

THE ATLAS AND THE SKYSCRAPER: ON ABY WARBURG AND LOUIS SULLIVAN

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ABSTRACT

J. L. Borges compared Orson Welles's masterpiece *Citizen Kane* to a labyrinth without center, a building expanding horizontally with no limits in space, or synchronically with no limits in time. It may be tempting to compare Warburg's atlas *Mnemosyne* to a building expanding with no limits vertically, or diachronically; but such a building has also a proper name, that of the Tower of Babel, or, if we were to translate it into a now common noun,

a skyscraper. This type of building has its own Daedalus, the great North-American architect Louis Sullivan (1856 – 1924). My paper tells the story of the possible encounter between Warburg and the man who had arguably already invented the skyscraper by the time of Warburg's American journey, and had already built enough to allow a prescient man such as Warburg to imagine what was to come — with the sky, literally, as the limit.

Keywords: Visual arts. Architecture. Aby Warburg. Louis Sullivan. Adolf Loos.

This paper¹ is an homage to the memory of Elsie Altmann-Loos, the widow of the great Austrian modernist architect Adolf Loos (1870 – 1933), who found refuge in Argentina escaping from the Nazis and died while trying unsuccessfully to regain control over the papers of her late husband, which are to this day kept among the priceless collections of the Albertina in Vienna.² I will discuss some images out of that extraordinary archive, so that at least *in effigie* they may return to her adoptive continent, and I will explain how Loos is legitimately part of the story I am going to narrate.

In a 1941 review J. L. Borges famously compared Orson Welles's just released masterpiece *Citizen Kane* to "a labyrinth without a center" — an image he borrowed from one of his favorite writers, G. K. Chesterton:³ "This film is precisely that labyrinth" (Borges, 1941, p. 13). It may be both tempting and fruitful to apply the metaphor to Aby Warburg's work, but I would like to slightly complicate the picture by suggesting that we compare Warburg's unfinished masterpiece, his atlas *Mnemosyne* (Warburg, 2000), to another archaic building type, but one that was during his lifetime, and still continues to be, also the most modern dwelling form, namely, the skyscraper — or, as it was formerly known, the Tower of Babel.⁴

The metaphor of the labyrinth without center applies undoubtedly well to Welles's *Citizen Kane*, having as its main stage the tycoon Charles Foster Kane's fabulous Xanadu palace⁵ and its infinitely reverberating hall of mirrors, whereas the flash-backs that make up the film, all irradiating from its starting moment, Kane's death, and the final word, Rosebud, that he pronounced with his final breath, all converge towards the vanishing point and the missing center of the action: the sled Rosebud that is devoured by fire at the end. The narratives that center around the enigma of Kane's life and death, in other words, could be infinitely multiplied without

¹ This paper is an expanded version of the paper I presented at the Simposio Internacional *Warburg 2019* at the Biblioteca Nacional de Argentina in Buenos Aires on April 9, 2019. I wish to thank Roberto Casazza and the organizers of the symposium for their kind invitation and generous hospitality. I also wish to acknowledge the support of the Center for Humanities and the Arts at the University of Colorado, Boulder, which allowed me to conduct research in the Archive of the Warburg Institute.

² Elsie Altmann (Vienna 1899 – Buenos Aires 1984), internationally renowned dancer, singer, and actress, was Adolf Loos's second wife (1919 to 1926) and sole heir after his death in 1933. That same year, however, she decided to remain in Argentina, where the Nazi seizure of power surprised her while in *tournée*, and spent there the rest of her life, without ever being able to claim her husband's estate, in spite of her protracted attempts in the last twenty years of her life, due to the resistance of the Austrian authorities (Altmann-Loos, 1986, p. 311-318). Besides the memoirs of her life with Loos (Altmann-Loos, 1986), she authored in Spanish a book of Viennese cooking recipes under the ironic-sounding title *Felix Austria. Un libro de cocina. (Recetas y relatos de la Viena imperial)* (Buenos Aires: Mairena, 1985).

³ In one of the Father Brown stories ("The Head of Caesar," in the 1914 collection *The Wisdom of Father Brown*), the amateur detective speculates that "what we all dread most is a maze with no centre" (I quote from the 1915 American edition, Chesterton, 1915, p. 150).

