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Hart Crane: The “Architectural Art.”

In the near-century since the publication of *The Bridge* (1930), Hart Crane has been widely recognized as the poet of urban modernity, or, in his own words, as a “suitable Pindar for the dawn of the machine age.”¹ He has been acclaimed as celebrant and critic, by turn, of America’s myth of itself and as a pioneer cartographer of the queer spaces of the modern metropolis.² Paradoxically, perhaps, it is his rendering of the late nineteenth-century Brooklyn Bridge (designed by John Roebling, started in 1869 and opened in 1883), which has been taken as central to his vision of early twentieth-century America’s tensile complexity. I don’t demur from this position; but I do argue that for Crane it was not only the Bridge as manifestation in stone and steel of his nation’s past, present and future, that mattered. As important were the larger technologies, practices, and discourses of architecture which produced the Bridge, determined his experience of it, and shaped his understanding of its significance. Another way of putting this is to say that the Bridge (and *The Bridge*) are necessary, but not entirely sufficient, components of Crane’s construction of modernity and that to understand his emerging vision of America, we need to look to his larger engagement with contemporary architecture in all of its variety and potency.

The purpose of this essay, then, is to bring Crane’s architectural interests to the fore, to address the specificity of architectural allusion in his poetry, and to move beyond an assessment of the Bridge’s symbolic value and towards a more granular reading of the way architecture functions across his oeuvre, of the forms it takes, and the meanings it assumes. It goes without saying that poetry provides Crane with a medium in which to discuss architecture. More importantly, I will suggest, architecture provides him with a way of thinking and speaking about poetry. First in early poems from *White Buildings* (1926) and subsequently in *The Bridge*, he

engages in an assessment of architectural effect while also testing the capacity of poetry to deliver such an account. So, while *The Bridge* is, of course, a poem about the Brooklyn Bridge, it is also a poem about poetry.

Crane is not alone among his contemporaries in reading architecture as an important index of the age.³ Wallace Stevens' idea of order, we might say, is derived in part from his understanding of the aesthetics of architectural modernity (see, for example, the steel cross-beam in the closing stanza of "The Motive for Metaphor," the austere style of "Anecdote of the Jar," and the meditation on use and ornament in "Architecture").⁴ Carl Sandburg, from his *Chicago Poems* (1916) onwards, portrays the materiality of the city's distinctive architecture. In William Carlos Williams' work ("Flight to the City" and "Young Love," for example, from *Spring and All* of 1923), architecture's new dynamism frees the imagination.⁵ Contemporary little magazines such as *Others* frequently featured poetry on architectural themes, including Sherwood Anderson's "Song of the Soul of Chicago" (1917) which echoes Sandburg and anticipates Crane in its opening lines: "On the bridges, on the bridges, swooping and rising, whirling and circling. Back to the bridges, always the bridges."⁶ Each of these poets grapples with new ideas about form, and function or, in architectural critic Sigfried Giedion's terms, with "the ways in which space, volumes, and materials existed for feeling."⁷ But it is Crane, I suggest, for whom the association between poetry and architecture is most potent.

For Crane, the two disciplines are mutually constitutive and interchangeable. In his 1930 essay, "Modern Poetry," he asserts that "Poetry is an architectural art."⁸ And at times, for example in the closing section, "Atlantis," of *The Bridge*, his prolonged meditation on the properties of the Bridge is couched almost entirely in the language that one might use to describe the properties of poetry. He speaks of its upward sweep (the reach towards transcendence), of its

use of line and light (“long tiers of windows” which “crown the hill and gleam”), of sound (whispering, sibylline voices), pattern (flicker, stream), perception, and expression (*Bridge* 104).⁹ The metaphors say as much about poetry’s structure and effect as they do about the Bridge itself. Here, as in the early collection, *White Buildings*, Crane reads poetry and architecture as cognate forms which face similar formal, expressive, and material challenges and which must flex and change with the strain of their load.

I pause momentarily here to outline something of the history of architectural innovation in the United States during the period. Until well into the early decades of the twentieth century, the aesthetic traditions of the Old World (of classical, neo-classical, Gothic and Beaux Arts style) continued to dominate even in a context where new developments in materials and techniques such as load-bearing steel, electricity, and mass-production opened up the possibility of change.¹⁰ The clash between old and new had been particularly pronounced in the designs for the Chicago World Fair of 1893. Here, in a city which was ahead of the curve in its structural use of iron and steel and its embrace of simple lines over complex ornamentation, was to be found a reification of architectural conservatism – of elegant proportions and rich decoration, expressed through traditional materials. Chicago architect, Louis Sullivan, was horrified, describing the exhibition as “a naked exhibition of charlatany in the higher feudal and domineering culture.”¹¹ In the early years of the twentieth century, though, a new view of architecture began to emerge; no longer seen as primarily an artistic practice, architecture might now be understood as a form of engineering, appropriate to the machine age. This change was, in part, informed by innovations in European architecture including the work of the Bauhaus with its emphasis on standardization and its bold and abstract aesthetic – even as such movements were, themselves,

influenced by tendencies in America. Walter Gropius was one of several Europeans to be inspired by the “unintentional beauty” of America’s agricultural and industrial buildings.¹²

By the late 1920s and 1930s, when Crane was working on the poems discussed below, the earliest examples of a distinctive new style could be seen, for example, in Rudolph Schindler’s Lovell vacation house on Newport Beach of 1922-26.¹³ Henry Russell-Hitchcock and Philip Johnson’s “Modern Architecture: International Style” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1932 consolidated and popularised the aesthetic. Their exhibition and its accompanying catalogue featured the work of some forty “modern” architects from around the world, including Le Corbusier, Gropius, and, “by contrast,” Frank Lloyd Wright.¹⁴ It heralded a turn towards simplicity, to clean lines instead of applied ornament, to space instead of mass, and to light and shade as architectural materials in their own right. These innovations coincided, of course, with avant-garde thought and practice in other areas of the arts, including Cubism’s reorientation of perspective, the articulation of lines and planes in geometric abstraction, and the framing of industrial scenes in the work of painters and photographers such as Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler, and Walker Evans (more of whom later).¹⁵

Crane, then, was writing in a context that was shaped by transnational and cross-disciplinary dialogue between architects, commentators, artists, photographers and writers and characterised by architectural complexity and contradiction. The old and the new – in materials, in techniques, and in style – jostled for place. Crane, more even than his contemporaries, was attuned to this dialectic. In “Modern Poetry,” he reflected that “unless poetry can absorb the machine” (by which I take him to also mean modern or machine-age architecture), that is, to “acclimatize it as naturally and casually as trees, cattle, galleons, castles and all other human

associations of the past, then poetry has failed of its full contemporary function.”¹⁶ It is to this task that he applies himself.

White Buildings

Crane was raised in Cleveland, Ohio, and moved to New York in early adulthood (December 1916). There he encountered a tumultuously changing environment at a crucial time for his artistic and personal development. He returned to Cleveland in January 1922 to face the complexities of his dysfunctional family and to earn a living, all the time under pressure to hide his sexuality. It was here, between 1922 and 1923, that he drafted many of the poems in his first collection, *White Buildings*. At the same time, he was beginning to contemplate and draft sections of *The Bridge*, although the longer poem was not completed and published until late 1929.¹⁷ *White Buildings* captures the look and feel of New York and Cleveland during a period of rapid architectural change. At the same time, the pull of the past is evident, perhaps fueled by Crane’s reluctant return to his childhood home. The tension is manifested in metaphors that test the relationship between established or traditional standards and radical new attitudes and practices in the social, architectural, and poetic environments alike.

