

Martha Willette Lewis

The Method of Loci: a primordial memory palace

Sat and Sun Oct 24-25, 2015

Erector Square, 315 Peck St.

New Haven Ct 06511

The Method of Loci: a primordial memory palace is a site-specific installation occupying the office of Mr. A.C. Gilbert, in Erector Square. The office, which was installed in 1923, is normally closed to the public. This special project offers visitors a rare glimpse at this unusual space. ***The method of Loci***, uses the historic building as its starting point and delves into this year's **City-Wide-Open-Studios (CWOS)** theme of *Dwelling* by constructing a rudimentary planetarium in the center of the office. ***The method of Loci*** will be open to visitors only during regular **CWOS** hours during the weekend.

- **The conceptual relationship of this project to this year's CWOS theme of *Dwelling*:**

Where do we dwell? Even our own bodies are terra incognita to us- building, making, changing and forming according to the scripted codes of our DNA and minutely responding to external forces.

All life on earth is carbon based, and all matter comes from the same base ingredients: we are the stuff of stars. The boundary between inside and outside telescopes back and forth and energy is shared, looped, passed on. Things *seem* to be stable but in fact are in flux. As physics constantly reiterates: solidity, structures and boundaries are an illusion. As such, this project engages issues of mortality, embodiment and the temporal nature of dwelling here and now.

Physically, ***The Method of Loci*** consists of a tent-like structure occupying the central axis of the room and creating a temporary sacred kiva to spatially invoke, simultaneously, micro and the macro-cosmic, via a kind of rustic planetarium. The dark interior, which visitors are be invited to cautiously enter, creates a meditation chamber with glittering galactic drawings that are dimly visible, shimmering and rustling subtly.

- **About "Memory Palaces" and "The Method of Loci":**

The Method of Loci (Loci being Latin for "places"), also called **The Memory Palace** or **Mind Palace Technique**, is a mnemonic device adopted by the ancient Romans and Greeks. In basic terms, it is a method of memory enhancement which uses visualization to organize and recall information. Many memory contest champions claim to use this technique to recall faces, digits, and lists of words. These champions' successes have to do with their technique of using regions of their brain that access spatial learning.

- **How is this work a memory palace?**

“In cognitive psychology and neuroscience, spatial memory is the part of memory responsible for recording information about one's environment and its spatial orientation. For example, a person's spatial memory is required in order to navigate around a familiar city, just as a rat's spatial memory is needed to learn the location of food at the end of a maze. It is often argued that in both humans and animals, spatial memories are summarized as a cognitive map.”

(from Wikipedia)

The Method of Loci installation was made to act as a “memory palace” for our oldest memories, creating a locus for inward speculation. The work offers an interactive spatial experience for visitors that includes the structure and the history of Mr. Gilbert’s office, which surrounds it, forming a meta-discourse on the notion of dwellings. The inclusion of **Erector Square’s** architecture as artistic content and matter encourages visitors to view the whole of their **CWOS** visit in a fresh way, expanding the boundaries of “studio” “work of art” “dwelling” and “occupancy”.

Brief narrative texts on the history of the building, it’s products, founder, and his related home are included to augment and enrich the experience- the history is twinned with this space, one a projection of the other.

This installation is a mélange of various shamanistic and magical traditions from various cultures. As such, the word “occupy” is quite intentional, juxtaposing the room’s architectural references to English and European traditions with a temporary shelter that clearly invokes outside reference points such as Aboriginal Sand Painting, Native American ritual structures, African Fetish Objects, and Micronesian navigation maps, to name a few. In particular, Kivas were used by the Hopi Indians as sacred spaces and places for counsel, were usually underground, accessed from above and considered to be “symbolic of the entry to the fourth world, the present world” with the entry way “ “symbolizing the emergence from the other worlds, the home of the Kachina spirits”.