⁴ It may be indeed the most archaic building type, well worth such a monument to *archontology* as the Jesuit and polymath Athanasius Kircher produced with his *Turris Babel sive Archontologia* (Amsterdam, 1679), if we do not consider, of course, Adam's putative "house in Paradise" (Rikwert, 1981).

⁵ Inspired by S. T. Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan" (1816) and its description of Kubla Khan's "stately pleasure-dome": cf. Mankiewicz and Welles, 1984, and Lowes, 1927.

ever unveiling the mystery that is only privy to us, the viewers, in a final moment of insight, a leger-de-main conclusion Welles was never too happy about.⁶

Warburg, it must be said clearly, never doubted that there was a monster at the center of the labyrinth, and saw himself as both Ariadne and Theseus, mapping a way out of the labyrinth we find ourselves trapped in and slaying the monster at the heart of it. Especially in the wake of his own mortal struggle with the ailment that brought him at the end of WWI to the very real entrapment in the mental institutions he was confined to and could only escape in 1924,⁷ Warburg returns again and again to think about the monster, or rather, the *monstrum*, which he consistently summons in Latin,⁸ and *per monstra ad sphaeram* becomes the motto not only for the *exlibris* of the Boll library⁹ that he purchased and added to his own collection after the untimely death of his dear friend Franz Boll, the great historian of astrology, on July 3, 1924, but more in general for his last years, the period he liked to refer to as his “haymaking in a thunderstorm (*Heuernte bei Gewitter*)”,¹⁰ acutely aware as he was that he was living on borrowed time and that “a second Kreuzlingen,”¹¹ a new nervous breakdown, was very much a possibility. A marginal note to the Schifanoja essay, which Warburg added after his return to Hamburg from Kreuzlingen, sums up his concerns at the time: “Catharsis of the monstrous world-view through astral ‘contemplation’; the metamorphosis from the struggle with the monster that demands offerings (*placatio*) to the contemplation of hieroglyphs of fate that disclose the future; from the *monstrum* to the idea.”¹²

Once tamed, the very monsters that threatened even to “devour”¹³ the sphere, may now transform themselves “in leaders in the ascent through the sphere.”¹⁴ This sentence, which Warburg jotted down in a notebook on July 14, 1924, will be quoted almost verbatim in the introduction to *Mnemosyne*, in which the monsters are

⁶ Cf. Welles-Bogdanovich, 1992, p. 53: “‘Rosebud’ was Mank’s [*Herman J. Mankiewicz, who co-wrote the script with Welles*], and the many-sided gimmick was mine. Rosebud remained, because it was the only way we could find to get it off, as they used to say in vaudeville. It manages to work, but I’m still not too keen about it”.

⁷ Cf. my introduction “Tinctura Warburgii”, to Binswanger-Warburg, 2007, 7-25.

⁸ *Monstrum* is a favorite term of Warburg’s, and his usage of the word would deserve a study of its own. It would probably have to start from Jacob Burckhardt, as Warburg himself wanted to assign a dissertation on Burckhardt’s usage of words such as ‘*monströs*’ and ‘*ungeheuerlich*’: cf. Warburg, 2001, p. 103 (entry on June 19, 1927).

⁹ Cf. my “Einleitung” to Warburg, 2008, p. 20-22.

¹⁰ Gertrud Bing’s translation (Bing, 1957, p. 17).

¹¹ Warburg Institute Archive [henceforth: WIA], General Correspondence [henceforth: GC], Fritz Saxl to Max Adolph Warburg, 9 September 1924.

¹² *Katharsis der monströsen Weltanschauung durch astrische “Kontemplation”; die Metamorphose vom Kampf mit dem opferheischenden Monstrum (Placatio) zur Kontemplation zukunfts-offenbarender Schicksalshieroglyphen; vom Monstrum zur Idee* (Warburg, 1988, p. 628): note added to “Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoja zu Ferrara,” *Atti del X. Congresso internazionale di Storia dell’Arte. L’Italia e l’arte straniera* (Roma 1922), p. 179-193; reprinted in Warburg, 1988, p. 459-481. Britt’s translation (Warburg, 1999, p. 733) is, unfortunately, of little service in this instance.

¹³ See Warburg, “*Per Monstra ad Sphaeram*”, p. 79.