Although often overlooked, even by architects (as the publisher’s note to the American Institute of Architects, or AIA, guide to *Cleveland Architecture 1796-1958* concedes, a common view among the profession was that “There is nothing in Cleveland”), Cleveland has a rich architectural history, one that shaped Crane’s perception of this and other built environments. Bifurcated by the Cuyahoga River, the city was well-served by bridges, including “a number of prize-winning structures.” At its heart sat “the architectural forms of a vigorous industrial complex” and a number of late nineteenth-century buildings that featured iron and steel frames in

the manner of modern Chicago-style architecture.¹⁸ At the time of Crane's return, Cleveland was undergoing significant remodeling. Local developers, the Van Sweringen brothers, had commissioned a new Terminal Tower complex comprising a hotel, store, offices, and new transit lines to their own Shaker Heights suburb. Construction on most areas started in 1916 with the eponymous Tower following in 1923 at a time when Crane was in Cleveland and working on *White Buildings*. The "sprawling, little-known Terminal Tower Complex provided a prototype for such projects as New York's Rockefeller Center (1926-35)" – itself under construction when Crane returned to New York in March 1923 – and arguably inspired the *White Buildings* of his title.¹⁹ The metonym of white buildings was frequently used in the early decades of the century to signal America's distinctive new cityscape, see for example, "Artistic Aspects of the Skyscraper" in a 1913 issue of *Current Opinion*, which sees the "cluster of white buildings" edging Central Park as a sign of great things to come.²⁰ It also, as Adrienne Brown has shown, encoded a particular set of racial relationships. The apparent whiteness of the buildings served as one among several manoeuvres that established hierarchies of race and place.²¹

Also in Cleveland, and contrasting sharply with the neo-classical style of its surroundings, was the city's own Rockefeller Building of 1905. Described as a "monument of national caliber," its predominantly modern style may have presented the young Crane with a model of architectural innovation. As the AIA guide explains: "The Cleveland building establishes a close harmony between engineering and design. Its cast-iron base retains a Sullivanian efflorescence; but the remaining 14 stories constitute a triumph of machine art, the steel frame becomes the total basis of design."²² In this building, then, is manifested the central contradiction of early twentieth-century American architecture – the use of the materials and

techniques of scientific modernity in the service of a more conventional aesthetic, or a “Sullivanian efflorescence.”

Other examples of Cleveland’s commercial and industrial architecture that emerged from this dialectic and may have informed Crane’s vision include the Sterling and Welch Department Store, designed as “one unit of flowing space,” and the Fisher Body Plant, under construction when he was in the city in 1923, which had a novel “bare-bone concrete skeleton” and exterior walls “filled with brick and glass panels.”²³ The latter provides an additional source for the image of the power plant in section IV, “Cape Hatteras,” of *The Bridge* which has otherwise largely been read as a reference to the Ford Motor Company’s River Rouge plant (Sheeler’s first Ford Plant photographs were taken in 1927).²⁴ In embracing the aesthetic and symbolic value of the power plant over, or as well as, that of the Bridge, Crane is in step with contemporary architects such as Gropius and Le Corbusier, both of whom cited the influence of American industrial and agricultural design on their own aesthetic. Writing in 1927, Le Corbusier enthuses: “Here are American silos, magnificent FIRST FRUITS of the new age. AMERICAN ENGINEERS AND THEIR CALCULATIONS CRUSH AN EXPIRING ARCHITECTURE” (sic).²⁵ This is the age of science and of technological innovation; with it come new possibilities for conceptualizing time and space. As Daniel Albright has shown, modern ideas in the sciences (quantum and particle physics, wave theory) both challenged and stimulated the way poets and other contemporary artists, such as the Cubists, thought about the fundamental structure and operation of their work.²⁶

These debates underpin Crane’s early (January to February 1923) and uncollected poem, “Euclid Avenue.” The title does not specify which “Euclid Avenue” is intended (there is one in Brooklyn, for example), but might usefully be read as a meditation on Euclid Avenue in

Cleveland. This particular Euclid Avenue was close to Crane's family home and was a "major shopping street" lined by "typical neo-classic skyscrapers."²⁷ "Euclid Avenue" opens in *media res* and proceeds through a sequence of disjointed stanzas and often ungainly diction. The poem covertly gestures to the mixture of architectural ornamentation (perches and angles) and commercial function (the sale of crepe and drapes) that characterizes the space in which the first-person speaker finds himself:

Bland (grim)aces Plutarch's perch. And angles

Break in folds of crêpe that blackly drape

The broken door . . . Crouch so. Amend. (*CPHC* 177-8)

The apparent confusion of subsequent stanzas evokes a subject out-of-place, caught in the grip of competing architectural discourses, from the classicism of Plutarch to the modernity of sharp "angles." The poem's rendering of architectural light and shade (black drapes in line six; bleach and milk in line twenty-seven) and of "angles," "curves," and the flat line of the "rail" (stanza two and line seventeen), mark this out as a distinctively modern scene, one which evokes the move towards geometric abstraction in contemporary painting (Picasso, Mondrian, de Stijhl) just as it anticipates the shapes and tones of the new architecture that we see in the final section of *The Bridge*.

Crane, like contemporaries such as Wallace Stevens (see his "Six Significant Landscapes"), assesses the potential of geometry both in its Euclidian and its new, non-Euclidian forms, to contain and express meaning.²⁸ What place is there for poetry (telegramatic language?) in a context where Euclid's norms, conveyed by "angles," and in the implied lines of the "rail," and "boulevard," are under question?

As telegrams continue, write, strike

Your scholarship (stop) through broken ribs; jail

(Stripe) answers Euclid. Einstein curves, but does not

Quail. Does Newton take the Eucharist on rail

Nor any boulevard no more? I say . . .

The “(stop)” and “(stripe)” signal the point and line of new geometric and artistic forms, as revealed in Wassily Kandinsky’s *Point and Line to Plane* (1926) wherein “We look upon the geometric point as the ultimate and most singular union of silence and speech.”²⁹ The ellipsis at the end of the stanza quoted above leaves us on such a moment of silence. Kandinsky’s subsequent exposition of the analogy between geometry and poetry, and by extension between geometry, poetry, and architecture, speaks directly to the concerns of Crane’s poem with its lines, and curves, its suspended “Hexameters,” and its moments of variation and of musicality, such as the rhyming couplet with which it closes. Here, in Kandinsky’s terms:

The rhythmic form of the verse finds its expression in the straight and the curved line, where a regular recurrence is exactly denoted graphically – meter [. . .] the verse develops on recital a certain musical melodic line which gives expression, in an inconstant and variable form, to the rise and fall, the tension and the release of tension.³⁰

The staccato rhythms of “Euclid Avenue,” its relentless caesurae, repeated ellipses, and parenthetical dashes, provide us with just such a pattern of “tension” and “release.” The poem seeks to capture this energy, or the new physics of motion and rest. The architectural allusions

throughout are tacit and oblique, but nevertheless provide an important foundation for the poem's evocation of subjective experience. The closing couplet brings poetic utterance ("right outa my mouth") and architecture ("Euclid Avenue") together in a resounding affirmation of the relationship between the two: "Grabbed right outa my mouth that final chew – / Right there on Euclid Avenue." More properly, perhaps, the blank verse couplet promises closure while the moment of violent dispossession (the grabbing of the "chew") denies any such satisfaction. In this way the tension of the poem – experienced in and through Euclid Avenue's distinctive architecture – persists.

The *White Buildings* of Crane's title signal the modernity of his environment. Louis Sullivan had described the Chicago World Fair as "the White City by the Lake" – an epithet that denoted the misplaced fantasy of a return to neo-classical form.³¹ More usually, whiteness in this period was taken as a sign of architectural innovation and of the possibilities of civic and social renewal. Hitchcock and Johnson, writing in 1932 about the "international style" of architecture avow that "in the use of color, the general rule is restraint."³² Reflecting in *When the Cathedrals Were White* (1937) on his initial encounter with contemporary American architecture, Le Corbusier observes that: "New York is the home of some god of modern life [. . .]. Your towns are painted with white and with intense colors; they have no confining walls."³³ The paradox here, as Brown has recently and skillfully argued, is that the whiteness of this architecture drew much of its value from the perception that whiteness itself was under threat in the racially mixed city. That is; the championing of (architectural) whiteness spoke to a deep anxiety about the anticipated risk of darkness – a risk that the new skyscrapers stood both to challenge, and to exacerbate.³⁴

White Buildings, as we have seen, appears at a time of transition between the architectural standards and practices of the past, and the novel forms of the future. The image of white buildings summons contemporary tropes of architectural lightness, plainness, and transparency or, for Lewis Mumford, writing in 1924, “the clean surfaces, the hard lines, the calibrated perfection” of the machine age.³⁵ For Crane, the white buildings of architectural modernity represent a chance to break open the “spiritual gates” of tradition (see “Emblems of Conduct” (*CPHC* 5)), to confront the old, as reified by the “cellar,” the “closed door,” and the “crevice” of another early poem, “Black Tambourine,” (*CPHC* 5), and to replace these with a clearer and more open vision of the future.

