the monastery: its spaces drift between horizon and well, open space out of time and ordered ritual grounded in time. The result is a weakened and de-centered architecture, as neither one side nor the other is a strong center opposed to a weak periphery.

Further, in opening itself to interpretation, the architecture endures exactly because it permits multiple readings. As Zabala explains,

“This is what Gadamer noticed of those works of art that became classics: they are works that can never be completely understood, not because of their complexity but because the ‘duration of a work’s power to speak directly is fundamentally unlimited.’ ...In this tradition, the works of art that will become classics are not those from which we may obtain information from their propositional truth in order to explain them, but the ones whose interpretation will never exhaust them.”⁴⁸

The interpretive plenitude opens into dialogue between space and person. In the monastery, the richness is found in spatial experiences that play and meander in a constantly changing relationship between empty space overwhelming time and ordered ritual overwhelming space. The monks are always in between; the monastery is always adrift.



Epilogue

“So, floating on the margin of the ensuing scene...I was then, but slowly, drawn towards the closing vortex. When I reached it, it had subsided to a creamy pool. Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, like another Ixion did I revolve...”⁴⁹

-Melville, *Moby Dick*

I.

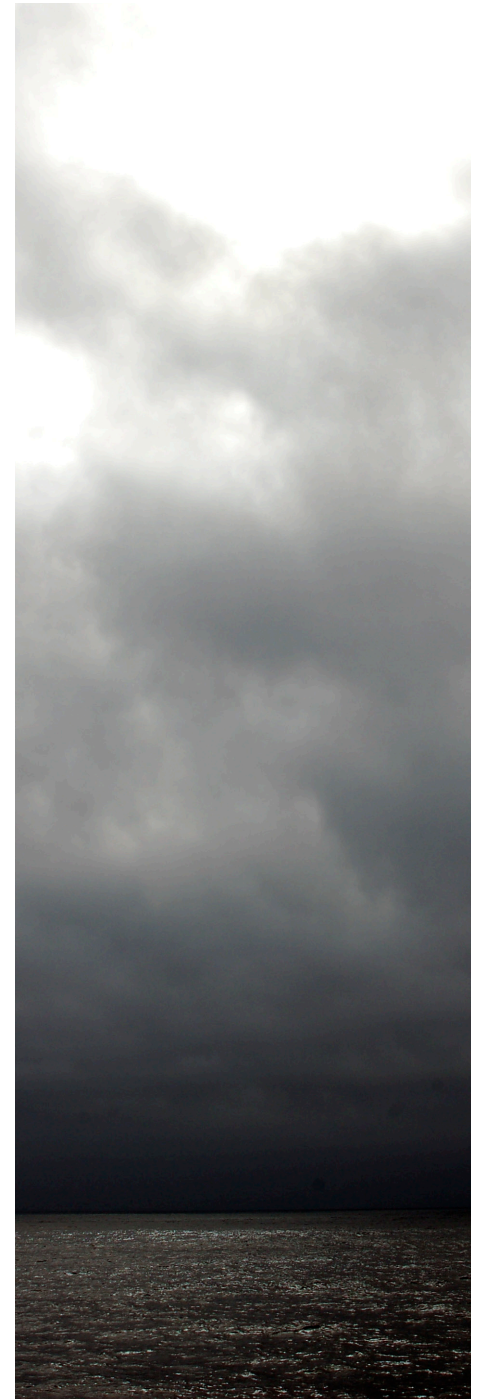
At the end of *Moby Dick*, it is only Ishmael who is left. He survives not because of his strength, but rather because of his weakness: in the final, chaotic moments of the battle with Moby Dick, he is thrown from his whale boat and into the sea. The Pequod eventually sinks, creating a whirlpool that slowly pulls Ishmael in a spiral towards its center. The suction releases; the Pequod slips into the depths. An unused coffin, filled with air, shoots to the surface and becomes a raft. Here at the end, an ambiguous mixing of center and perimeter, sea and sky, life and death.

The forces at work in the landscape of the sea and the monastery cause a similar mixing, a similar de-centering. The monks continually revolve through uncertain territories, drifting between space and time. And in the far future, when the steel of Platform Harmony has been depleted, the monks continue on to salvage the next available rig, expanding their drift ever outwards, towards an ever unknowable horizon.

II.

Ultimately this thesis may be no more about a monastery than *Moby Dick* is about killing a whale. That is, allegory, not solution, can be seen as its underlying foundation. Its issues—emptiness, belief, community, liminality—apply to far more than the design of a monastery on a specific oil platform off the coast of California. In this, the thesis remains open to continual interpretation, dialogue, and relevance.

*“And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol.
Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?”⁵⁰*







Notes

1. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick; or, The Whale*, ed. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 18.
2. Melville, *Moby Dick*, 20.
3. Melville, *Moby Dick*, 367.
4. Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 136.
5. Charles Olson, *Call me Ishmael*, in *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 101.
6. *Ibid*, 18.
7. *Ibid*, 101.
8. Robert Smithson, *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 111.
9. Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 19.
10. Melville, *Moby Dick*, 136.
11. *Ibid*, 331-332.
12. Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, 59.
13. *Ibid*, 19.
14. Melville, *Moby Dick*, 107.
15. *Ibid*, 140.
16. Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. Anthony C. Meisel and M. L. Del Mastro (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1975), chapter 48.
17. Melville, *Moby Dick*, 367.
18. *The Psalms: Hebrew Text, English Translation and Commentary*, trans. A. Cohen (London: Soncino Press, 1945), 107.23-24.
19. Patrick Henry and Donald K. Swearer, *For the Sake of the World: the Spirit of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism* (Mineapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 14.
20. *Ibid*, 21.
21. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Genesee Diary* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976), 147.
22. *Ibid*, 52.
23. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), 325.
24. Nouwen, *The Genesee Diary*, 55-56.
25. *Ibid*, 56.
26. Olson, *Call me Ishmael*, 87.
27. Melville, *Moby Dick*, 167.
28. *Ibid*, 115.

29. Ibid, 284.
30. Jefferey Kipnis, "A Conversation with Steven Holl," *El Croquis* 93, 1999, 11.
31. Melville, *Moby Dick*, 69-70.
32. Ibid, 386.
33. Ibid, 363.
34. Ibid, 331-332.
35. Ibid, 419.
36. Ibid, 152.
37. Ibid, 379.
38. Ibid, 193.
39. Ibid, 197.
40. Ibid, 230.
41. Ibid, 133.
42. Ibid, 373.
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44. Gianni Vattimo, "Postmodernity and New Monumentality," *Res*, no. 28 (1995): 41.
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