¹⁴ *Monstra (ver)wandeln sich in Aufstieg Führern durch die Sphaera* (WIA, III.93.13., fol. [7], 14 July 1924).

directly identified with those produced by the imagination: “the *monstra* of the imagination become decisive pointers to the future”.¹⁵ With *Mnemosyne* Warburg wanted not only to teach us how to dispatch the monster and get out of the labyrinth horizontally, as it were, but, more ambitiously, to point the way out vertically, up to the heaven and into the future. It is no longer just a therapeutic and apotropaic goal that he sets for himself, in other words, but he is actually thinking in architectural, even tectonic terms,¹⁶ and his goal is that of building a new kind of structure, not just a labyrinth to both hide and restrain the monster, as Daedalus’s task had been,¹⁷ but actually a ladder or, with a metaphor that would have only recently become available to him, an elevator¹⁸ to lead us upward and bridge the gap between earth and heaven, as a shortcut to bypass the traditional *gradus ad Parnassum*.¹⁹

We know how the reactivation of the memories of his American journey in 1895-1896 was decisive in bringing about his healing, but our attention has been too narrowly focused on his journey to the Native American reservations, and his encounter with the rituals and disappearing form of life of the Native American tribes. Warburg was, however, more broadly and overwhelmingly affected by the encounter with the astonishing swell of the new American civilization and the new technologies that were changing the face of the American continent and simultaneously documenting that transformation: the train, the telegraph, and photography [Fig. 1, 2 and 3], and we may detect this impact both in his photographic documentation of the journey and the lectures he delivered immediately after his return.²⁰

¹⁵ *die Monstra der Phantasie werden zu zukunftsbestimmenden Lebensführern*: Warburg, 2000, p. 3 (trans. Gombrich, 1980, p. 289).

¹⁶ Cf. a note on February 14, 1924, which turns the etymology of the Latin verb *contemplari*, from the noun *templum*, that Warburg found in Franz Boll’s lecture “Vita Contemplativa”, published in 1920, shortly before Warburg’s essay on Luther in the same series of the *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften*, into a philosophy of history *in nuce*: “The spellbinding of the monstrous through imaginary binding to the tectonics of the temple — *contemplari* (*Die Bannung des Monströsen durch imaginäre Bindung an die Tektonik des Tempels* — *contemplari*)” (WIA III. 93.13., fol. [38]).

¹⁷ An already epigonal version of the myth, as Karl Kerényi convincingly argues in his still enlightening *Labyrinth-Studien* (Kerényi, 1950, p. 34-36).

¹⁸ As Francisco Mujica, the first historian of the skyscraper, put it (Mujica, 1929, p. 21): “The entire history of skyscrapers contains an homage to the inventors of the elevator” — whoever they may actually be: invented either by Elisha Graves Otis in 1854 or by Otis Tufts in 1859 (cf. Bernard, 2014, p. 1-13), the elevator was essential to the upward expansion of the modern building: “Even the creators of the first multistory structures in New York and Chicago emphasized that above a certain number of floors, this means of conveyance was the basic prerequisite for further increases in building heights” (Bernard, 2014, p. 15).

¹⁹ This also applies to Warburg’s own architectural project, the new building for the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg in Hamburg (1925-1926), and may confirm Tilmann von Stockhausen’s suspicion that the technological sophistication of the library — comparable only to that of American libraries such as the Boston Public Library or the Library of Congress (Stockhausen, 1992, p. 107-8) — in which books were automatically transported to the reading room through an elevator and then a conveyor belt, had more “a symbolic value” than an “actual usefulness” (Stockhausen, 1992, p. 101), given the small number of readers.

²⁰ Cf. Warburg, 2018, p. 25-64.



Fig. 1. Unknown photographer
Aby Warburg with the case of his Buckeye Camera lying next to him, near the ruins of San Cristóbal Pueblo, New Mexico, December 1895.
Photo courtesy Warburg Institute, London.



Fig. 2. Aby Warburg
San Francisco Street, Santa Fe, New Mexico, December 1895 or January 1896.
Photo courtesy Warburg Institute, London.
“Typical Santa Fe street sight” with “the high-jutting telegraph pole as symbol of American Culture”
(Warburg, 2018, p. 28)