Another *White Buildings* poem, “Praise for an Urn,” written in 1922 and dedicated to the memory of Crane’s Cleveland friend, Ernest Nelson, tests the conventions of architecture in memorial and other forms in its meditation on the poet’s loss.³⁶ The funereal “urn” of the title and the formality of the “crematory lobby” in stanza four determine the poem’s mood and meaning (*CPHC* 8). The careful quietness and hard-won control of the scene are replicated in the formal coherence of the poem’s measured pace. The architecture of such a space is designed to prepare us for what is to come (it “moved us toward presentiments” in stanza three). Even so, what really interests Crane is architecture’s inability to fully impress on the speaker the truth of his friend’s passing. More real to him is an imagined or remembered state, or a “lucid space” (stanza five). The sixth (and final) stanza rejects “well-meant idioms” (I take this to mean funereal, architectural, and elegiac idioms alike) in favor of a rather different message or insight:

Scatter these well-meant idioms

Into the smoky spring that fills

The suburbs, where they will be lost.

They are no trophies of the sun.

The poem works both with and against the grain of elegiac convention in order to establish a new language and form. The allusion to the “suburbs” in the penultimate line is no mere throwaway comment. It evokes the birth of Shaker Heights, the vast suburb of Cleveland built by the Van Sweringen brothers. At the time that Crane was writing, Shaker Heights was growing apace. Between 1920 and 1930, the “population grew by 1,000 percent, and real-estate valuation increased more than five-fold.”³⁷ Crane’s point is, perhaps deliberately, gnomic. Are we to take comfort from this strange, modern form of blessing – from the committal of “well-meant” but presumably meaningless words into the “smoky spring” of the suburbs? Are we to understand that the suburbs are an inglorious place to end? Or that no ritual is sufficient and that the idiom of the past is incommensurate with the demands of the future? The poem, I think, leaves all of these possibilities open. In each and any case, the architectural context, however tacitly evoked, is fundamental to the poem’s depiction of impending (“they will be lost”) change.

Another poem, “Repose of Rivers,” also tests the tropes of pastoral elegy. Probably written in Patterson, New York, in late spring of 1926, it was accepted by Marianne Moore for *The Dial*, but seems never to have appeared.³⁸ “Repose” seeks, at first, to establish a conventional elegiac setting through the sustained assonance of the opening line: “The willows carried a slow sound”; allusions to the soft flowing water in the “seething, steady leveling of the marshes”; the overheard voices of lamentation (in stanza three, the “singing willow rim”), and the invocation of the painful power of memory. Even as it uses these tropes, though, the poem questions or undermines them. The “slow sound” of the willows is, we learn in line two, a “sarabande” (a lively Spanish dance); the river of elegiac convention ceases to flow as it reaches first the “marshes” and then a “pond” (stanza three) and the repose traditionally promised by the

pastoral setting is withdrawn as the speaker is pulled “into Hades almost.” The scene is overlaid and modified by more recent memories of a quite different and modern architectural setting: of “the city that I finally passed / With scalding unguents spread and smoking darts.” This is a startling change of environment, reified in the altered tone and structure of the text (the careful control of the first two stanzas is fractured in line 11 by the single word, “Asunder” followed by a disruptive ellipsis). The effect is to unsettle the easeful commemoration of the past and to reveal the power of the new architecture of urban America to recast, and thus question, the reassurance, or “repose,” of tradition – a tradition centered on the fantasy of agrarian selfhood. Even so, Crane’s poem remains open to the possibility that there is common ground between country and city, past and present, natural and built environments. In the central (third) stanza, the metaphor of the “black gorge / And all the singular nestings in the hills” speaks both to the natural world of valleys and hillsides and, more pertinently, to the figurative gorges, ravines, and cliff faces of the new urban architecture as widely invoked by contemporary commentators.³⁹ The poem’s sustained assonance whereby the plaintive “willows” and “slow” sound of line one echo in the “smoking” of line 19, and where the image of the “sea” in stanza one meets its boundary in the “dykes” of line 21, also suggest a degree of commonality such that in the poem’s closing couplet, the willows and wind of the natural world and the architecture of the city become interchangeable. In this way, contemporary urban architecture assumes the properties, and the affective power, that previously pertained to nature.

Crane’s city is characterized by the harsh electrical illumination of its buildings, the lights of automobiles and elevated trains, and the glow of the new neon signs then proliferating across commercial façades. Neon was introduced to the United States in 1923. A product of the electrical charging of a gas, it was widely known as liquid fire, hence the “scalding unguents”

and “smoking darts” of Crane’s line. A *New York Times* article of 9 October 1927, just a year after Crane’s poem, describes the neon on Broadway’s “Great White Way”:

‘Synthetic electricity’ is what some technicians call the colored rivers of light that go careening round the intricate patterns of a few of the big displays. This synthetic fluid is a rainbow gas confined in glass tubes. In rippling streaks of lights – now faint, now brilliant – it nightly performs its grotesque dance across the face of a sign.⁴⁰

The opening scene of “The River” section of part two (“Powhatan’s Daughter”) of *The Bridge* plays with similar motifs:

Stick your patent name on a signboard

brother – all over – going west – young man

Tintex – Japalac – Certain-teed Overalls ads . . .

and lands sakes! under the new playbill ripped

in the guaranteed corner – see Bert Williams what? (*Bridge* 33)

These signboards are usually taken to refer to print advertisements, for example, for “Certain-teed” building materials (*Bridge* 33, n. 4). But the allusion to the actor Bert Williams, who appeared on Broadway in 1903 (*ibid.* n. 5), and, subsequently, to “Mazda” light bulbs and to Thomas Edison (conflated with Henry Ford in the portmanteau term “Ediford”), coupled with the capitalization of the final lines of the stanza (“SCIENCE-COMMERCE and the HOLYGHOST / RADIO ROARS IN EVERY HOME WE HAVE THE NORTHPOLE”), all suggest that Crane may have had the vibrant letters of the new electric streetscape in mind. His friend, Waldo Frank,

describes the scene in his 1919 *Our America*: “Broadway’s brightness is the sum of advertisements flashing petticoats and constipation-cures against the blackened heavens.”⁴¹ The “smoking darts” of “Repose of Rivers” also evoke the effect of nighttime illumination piercing the often murky sky (Van Dyke observes in *The New New York* that the city “is seldom free from a haze or mist of some sort”) and casting the sharp angles of the new high-rise architecture into relief.⁴² Crane’s metaphor replicates the visual iconography of contemporary artists including Joseph Pennell, Hugh Ferriss, and Crane’s acquaintance, Joseph Stella. Pennell’s rendering of the Singer Building in the early evening, for example, shows it as a white steeple against a dark backdrop, illuminated by a piercing shaft or beam of light from the top right (fig. 1).⁴³ Ferriss’ *The City at Night* from around 1925 similarly casts the architecture in dark relief striated by harsh oblique beams of artificial light (fig. 2).⁴⁴

A slightly earlier poem from *White Buildings*, “Possessions” (September 1923 to March 1924), also explores the boundaries of the organic and architectural environment. This expansive, four-stanza poem opens with a bold apostrophe: “Witness now this trust!” But the ebullient claim on our attention soon gives way to something quieter and more furtive as the poem focuses in on “an hour” and a place (“Bleecker Street”) and finally on the “bleeding” body and inflamed “heart” of the implied speaker of the final line. Like in “Repose of Rivers,” the opening focus is on nature, evoked in fluid, synesthetic metaphors: “Witness now this trust! the rain / That steals softly direction.” This time, though – and here the sibilance is particularly effective – there is something sinister about the scene, something unknown, or queer. The indeterminacy of phrasing and punctuation add to the effect. What does it mean to say that rain “steals softly direction”? And why the inversion? What is the effect of the double parenthetical aside or of the ellipsis that closes the stanza?