This version is a more temporary take on this idea, a nomadic visitor encamped within the central axis and fireplace of the space. The fireplace/chimney can be seen as the breathing passage of the room- the true entrance and exit of the space, which the artist liken’s to a mind space, Mr. Gilbert’s chosen mindscape being English Tudor.

Pitching a tent within the space itself, with its veneer of old Europe coating the insides of a modern industrial structure, creates a nesting box set (like Russian dolls) of spaces which one can inhabit. By extension, the person inside the meditation chamber becomes yet one more skin, one more vessel, one more porous boundary for containing that which is all around us: atoms, electricity, molecules of water, calcium, iron, in other words: everything and nothing.

As in her previous site specific installations, Martha Lewis is again referencing magic, history, mythology and world cosmology, to connect the various elements in the room to create tethers that connect the outside references to the inside details..

- **Why a planetarium?**

Inspired by stick charts from the Marshall islands which were very abstract “maps” of currents and islands made using reeds and a few shells to learn routes of water currents, and islands in the surrounding seas, this star chart is an abstract schematic meant to focus and locate one back to the primordial matter that we all come from. Womb, sky and cellular memory invoked in this close space invite focus breathing and meditation on ones’ place in the cosmos. The glittering schematics are to guide and orient ones passage through the dark and familiar territory of space and time.

- **About Mr. Alfred Carlton Gilbert :**

The owner and Director of the **A.C. gilbert Company**, who built **Erector Square** and manufactured in it from 1923 until his death in 1961.

A.C. Gilbert was a polymath: a magician, medical doctor, inventor, athlete and big game hunter. As a child he began performing as a magician, doing sleight-of-hand and other illusions on the stage. Before graduating from **Yale** he started the **Mysto Manufacturing Company**, which was to become the largest manufacturer of magical apparatus in the world. After he earned his medical degree from **Yale University**, he won a gold medal in the 1908 London **Olympics** for pole vaulting, having broken the world’s record at the US **Olympic** tryouts. In 1913, He invented the **Erector Set**, a construction toy modeled after the steel girders used in railroad construction. The idea came to him while riding on the New Haven train line, which was then under construction, converting to electricity. By 1935, the **A.C. Gilbert Company** had sold more than 30 million erector sets- it was the most popular toy in the world. He was also deeply interested in the development of real-estate in New Haven, the construction of Maraldene was one of the products of his development projects. He lived in New Haven from 1904 to 1961.

- **About the office:**

The now-abandoned 1923 office features a Tudor wooden skin veneering the interior surface of the industrial building, with a carved fireplace, wainscoting and leaded glass windows. This was all created by the same master craftsmen responsible for Mr. Gilbert’s ornate Ridge Street home, Maraldene, which it is meant to echo. This space is normally not open to the public and offers a rare glimpse in to the historic founder’s intimate work-space, making the project all the more special. Maraldene, was listed by **Zillow** as “North Haven’s most expensive house” when it was recently put on the market. The English-style country estate covered 6,700-square-feet , with six bedrooms, eight bathrooms, a swimming pool, a tennis court, and extensive grounds.

Visitors are asked to:

Kindly be careful and respectful of both the installation and room during their visit. Please accompany all children, holding the hands of visitors under 10 years of age. Please no more than 20 visitors on the room at any one time, and please no touching.

Visitors are welcome to enter the kiva one at a time.

To do so please:

Crawl in gently, sit in the center positioning oneself into a balanced and comfortable position and breathe evenly in and out.

Thank you! There is a guest book for your comments and thoughts.

This project was realized with the help of:

- **Kathi Telman and the Erector Square Management Team** for their kind permission to use this space during the festival weekend.
- **The Eli Whitney Museum** for the loan of Vintage Erector Set Items, all erector set parts are genuine vintage items from their wonderful collection, the artist is indebted to them for their generosity in loaning this equipment.
- **The New Haven Museum**, particularly the library, for their help with historic research which was essential to the fomenting of this project.

and

- **Artspace New Haven** for their support, financial, moral and intellectual of this project.

Martha thanks them all, and is so grateful for their openness and support.