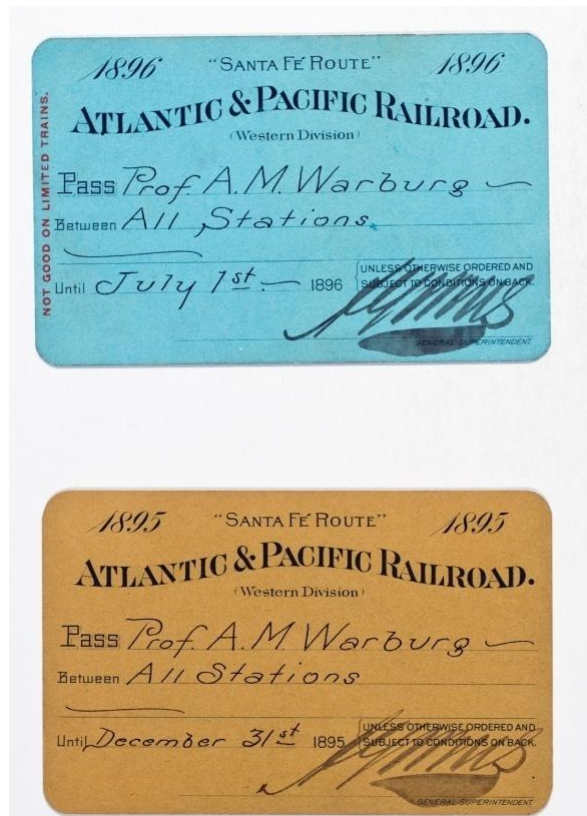


Fig. 3. Warburg Institute Archive
General Correspondence 1895-96 (American File).
Atlantic & Pacific Railroad Passes, 1895 and 1896. Photo courtesy Warburg Institute, London.

A particularly memorable moment is certainly the conclusion of the lecture he delivered in Kreuzlingen with the famous photo of Uncle Sam in San Francisco, the electric line hovering above his top-hat and the neoclassical rotunda in the background [Fig. 4]: “Telegramm and telephone are destroying the cosmos. Mythical and symbolic thinking, as they struggle to establish a spiritualized bond between humans and the environment, create space as devotion-space (*Andachtsraum*) or thought-space (*Denkraum*), which the instantaneous electric connection deprives them of — unless a disciplined humanity restores the inhibition of conscience (*die Hemmung des Gewissens*)”.²¹ Before getting to San Francisco, however, Warburg had met far more forward-looking examples of new American architecture, and in Chicago he had the chance to spend the night in one of the most extraordinary examples of the new style, Louis Sullivan’s Auditorium theater and hotel,²² a magnificent building that still graces the shores of Lake Michigan, contrary to many

²¹ Warburg, 2018, p. 94; the translation is my own, as both W. F. Mainland’s 1939 translation (Warburg, 2018, p. 147) and Michael Steinberg’s 1995 translation (Warburg, 1995, p. 54, which is based on Raulff’s 1988 edition: Warburg, 1988, p.59, and lacks therefore the final clause that Warburg added in pencil), fall short of capturing Warburg’s idiosyncratic and formulaic, indeed almost hieratic German.

²² Cf. Morrison, 1935, pp. 80-110. Dedicated on December 9, 1889, the Auditorium was the joint creation of the two partners in the architectural firm Adler & Sullivan, but there was no question even to their contemporaries, and to the senior member of the partnership, Dankmar Adler, who was mainly responsible for “the business and engineering side of the office work” (Morrison, 1935, p. 83), that “the artistic achievement of the firm of Adler and Sullivan” was indeed solely due to “the individuality of Mr. Sullivan” (Morrison, 1935, p. 84).

others that fell unfortunately victims to greed or disaster.²³ The hotel component of what was a multiuse building, a true “cultural machine,” (Clague, 2006) did not last long, as it turned out not to be profitable enough,²⁴ but it was at the time of Warburg’s journey still a magnet for tourists,²⁵ including his sister Olga, whom Warburg reminds of a happy stay in a letter written on the hotel’s stationery on November 17, 1895 [Fig. 5],²⁶ and another letter from his brother Paul on the same stationery at a later time, in 1901, confirms the family’s predilection for this marvelous achievement of style and technology [Fig. 6].²⁷



Fig. 4. Aby Warburg
 “Uncle Sam”. In the background San Francisco City Hall, Hall of Records and Mechanics Pavilion, San Francisco
 February or March 1896
 Photo courtesy Warburg Institute, London

²³ Another Sullivan building Warburg may have sighted on his way to the American West was the Opera House Block in Pueblo, Colorado, which also combined hotel, theatre, and retail spaces: finished in 1890, it was destroyed by fire in 1922 (cf. Morrison, 1935, p. 117-118).