And the key, ready to hand – sifting

One moment in sacrifice (the direst)

Through a thousand nights the flesh

Assaults outright for bolts that linger

Hidden, – O undirected as the sky

That through its black foam has no eyes

For this fixed stone of lust . . .

We are left unsure of the setting or of the speaker's position. And we are left knowing that we are unsure. It is tempting, and rewarding, to read the poem as a latent expression of homosexual desire, and of the (thwarted) promise of its fulfilment among the dim, uncanny streets of the city. I would not demur from such a reading.⁴⁵ However, I would emphasize that it is in the architecture of the city that such an experience is realized and, in turn, that it is through architecture that it is most clearly evoked. This queer space offers both stability and uncertainty, familiarity and risk. It allows the speaker to lose and to find himself, to descend into the darkness and to emerge, in the final lines, into the light of the "bright stones wherein our smiling plays."

"Possessions" is sustained by a hidden scaffolding of building metaphors, evocative both of its time and place and, more importantly, of the speaker's alertness to markers of strength in an environment otherwise seen as mutable and unstable. The speaker reaches out for "bolts," "stones," the "screen," and "spires" even as each of these signs of stability is countermanded by images of movement or flux ("flying," "sways," "turning, turning"). The ambivalence of the metaphors (does "bolts" signify a piece of iron work, a bolt of lightning, the act of fleeing, or is it

a phallic image?) further indicates the precariousness of the construction. The idiosyncratic rhyme scheme, with emphatic but irregular half- and internal rhyme, and the resounding full rhymes in the penultimate or final couplets in each stanza (“sky” / “eyes”; “sways –” / “stays”; “spires” / “desires”; “rase” / “plays”) simultaneously emphasizes the latent chaos of the urban architecture, and its claustrophobic affect.

Even more striking is the way the poem aligns architecture with other forms of discourse, both written and spoken. The first line invites us to serve as a “Witness,” or to affirm or attest to the truth of an action, document, or utterance. The point is picked up again in line three where the allusion to “the key, ready to hand” refers simultaneously to a figurative “key” (perhaps to the truth of something), a material “key” (the key to a building) and the keys of a typewriter. The latter possibility, only tacit at first, is sustained in stanza two’s “distant flying taps / and stabbing medley” – again, a subtle metaphor that suggests the sound of the typewriter, the echo of footsteps, and the clanging noises of a city under construction. In this context, we might also read the metaphor of the “stone” in stanza three (“And I, entering, take up the stone”) as alluding to the power of witness (Biblical tablets of stone), to a printer’s “stone,” or to the use of stone, including white limestone, on the surfaces of many of the city’s new buildings. The architectural effect was both dazzling and cacophonous, creating what Stella described as a new “polyphony (never heard before).”⁴⁶ Le Corbusier similarly observed of his first visit to New York just over a decade after this poem was written, that “there are buildings walls [sic] disposed so as to serve as ricochet surfaces for street noise, projecting it a long distance by reflection.”⁴⁷ Architecture, in this sense, speaks. It is like a language. In Le Corbusier’s terms, it expresses “the lyricism of modern times.”⁴⁸ Poet and architect both evoke what Peter Collins was later to describe as the “linguistic analogy” between the two practices.⁴⁹ Crane, though, is as interested in those

moments where the analogy breaks down, or where (poetic) language fails, as he is in moments of congruence.

The final two stanzas of “Possessions” tease out the relationship between expression and silence, presence and absence, and, by extension, between the material properties of the buildings and the “void” that determines their shape. It asks us to consider both the poetic figures (lines, images) and the gaps (or, to revert to “Praise for an Urn,” the “lucid spaces”) that make them meaningful:

And I, entering, take up the stone

As quiet as you can make a man . . .

In Bleecker Street, still trenchant in a void,

Wounded by apprehensions out of speech,

I hold it up against a disk of light –

As this poem shows, space itself is architectural; it assumes dimensions. In Stephen Kern’s terms, it becomes a “positive element.”⁵⁰ At the same time, it engenders a certain kind of dread – the “anxiety or horror in the face of the void” that Anthony Vidler sees as characteristic of modernity.⁵¹ Crane’s speaker remains “trenchant” (assertive, sharp, vocal) in the face of this threat. He may be oppressed almost unto silence, or “wounded by apprehensions out of speech,” but by holding the stone up to the light, he is able to create a sign and to reflect, in the final two lines of the stanza, the “smoked forking spires” of “The city’s stubborn lives, desires.” In the closing stanza, the stones themselves have become “bright,” invoking the neon-lit facades of the modern city’s commercial buildings and the *White Buildings* of the collection’s title.

From the same period, late 1923 and early 1924, “Recitative” similarly, if even more explicitly, takes the queer architecture of the city as a setting and rhetorical resource. The poem opens with unsettling images of duplicity, distorted symmetry, and strange catoptric effects (“Janus-faced,” “glass,” “Twin shadowed halves,” “mercury”). Each connotes the mirroring, glassy look of the modern city with its expansive windows and steel, marble, and limestone surfaces. The first line of stanza four explicitly commands, “Look steadily.” This is an architecture designed to attract attention and to exploit the gaze. In the next line, the exhortation is repeated and we are asked to “watch / While darkness, like an ape’s face, falls away, / And gradually white buildings answer day.” The motif of darkness receding and thereby revealing the city’s startling architecture, or, conversely, of night rising and thereby obscuring the scene is common to the period. See, for example, Stevens’ “The Public Square” from 1923.⁵² Another poem from *White Buildings*, “Lachrymae Christi,” opens with a similar image, this time of Colonial buildings fading into industrial architecture: “Whitely, while benzine / Rinsings from the moon / Dissolve all but the windows of the mills” (*CPHC* 19). Crane deploys architecture (white buildings set against a darkening sky, or structures that darken or are put “out” as daylight emerges, for example, the image from the “Cutty Sark” section of *The Bridge* where “the dawn/was putting the Statue of Liberty out” (65)) to unsettle or queer other apparent – but now fragile – binaries, including those of sexuality and race.⁵³ The new architecture, then, offers a medium for thinking differently about hitherto established norms.

These early poems from *White Buildings* show how important architecture was to Crane as a touchstone for his own experience and vision. The short, incomplete and uncollected poem, “This Way Where November” (October 1924) returns to the theme (*CPHC* 192). In this autumnal poem, which I read as an inverted aubade, the uncanny shapes of the city at night stir

the speaker's imagination. Again we have the curious image of the darkness rising to meet the city just as the buildings – and, here, the speaker – sink into the gloom:

This way where November takes the leaf
to sow only disfigurement in early snow
mist gained upon the night I delved [. . .].⁵⁴

Although not collected in *White Buildings*, “This Way Where November. . .” evidently belongs in the group and shows Crane gaining confidence in his manipulation of architectural motifs. The metaphor of “white buildings” is prominent in the third and longest stanza: “while inside, downward passing steps / anon not to white buildings I have seen,” and architectural features – beams, arches, bevels, steps, courtyards, and vaults – appear throughout. The perspective is different from that of other poems, though. This is an urban space seen, literally and figuratively, from below.

In stanza one of “This Way,” the speaker has “delved” out of sight; in stanza three he finds himself in an obscure courtyard, looking up at a “labyrinth of laundry,” and in the final stanza, in a vault. And although, as I’ve indicated, “white buildings” are mentioned, it would be more accurate to say that they are invoked in their absence or in the negative: “anon *not* to white buildings.” Similarly, the conventional symbolic resonance of architectural style is annulled. In stanza two, the roof is “not arched” and thereby offers no possibility of transcendence while the “edge” of the beam is “not bevelled.” The “beam,” as will become clear in a moment, works in two ways both as a beam of wood or steel and as a beam of light (see figs 1 and 2). Curiously, though, the building’s sheer mass or “bulk” provides not a guarantee of stability but a threat to the speaker’s wellbeing:

For there is a beam across my head;

its weight not arched like heaven full, its edge

not bevelled, and its bulk that I accept,

triumphing not easily upon the brow . . .