²⁴ Cf. Clague, 2006, p. 508.

²⁵ As a contemporary advertisement for “the most massive structure in the world, built of stone and iron, eleven stories high, having a frontage on the street of one thousand feet” boasts (author’s personal collection).

²⁶ WIA, GC, Aby Warburg to his parents and siblings, 17 November 1895.

²⁷ WIA, GC, Paul Warburg to Aby Warburg, 15 December 1901.

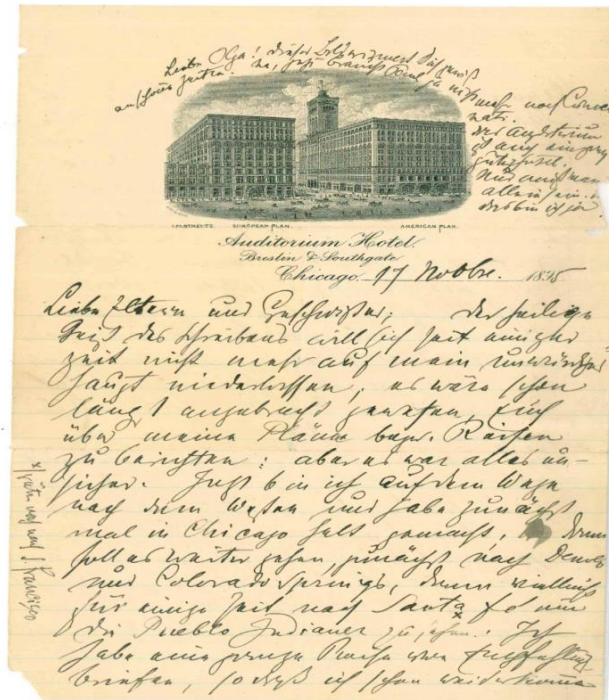


Fig. 5. Warburg Institute Archive, General Correspondence
 Aby Warburg to his parents and siblings, fol. [1r], 17 November 1895.
 Photo courtesy Warburg Institute, London

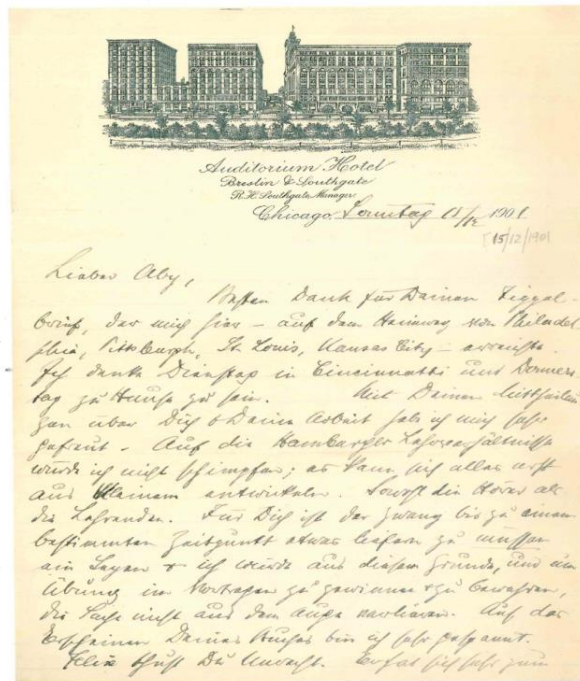


Fig. 6. Warburg Institute Archive, General Correspondence
 Paul Warburg to Aby Warburg, fol. [1r], 15 December 1901.
 Photo courtesy Warburg Institute, London