Architecture here is ponderous and oppressive. Evoked in clear monosyllables with careful, emphatic alliteration, it permits no ornament or elaboration.

“This Way Where November” offers a meditation on the responsibility of the poet in a world of disturbed or inchoate meanings – of “disfigurement” and “mist,” margins and courtyards. Crane looks to architecture to provide a metaphor but also a salve for his sense of confusion and disorientation. The “white buildings” of stanza three and the “beam” that “triumph[s]” against the odds in stanza two, and “crops my hair” in stanza three, give architectural shape (we recall that whiteness and light were claimed as defining features of architectural modernity) to the speaker’s aspirations. The “beam,” when read as a shaft of light, functions as a kind of annunciation, hence images of “heaven,” “wings,” and triumph, and signals the poet’s capacity to bear witness or to speak truth to power. When read as a beam of wood or steel, though, it bestows a heavy load (a “bulk”) which is experienced as a sobering responsibility.

This is a poem about a winter evening in the city that relies on architectural allusion to evoke the experience of a particular subject in a specific time and place. But it is also a poem about poetry, about what we say, the way we say it, and the requirement to speak honestly and plainly (“not arched,” “not bevelled”) about that experience. The tone throughout is controlled

and purposeful as though architecture were becoming ever more important to Crane as a touchstone for his own developing poetics. The closing stanza continues to draw an architectural analogy (hence “vaulted”) but its primary focus is on the act – the necessity – of reading and on the dangers of mis-speaking:

Vaulted in the welter of the east be read,

‘These are my misused deeds.’ –

And the arms, torn white and mild away, be bled. (*CPHC* 192)

“Deeds” in this context signal both acts of commission and of omission, and written documents (poems?) whose impact and reception remains disturbingly unclear.

The Bridge

After what we might politely call a slow start (Adam Kirsch, paraphrasing Crane’s friend, Waldo Frank, calls it a “great American failure”), *The Bridge* has been widely acclaimed in the years since its 1930 publication.⁵⁵ Tashjian’s influential account in *Skyscraper Primitives* shows how the poem engages with the concerns of machine-age art and culture while recent scholarship such as Paul Giles’s *Hart Crane: The Contexts of ‘The Bridge,’* Thomas Yingling’s *Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text*, and Lawrence Kramer’s annotated edition have further added to our understanding. Nevertheless, there is more to say about the poem in the light, firstly, of the features and tropes I have identified in *White Buildings*, and second, of broader discourses of architecture and engineering as these prevailed in Crane’s time. And while I don’t dispute the stature of *The Bridge* as an affirmative “myth” of American modernity, I want to move away

from a reading of *The Bridge*'s symbolic resonance, and to turn instead to its architectural specificity and situatedness.⁵⁶

Crane is interested in the materiality of contemporary architecture: in “timber,” “iron” (*Bridge* 39), “macadam” (27, 31) and, more explicitly still as the poem proceeds, in “steely gizzards,” “traffic lights,” “derricks, chimneys, tunnels,” “dynamos,” the “looming stacks of the giant power house,” “cupolas,” and “bound cable strands” (75, 4, 72, 75, 75, 85, 127). In this way, his poem engineers its object as it proceeds.⁵⁷ But he is interested, too, in the wider architectural framework (historical, material, topographic, aesthetic) in which the bridge (and *The Bridge*) are positioned and must be read. The artist Joseph Stella, who was writing about the Bridge at the same time as Crane (his “The Brooklyn Bridge (A page of my life)” was privately printed in 1928 and reissued in *transition* in June 1929), similarly emphasises the importance of the setting and of the “conjunction” between old and new to the Bridge’s meaning, drawing attention to the “massive dark towers dominating the surrounding tumult of the surging skyscrapers with their gothic majesty.”⁵⁸ His most famous rendering, *The Brooklyn Bridge Variation on an Old Theme* of 1939 was preceded by his pentptych, *The Voice of the City of New York Reinterpreted*, wherein a painting of the Bridge is just one among five panels that include the port, Broadway, and a view of the city’s skyscrapers, with the Fuller (Flatiron) Building in the foreground. Crane’s *The Bridge* also rewards being read in terms of its material and discursive contexts; that is, in relation to the architectural histories, practices, and technologies that brought it into being, continue to frame it, and determine its final shape and significance.

If we look again at *The Bridge* with an attentiveness to its environment, we can see how important these wider conditions were to Crane’s emerging vision. In describing his practice in

his 1926 “Letter to Harriet Monroe,” he is clear about the importance of context and of the associative connections that generate meaning. The object itself – in this letter the design of some street furniture – is of less importance than the reverberations which arise from the situation in which it is embedded:

It is of course understood that a street-lamp simply can’t beat with a sound like a drum; but it often happens that images, themselves totally dissociated, when joined in the circuit of a particular emotion located with specific relation to both of them, conduce to great vividness and accuracy of statement in defining that emotion.⁵⁹

In the case of the poem, its opening dedication “To Brooklyn Bridge” is as much about the setting or “circuit” as it is about the Bridge. Line three, ostensibly addressed to the seagull seen figuratively “building high” (rising into the sky) gestures also to the tall buildings which were then ascending, or literally “building high,” from the business district at Manhattan’s tip. The location is confirmed in lines six to eight with their reference to:

sails that cross

Some page of figures to be filed away;

– Till elevators drop us from our day . . .

The “page of figures” anticipates a later reference to Wall Street and represents the servitude of the modern office worker who is “chained,” like the “bay waters” of line four. But it also invokes this very poem and its attempt to render in a “page of figures” (the language of metaphor) the poet’s vision.⁶⁰

The reference to the “elevators” acknowledges the significance of one of several technological innovations which enabled the construction of the tall buildings that were already crowding Manhattan. Steam-powered and then electric elevators were popularised by Elisha Otis in the late 1800s and were instrumental in architecture’s upward reach.⁶¹ Originally suspended on hemp rope and later on twisted steel cables (echoed in the “chains” of line four and anticipating *The Bridge*’s sustained metaphor of weaving), the safety elevator deployed a brake mechanism that mitigated the risk of the car dropping down the lift shaft. For Crane’s speaker, being “dropped by elevators” signals the promise of release from the quotidian routine. Significantly, though, Crane’s first draft had the elevator operating in the opposite direction. To Caresse Crosby on 26 December 1929 when *The Bridge* was being typeset, Crane writes:

I have an idea for a change in one line of the dedication to B. Bridge [sic]. If you don’t like it, don’t change it. But I feel that it is more logical, even if no more suggestive. Instead of:

“– And elevators heave us to our day”

I suggest:

“– Till elevators drop us from our day”

I’ll leave the choice to you.⁶²

Thus, in the original draft, the workers are being “heave[d]” up towards, not released down “from,” their daily toil. Had Crane stuck with his original line, “And elevators heave,” we would have had a surer indication of the aspirational and affirmative vision of the poem, with its sights focused firmly upwards. As it is, though, the vignette invokes a different mood. The December

1929 date of the proposed change from “heave” to “drop” registers a tacit allusion to the Stock Market Crash of October 1929. By this point, in other words, instead of stocks (commercial and other forms of value) rising, they are in freefall; thus this poem’s celebration of the city’s and the nation’s place as a centre of trade seems, suddenly, vulnerable. For the elevators to “drop” is only appropriate in the circumstances.⁶³

The metaphor of the elevator, whether “heave[d]” on high, as in the initial draft, or “drop[ped]” as in the final version, allows us to see a further significance to stanza five of this section (lines 17-20):

Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft

A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,

Tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt ballooning,

A jest falls from the speechless caravan.

Often glossed as a depiction of some lunatic’s (bedlamite’s) suicide, the image points more specifically to the belatedly recognised risk attached to the new skyscrapers (a problem that seemed acute during the Wall Street crash). Many, for example the Woolworth Building (1913), or the Manhattan Company Building of 1929-30, had observation decks, or, in architectural terms, paces (Giles notes that “silver-paced” in the previous stanza suggests a raised platform “as in visual terms Brooklyn Bridge is indeed a platform raised above the rest of New York City”).⁶⁴ These had minimal, if any, safety provisions such that the Singer Building’s observation balcony, added in 1908, was popularly known as the “suicide pinnacle.”⁶⁵ With the rise of the skyscraper came an exponential increase in the number of jumpers. Of course, as the rather archaic

reference to “thy parapets” indicates, suicides had long been able to find heights from which to jump, including the Brooklyn Bridge.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the extreme elevations now accessible through new construction techniques coupled with innovations such as elevators provided additional opportunities. In effect, they establish the conditions by which the suicide “speeds” to his fate (line 18), pausing here only “momently” before he “falls,” or, to return to line 8, “drop[s]” from “our day”

The early image of the elevator establishes an important tension in the poem between ascension and decline, freedom and restraint. This is extended in line seventeen by twin allusions to the “loft” (above) and the “subway” (below) and through the apostrophe to the saints and stars in “Ave Maria” and “Three Songs” and, conversely, to “The Tunnel” and underwater realm of “Atlantis.” The tension is of course, embodied in the very structure of the Brooklyn Bridge. As Giles notes, here responding to Trachtenberg: “suspensions are built into Crane’s structure as sure as they are into Roebing’s. The engineering of the Brooklyn suspension bridge depends upon ‘stays,’ parts in tension holding the structure together.” He further observes that in the poem, as in the actual Bridge, “these stresses are implicit not explicit, concealed from public view.”⁶⁷ But I would suggest that these architectural metaphors (elevators, paces, parapets) in fact make this structure visible and that to further strengthen and sustain the scaffolding, the poem establishes a rhythm or cyclical pattern of rising and falling, land and water, night and day, past and present, which enables it to take shape in the imagination. Such repetition is, as Brian Reed notes, an “architectonic principle.”⁶⁸

The ungainly diction of the next stanza (stanza six), where “Down Wall, from girder into street noon leaks, / A rip-tooth of the sky’s acetylene,” further develops the connection, denoted by the plunging “bedlamite,” between contemporary urban architecture and social or psychic

disorder. The “Wall” refers to Wall Street and, more broadly, to the walls of the still developing city, where “girder into street noon leaks.” At the time of writing, the Bank of the Manhattan Company building was nearing completion at 40 Wall Street. With a proposed height of 840 feet, it was in a race to the top with the Chrysler Building and, before long, with the Empire State Building.⁶⁹ Again, Crane’s rhetoric mirrors the visual idiom of contemporary photographers such as Stieglitz and Paul Strand. The light, caught between the tightly packed walls of tall buildings, is concentrated and forms a “beam” or girder that seems to take concrete shape as, for example, in the sharp, oblique shadows of Strand’s 1915 photograph, “Wall Street” (see fig. 3). We are reminded of the “smoking darts” of “Repose of Rivers” and the “beam” of “This Way Where November” The image recurs later in this section of *The Bridge* (line 36) where “we have seen night lifted in thine arms.” This is, again, a strange inversion (night usually descends, not rises), recalling the diametric heaving up or dropping down of the elevator in line 8. Strangely, the “noon” is both solid (akin to a “girder”) and liquid (it “leaks”). The image of the “sky’s acetylene” in the next line (line 22) brings both inferences together by way of the shower of sparks that fall from the welders’ torches as they erect the steel beams and girders that structure the architecture of the modern city.

Crane returns to the theme in “Cape Hatteras”:

Thine eyes bicarbonated white by speed, O Skygak, see

How from thy path above the levin’s lance

Thou sowest doom thou hast nor time nor chance

To reckon – (*Bridge* 79, ll 122-5).

The “Skygak” (according to Kramer, “probably a misspelling of ‘skygack,’ pronounced ‘skyjack’”) was another name for a steelworker. Kramer notes a letter from Crane to Frank of 12 August 1926 about the process of writing the poem in which he declares “I skip from one section to another now like a sky-gack or girder-jack” (*Bridge* 79, n. 49). The identification is anticipated in the preceding lines through references to the sounds of construction work (“thunder,” “banging”) and to the sparks (“bicarbonated white,” “searchlights”) and smoke (“foaming anthracite”) of the welding process (78, ll 118-120), all of which offer an analogy for Crane’s own poetic labor. It is worth noting that the skygacks who erected these buildings would likely have been from Native (usually Mohawk) teams. As Joseph Mitchell was soon to document in his renowned *New Yorker* essay, “The Mohawks in High Steel,” Native steelworkers were instrumental to the growth of the modern city.⁷⁰ At this time, they formed a settlement (the Caughnawaga community) just south of where Crane lived in Brooklyn. It’s likely, then, that Crane has their presence in mind and that their work offered a visible metaphor for the relationship between the nations’s past and its modernity.⁷¹

There is a further allusion to steelworkers in the later section, “Atlantis.” Although more usually taken as a metaphor for the questing hero of the Americas, leading from the mast of his ship, there is also a clear analogy between this Jason – the empire builder – and the laborers of the present day construction boom, suspended atop the lofty steel frame of the new skyscrapers:

And you, aloft there – Jason! Hesting Shout!

Still wrapping harness to the swarming air!

Silvery the rushing wake, surpassing call,

Beams yelling Aeolus! splintered in the straits! (130, ll 37-40)

The confluence here of steel and light (“Silvery,” “Beams,”) invokes the “revolutionary metal” which gilded the spire of the Chrysler Building, then nearing its 1929 completion. The architect, William Van Alen, had “tested it for months, to be sure that no amount of exposure would tarnish its almost metaphysical silver glow.”⁷² So, too, the “scouting griffons” of line 117 (“See scouting griffons rise through gaseous crepe”) suggest the Chrysler’s famous, eagle-like gargoyles glimpsing through the clouds at the top of the building. By yoking the Jason of ancient history with the Mohawk steelworkers and the architectural innovators of the present day and casting all in the dual light of the “silvery wake” of mythology and the “silver glow” of contemporary architecture, Crane asserts the contiguity of past and present as manifested not only in the Brooklyn Bridge, but in the buildings that envelop it. These, too, form part of the meaning of the Bridge and, in turn, of contemporary America.

To take another example – and here again the skygacks provide an important structuring thread, akin to Roebling’s cables – “Powhatan’s Daughter” takes as its ostensible object and theme the figure of Pocahontas, the daughter of Powhatan, leader of the Algonquin. But what is striking about this rendering of a story from the past is the dominance of architectural figures from the present. The specific setting is the harbour and quays of lower Manhattan, rendered real and resonant by the modern buildings that tower above them:

From Cyclopean towers across Manhattan waters

–Two-three bright window-eyes aglitter, disk

The sun, released – aloft with cold gulls hither. (24, ll 31-4)

The reference to Cyclops is straightforward enough. It establishes the theme of crossing (Odysseus’s journey) that pertains throughout the poem and thus summons the mythical past that

Crane is keen to align with the American present. “Cyclopean,” though, also refers to an “ancient style of masonry in which the stones are immense and irregular in shape” (*OED*); the adjective suggests the scale of the new architecture and the conjunction of traditional forms and new materials.⁷³ More specifically still, the “Cyclopean towers” invoke key buildings that had risen “across Manhattan waters” in the years since the Bridge was constructed. These include the Chrysler Building; the Woolworth Building (to which Crane returns at the end of “Three Songs,” with an allusion to the “out of the way-up nickel-dime tower” (99)); the Metropolitan Life Building, built in 1893 and extended upwards in 1909, and the clock tower of the New York Tribune Building, a near contemporary of the Brooklyn Bridge having been built in 1875 and extended upwards in 1905.⁷⁴ There is also, perhaps, a residual memory of the Beacon Tower at Coney Island of 1904-11. Crane’s friends, Waldo Frank and Joseph Stella, were both enamoured of the spectacle there.⁷⁵

Each and any of these buildings provide a source for the image of the “Cyclopean towers” with “bright window-eyes aglitter.”⁷⁶ Several featured lavish fenestration complemented by steel and other alloys to provide a glittering edifice. Some, notably the New York Tribune and Metropolitan Life buildings, displayed enormous clock faces at the top, akin to Crane’s “disk / The sun” that marks the passing of time for all to see. Earlier sections of the poem had already alerted us that time passes. The architecture of the new American city writes that process large, rendering it concrete and visible. Crane touches on the point again in part VII, “The Tunnel,” where the circle burning bright on top of the building suggests these and other illuminated sites:

Be minimum, then, to swim the hiving swarms

Out of the Square, the Circle burning bright –

Avoid the glass doors gyring at your right. (*Bridge* 115)

“Out of the square,” may refer to Madison Square which was overlooked by the Metropolitan Life Tower. The “gyring” glass door signals the still relatively new revolving doors (first patented in Philadelphia in 1888). Although conceived as a way of keeping inclement weather out of buildings, they soon became indispensable for allowing large numbers to easily access skyscrapers.⁷⁷ Thus Crane deploys architectural detail both as a sign of historical continuity and an emblem of change.