Writing in 1896 in an architectural magazine, Sullivan explained the revelation that led him to his groundbreaking design: “What is the chief characteristic of the tall office building? And at once we answer, it is lofty. This loftiness is to the artist-nature its thrilling aspect [...] It must be tall, every inch of it tall [...] It must be every inch a proud and soaring thing, rising in sheer exultation that from bottom to top it is a unit without a single dissenting line”.²⁸ Sullivan had not written yet the book that proves even more his affinity with Warburg’s way of thinking about modernity, his *Autobiography of an Idea* (Sullivan, 1924), which was published posthumously, and his polemical writings had not been gathered yet under the title *Kindergarten Chats* (Sullivan, 1934), but his architecture made an eloquent enough statement of the unlimited vistas that a new style of thinking about building and living was opening. American novelist Willa Cather reportedly said that there are no truly human dwellings on the continent between Chicago and Mesa Verde, and Richard Schindler, a recent immigrant from Vienna and Loos disciple, reiterated the assessment in a letter to another great mediator between European and American architecture, Richard Neutra (both Schindler and Neutra ended up in California where they contributed decisively to the development of a new Southern Californian architectural idiom): “The only buildings that testify to any true feeling for the earth from which they spring are the ancient adobe buildings of the first settlers and their successors-Spaniards and Mexicans-in the Southwest [...] Louis Sullivan is the founder of the ‘Western School.’ He was the first to proclaim here that ‘Form follows function,’ and he sets out to give the skyscraper the form that is natural to it. He writes books on architecture, which have yet to find a publisher in America, and his buildings represent the ultimate that is attainable”.²⁹

The letter lends me the *trait-d’union* with Loos that I promised at the start of my text. Such was the admiration the Viennese architects had for Sullivan that they tried to have his writings published in Europe before even they could find a publisher in the US.³⁰ Sullivan’s fame in his own country had already waned by the 1920s and he spent his last few years in very dire financial conditions, depending on the support of former employees and apprentices, such as Frank Lloyd Wright, who always revered the man he called affectionately *lieber-meister*.³¹ I will let his greatest disciple and heir describe Sullivan’s achievement, with a salient quote from the six-page tribute that Wright published in the July 1924 issue of *Architectural Record*, following Sullivan’s death on April 14, 1924: “When he brought in the board with the motive for the Wainwright Building³² outlined in profile and in scheme upon it and threw it down on the table, I was perfectly aware of what had happened. This was Louis Sullivan’s greatest moment — his greatest effort. The ‘skyscraper,’ as a new thing beneath the sun, an entity with virtue, individuality and beauty all its own, was born” (Wright, 1924).

When Adolf Loos submitted the controversial, even scandalous project of a skyscraper in the shape of a Doric column [Fig. 7] for the Chicago Tribune headquarters competition in 1922, he intended it as an homage to the architect he had admired since his own days in America in the 1890s.³³ What Loos had in mind was to build “an

²⁸ “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered” (Sullivan, 1988, p. 108). Cf. Poerschke, 2016, p. 88-92.

²⁹ R. M. Schindler to Richard Neutra, December 1920 or January 1921, in McCoy, 1979, p. 129-130.

³⁰ Cf. McCoy, 1979, p. 44-48.

³¹ See, for instance, Wright’s greatest tribute to Sullivan: Wright, 1949, p. 73.

³² Wainwright Building, St. Louis, 1890-91. Cf. Morrison, 1935, p. 140-156.

³³ Cf. Rikwert, 1996, p. 19-24.

inhabited column (*eine bewohnte Säule*)³⁴ and how did he go about meeting that challenge? By drawing windows on the column, hence by literally opening windows on its otherwise smooth surface. It is a very simple idea, and we may see its very origin in a sketch from the Albertina collection, with the windows that Loos started drawing, without continuing, however, the process to the end [Fig. 8]. Was it merely out of boredom that Loos did not complete the repetitive task, or because it was no longer necessary to continue? Loos has shown us how to follow a rule, his great admirer Ludwig Wittgenstein would have said.³⁵ A similar awareness shines out of the child's drawing [Fig. 9] another great German-Jewish emigré, Rudolf Arnheim, reproduced and discussed in his *Entropy and Art*: "I remember seeing a child's drawing that represented a skyscraper building. The child had begun to put in the rows of windows but lost patience after a while and avoided further labor by the expedient shown in Figure 2. From the point of view of information theory, the child is to be applauded. He has recognized the redundancy of the window pattern and has practiced economy by a shortcut in communication. If his procedure strikes us as amusing, it is because we realize that to display structure to the eyes is the very purpose of a picture. The child's procedure would be quite proper if the drawing were to be dictated over the telephone. One would say: 'make sixty rows of twelve windows each!'" (Arnheim, 1971, p. 18-19). Having seen this image, now we know what to do: we just need to draw and open more windows.