The final part of the poem, “Atlantis,” was the first to be written and, as Kramer notes, is “actually the source of the many images it serves to recapitulate” (*Bridge* 126). “Atlantis” reads as a superb invocation of the qualities of the Brooklyn Bridge and its role as witness to, or harbinger of, the nation’s progress. It is the section that focuses most closely on the substance and spectacle of the Bridge itself. Even here, though, the manner in which it is described draws, at least implicitly (or, “obliquely,” to quote line 17) on the signs of architectural modernity that have arisen to gird it in the 50 or more years since it was built:

Through the bound cables strands, the arching path

Upward, veering with light, the flight of strings, –

Taut miles of shuttling moonlight syncopate

The whispered rush, telepathy of wires.

Up the index of night, granite and steel –

Transparent meshes – fleckless the gleaming staves –

Sibylline voices flicker waveringly stream

As though a god were issue of the strings . . . (127, ll 1-7)

Again and again, Crane depicts the properties of the Bridge in the crystalline, glistening, translucent tones that were then coming to prominence in contemporary architecture and that we also saw in *White Buildings*. But the “transparent meshes” of his metaphors – the “frosted capes,” “crystal-flooded aisle / White tempest nets,” “glistening fins of light,” “planet-sequined heights,” “white escarpments swinging into light,” “white choring wings,” and finally “Bridge of Fire!” – also speak to, and form a connection or bridge with, the wider and still-developing architectural context.

As others have noticed, the effect throughout the poem and particularly in the closing section, is musical (hence images of “strands,” “strings,” “wires,” “staves,” and “voices”) but it is also profoundly, ineluctably poetic (the Bridge as lyre).⁷⁸ This final section produces a close harmony by tacitly joining the architecture of the past and of the Bridge with the aesthetic of the new and of the wider environment. As the poem moves towards a conclusion, Crane winds an ever tighter thread around the object of his vision; he musters his figurative resources to show us the Bridge in all of its multidimensional detail. But what he also shows us is that the achievement of Roebling’s Bridge lives on, finds echoes in, and enters into a “whispered” conversation with, the architecture of the present day.

In his 1930 essay, “Modern Poetry,” Crane asserts that:

The poet’s concern must be, as always, self-discipline toward a formal integration of experience. For poetry is an architectural art, based not on Evolution or the idea of progress, but on the articulation of the contemporary human consciousness *sub*

specie aeternitatis, and inclusive of all readjustments incident to science and other shifting factors related to that consciousness.⁷⁹

The closing section of *The Bridge* shows us such an “articulation.” It recognizes, in its treatment of construction detail, the “readjustments incident to science” and opens up a space in which the “shifting factors” of architectural tradition and discourse continue to inflect the Bridge’s and thus the poem’s meaning. It puts into words, animates, and gives poetic form, to “contemporary human consciousness” – a consciousness that comprises not only the Bridge, and not only its mythical and historical resonance, but the specificity of contemporary architecture that informs and sustains it.

¹ Hart Crane, letter to Gorham Munson, March 2, 1923. *The Letters of Hart Crane: 1916-1932*, ed. Brom Weber (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), 129. On the machine age(s), see Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (London: Architectural Press, 1960).

² Dickran, Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives: Dada and the American Avant-Garde, 1910-1925* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), 146. On *The Bridge* as national myth, see Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol*, 2nd edn. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) and Paul Giles, *Hart Crane: The Contexts of 'The Bridge'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). For queer readings of Crane's work, see Niall Munro, *Hart Crane's Queer Modernist Aesthetic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015) and Thomas E. Yingling, *Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text: New Thresholds, New Anatomies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

³ There were also important predecessors including, notably, Walt Whitman. See Kevin Murphy, "Walt Whitman and Louis Sullivan: The Aesthetics of Egalitarianism," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 6.1 (1988): 1-15.

⁴ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 257, 60, 66. For a reading of Stevens and skyscraper architecture, see Bart Eeckhout, "The Invisible Skyscraper: Stevens and Urban Architecture" in *Wallace Stevens, New York, and Modernism*, ed. Lisa Goldfarb and Bart Eeckhout (London: Routledge, 2012), 85-104.

⁵ William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume 1 1909-1939*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), 186, 200, 27, 40. On Williams, speed, and the spectacle of modernity, see Cecelia Tichi, “Twentieth Century Limited: William Carlos Williams’ Poetics of High-Speed America,” *William Carlos Williams Review* 9.1-2 (1983): 49-69.

⁶ Sherwood Anderson, “Song of the Soul of Chicago,” *Others* 4.1 (1917): 3. For more on poetic responses to the changing urban environment, see John Timberman Newcomb, “‘The Housetop Sea’: Cityscape Verse and the Rise of Modern American Poetry,” *American Literature* 76.2 (2004): 275-306.

⁷ Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*. 5th Edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1967), 343.

⁸ Hart Crane, “Modern Poetry,” in *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*, ed. Brom Weber (New York: Liveright, 1952), 260-63 (260).

⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from *The Bridge* are from Lawrence Kramer’s *Hart Crane’s The Bridge: An Annotated Edition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011) and are indicated by the parenthetical reference (*Bridge*) followed by page number. Quotations from *White Buildings* are from *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane: The Centennial Edition*, ed. Marc Simon (New York: Liveright, 2001) and are indicated by (*CPHC*) followed by page number.

¹⁰ The first American school of architecture, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, opened in 1865. Prior to this and even afterwards, architects including Daniel Burnham (New York’s Flatiron building of 1901-3) and William Van Alen (the Chrysler Building of 1928-30) trained at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris.

¹¹ Louis H. Sullivan, *The Autobiography of an Idea* (1924), foreword Claude Bragdon (New York: Dover, 1956), 322.

¹² Giedion, *Space*, 343. See Charles Sheeler's photos of the Ford Motor Factory in *Hound and Horn* 3 (1929-30): n.p.

¹³ Harry Francis Mallgrave, *Modern Architectural Theory: A Historical Survey, 1673-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), 291-2

¹⁴ Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style* (1932) (New York and London: WW Norton, 1995); Henry-Russell Hitchcock, "Foreword to the 1966 Edition," Hitchcock and Johnson, *International*, 19-25 (19).

¹⁵ For an overview see Daniel R. Schwarz, *Reconfiguring Modernism: Explorations in the Relationship between Modern Art and Modern Literature* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997). On Wallace Stevens' interests, see Glen MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art: From the Armory Show to Abstract Expressionism* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1993).

¹⁶ Crane, "Modern," 261-2.

¹⁷ Langdon Hammer and Brom Weber, eds, *O My Land, My Friends: The Selected Letters of Hart Crane* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1997), 3-6, 141, 420.

¹⁸ Committee of the Cleveland Chapter, American Institute of Architects, *Cleveland Architecture 1796-1958* (New York: Reinhold, 1958), 4, 5, 6, 15-16. For a critical overview of Chicago style, see Charles Waldheim and Katerina Rüedi Ray, eds. *Chicago Architecture: Histories, Revisions, Alternatives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Dell Upton, *Architecture in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 205.

Peter Riley's *Moonlighting Modernity: Archives of Distraction and the Labors of American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) suggests another possible source. In 1925, while employed as an advertising copywriter, Crane helped a friend decorate his house. This was "just after he had contributed a catalogue page on Dutch Boy White Lead Paint. Crane was full of ironic praise for the product and bought several containers with him" (188).