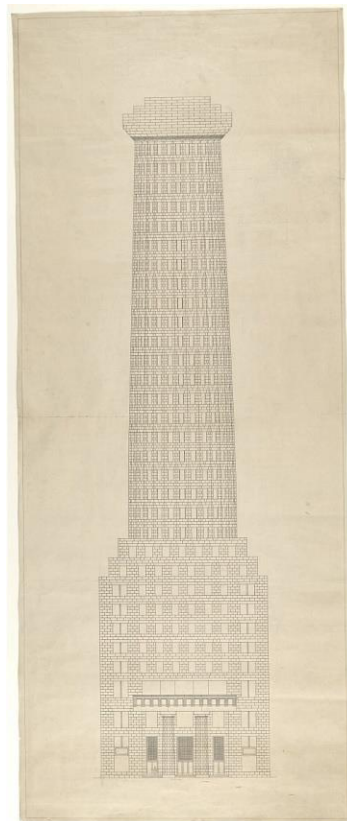


Fig. 7. Adolf Loos. The Chicago Tribune Column, Chicago, front view (1922)
Albertina, Inv. ALA221. Photo The Albertina Museum, Vienna

³⁴ Cf. Loos, "The Chicago Tribune Column" (1923), in Loos, 2010, p. 586.

³⁵ Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §§199-241. For Loos's influence on Wittgenstein and the house he built for his sister Margaret (1926-28), his only architectural project, cf. Wijdeveld, 1994, p. 30-37.



Fig. 8. Adolf Loos. The Chicago Tribune Column, Chicago, first sketch (1922) Albertina, Inv. ALA683. Photo The Albertina Museum, Vienna

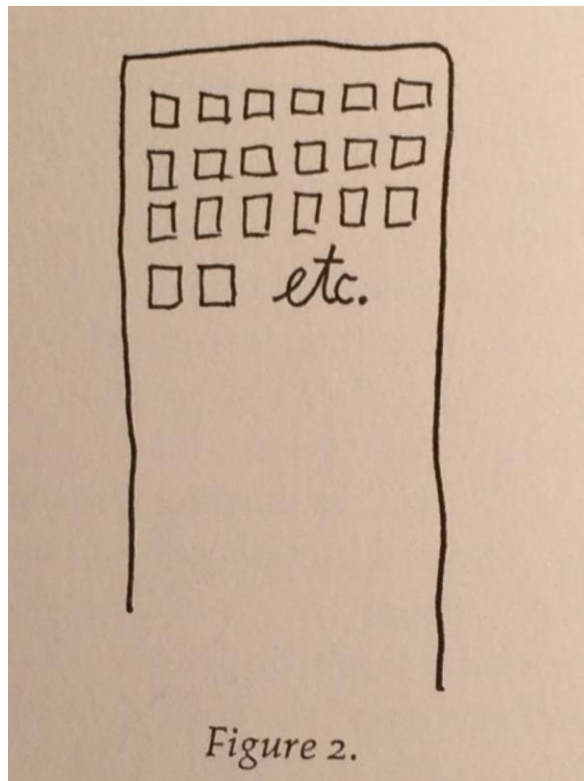


Fig. 9. Rudolph Arnheim. *Entropy and art: an essay on disorder and order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), figure 2, p. 9

I believe we may apply a similar reading method to the plates of Warburg's atlas, if we see each of them as a skyscraper and each individual image therein contained as a window.³⁶ They become then like the sentences of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, the steps of the ladder we need to climb, but we can get rid of once we have reached the top (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* 6.54). What Warburg is teaching us with his atlas, in other words, is not just to remember the past, but rather to open new windows: it is our task to raise up to the challenge and complete his plan. If we do, we may truly turn *Mnemosyne* into an inhabitable and living monument, rather than just a pyramid or a funereal crypt to his creator.³⁷

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³⁶ My lecture in Buenos Aires elicited a response from one of the viewers, Mr. João Carlos Luengo, from which I excerpt the following perceptive remarks "on the nocturnal aspect of the atlas": "every image in the atlas is a lit window in Warburg's dark night of remembrance. An image is, then, a window that has been lit up. [...] If the atlas is also a didactic device, we can [...] think of it as a guide to light up windows as we go along in our Warburgian journey into the night" (June 11, 2019).

³⁷ Frank Lloyd Wright was fully cognizant of such a danger, as he reacted with dismay to the design of a Sullivan memorial proposed by some of his associates: "to me, who had understood and loved him, this idea of a monument to the great Master was simply ironic," and issued the still valuable caveat: "no monument is ever more than a monument to those who erect it, is it?" (Wright, 1943, p. 269).

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