²⁰ "Artistic Aspects of the Skyscraper," *Current Opinion* 54 (1913): 321.

²¹ Adrienne Brown, *The Black Skyscraper: Architecture and the Perception of Race* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

²² Committee, *Cleveland*, 17-18.

²³ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁴ *Three Painters of America* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1969), plate 139.

²⁵ Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret), *Toward an Architecture* (1927), trans. John Goodman (London: Frances Lincoln, 2008), 106.

²⁶ *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Science of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

²⁷ Committee, *Cleveland*, 17.

²⁸ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 58. On the relationship between geometry and poetry, see Steinman, *Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987).

²⁹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, pref. Hilla Rebay (1926; New York: Dover, 1979).

³⁰ Ibid., 101.

³¹ Sullivan, *Autobiography*.

³² Hitchcock and Johnson, *International*, 87.

³³ Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals were White: A Journey to the Country of Timid People* (London: Routledge, 1947), xiii.

³⁴ Brown, *Black Skyscraper*, 158-96.

³⁵ Lewis Mumford, *Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization* (1924; New York: Dover, 1955), 83.

³⁶ In a letter of December 25, 1921 to Gorham Munson, Crane explains: “A mutual friend of our’s here recently died [. . .] That funeral was one of the few beautiful things that have happened to me in Cleveland” (Hammer and Weber, *O My Land*, 77).

³⁷ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 169.

³⁸ Hammer and Weber, *O My Land*, 254. On the origins and dating of this poem see Edward Brunner, *Splendid Failure: Hart Crane and the Making of The Bridge* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 246-9.

³⁹ See John Timberman Newcomb, “The Footprint of the Twentieth Century: The American Skyscraper and the Modernist Poem,” *Modernism/Modernity* 10.2 (2003): 97-125, for an account of the spread of such rhetoric.

⁴⁰ Diana Rice, “Stage Managing the Great White Way: A Veritable Army is Required to Keep the Brilliant Nightly Display of the Signboards Active – How the Colorful Pageant Moves,” *New York Times*, October 9, 1927, SM20.

⁴¹ Waldo David Frank, *Our America* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919), 175.

⁴² John C. Van Dyke, *The New New York: A Commentary on the Place and the People*, illus.

Joseph Pennell (New York: Macmillan, 1909), 47.

⁴³ Van Dyke, *New*, plate 28;

⁴⁴ Hugh Ferriss, *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* (New York: Ives Washburn, 1929).

⁴⁵ See Munro, *Hart Crane's Queer Modernist* and Yingling, *Hart Crane*.

⁴⁶ Joseph Stella, "The Brooklyn Bridge (A Page of my Life)," *transition* 16-17 (1929): 86-88 (86).

⁴⁷ Le Corbusier, *When*, 65-6.

⁴⁸ Le Corbusier, *Precisions on the Present State of Architecture and City Planning* (1930), trans. Edith Schreiber Aujame (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 66.

⁴⁹ Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture, 1750-1950* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 174. See also William Carlos Williams' debate with his architect brother in "The Basis of Faith in Art," *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1954), 175-95.

⁵⁰ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 155.

⁵¹ Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 14.

⁵² Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 91.

⁵³ The Statue was lit up from 1916. <https://www.nps.gov/stli/learn/historyculture/liberty-island-a-chronology.htm>.

⁵⁴ Stieglitz's famous 1903 photogravure, *The Flatiron – New York* and Alvin Langdon Coburn's *The Flat Iron Building* (1910) provide two possible referents.

⁵⁵ Adam Kirsch, “The Mystic Word: The Life and Work of Hart Crane,” *New Yorker*, October 9, 2006, 82.

⁵⁶ Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn*, 143

⁵⁷ Just as an architect or engineer like Roebling worked with a team of collaborators, so Crane worked ceaselessly to bring others (fellow poets, publishers, critics, printers, artists, patrons, and photographers) into his practice as he planned, drafted, revised, typeset, proofed, and published.

⁵⁸ Stella, “Brooklyn Bridge,” 87. Crane asked Stella for permission to reproduce as the frontispiece to the first edition of his poem one of this group of five paintings, *The Bridge*, which he may have seen in *The Little Review* (1922) or *The Arts* (1923). However, the painting was not used and was replaced by Walker Evans’ photographs. See Hammer and Weber, *O My Land*, 416, 421 on the late substitution. For more on the relationship, see Barbara Haskell, *Joseph Stella* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1994), 42-3, 81, 105ff.

⁵⁹ Crane, *Complete Poems, Selected Letters*, 238

⁶⁰ Crane worked briefly on Wall Street (October 1928) with his friend, Walker Evans. See Douglas Eklund, “Exile’s Return: The Early Work, 1928-1934” in *Walker Evans*, ed. Maria Morris Hambourg, Jeff L. Rosenheim and Mia Fineman (New York and Princeton: Metropolitan Museum of Art and Princeton University Press, 2000), 29-53 (29-30).

⁶¹ Van Dyke claims that “if there is one thing above another that makes the skyscraper possible, it is the elevator,” *New*, 108.

⁶² Hammer and Weber, *O My Land*, 421.

⁶³ Claudia Roth Pierpont describes the process by which the Chrysler Building’s spire was revealed. “How eerily apt,” she notes, “that the last risky upward rush seems to have taken place on the eve of Black Thursday – when the stock market brought the boundless world that the

Chrysler Building represented crashing down.” “The Silver Spire: How Two Men’s Dreams Changed the Skyline of New York,” *New Yorker*, November 18, 2002, 74.

⁶⁴ Giles, *Hart*, 83.

⁶⁵ Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994), 93.

⁶⁶ Robert Odium who jumped from the Bridge in May 1885 is thought to have been the first to have committed suicide in this way.

⁶⁷ Giles, *Hart*, 83.

⁶⁸ Brian Reed, *Hart Crane: After his Lights* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 214.

⁶⁹ Pierpont, “Silver,” 78.

⁷⁰ Joseph Mitchell, “The Mohawks in High Steel,” *The New Yorker* September 17, 1949, 38-52. On Williams’ use of similar motifs, see Fiona Green, “‘The Iroquois on the girders’: Poetry, Modernity, and the Indian Ironworker,” *Critical Quarterly* 55.2 (2013): 2-25.

⁷¹ See also a later allusion to “slain Iroquois” in “Quaker Hill.” The Mohawk were one of the original Iroquois nations, and although the Quaker Hill section of *The Bridge* is usually taken to invoke a village north of the city (see Kramer 102), there is also a Quaker Hill in Brooklyn, just south of where the Caughnawaga community lived.

⁷² Pierpont, “Silver,” 79. See David Stravitz, *The Chrysler Building: Creating a New York Icon, Day by Day*, intro. Christopher Gray (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002) for close-ups of the embellishments.

⁷³ I thank the anonymous peer reviewer for this observation.

⁷⁴ Lee E. Gray, “Type and Building Type: Newspaper/Office Buildings in Nineteenth-Century New York” in *The American Skyscraper: Cultural Histories*, ed. Roberta Moudry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 92-3; 85-97. Roberta Moudry, “The Corporate and the Civic: Metropolitan Life’s Home Office Building” in Moudry, *American Skyscraper*, 125.

⁷⁵ Haskell, *Joseph Stella*, 42-3.

⁷⁶ Oliver Pilat and Jo Ransome note that in the park, “The greatest single job of illumination [. . .] was the 375-foot-high tower (pure white, as all the Dreamland buildings were pure white [. . .]). This tower furnished a fifty-mile view to visitors who rode to the top in elevators.” In 1906, before the US Department of Lighthouses intervened, the Tower fleetingly sported a “powerful searchlight.” *Sodom by the Sea: An Affectionate History of Coney Island* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1941), 162, 168.

⁷⁷ Alan Beardmore, *The Revolving Door Since 1881: Architecture in Detail* (Holland: Boon Edam, 2000), 28.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Giles, *Hart*, 98-104.

⁷⁹ Crane, *Complete Poems, Selected Letters*, 260.