

Mandala and metaphor

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Iâ??m on sabbatical as I write this, and taking the opportunity to research AI in the urban context as I travel. Here I am in Central Java, at Borobudur for the first time. This trip was prompted by my early work with Adrian Snodgrass, with whom I joint authored the book *Interpretation in Architecture* in 2006. It includes a chapter by Adrian entitled â??Myth, mandala and metaphor,â?• which in turn is derived from several papers by Adrian listed in the Bibliography below.

Drawing on various sources, mostly from hermeneutical studies, Adrian maintained that

> â??myth, functioning as a mode of being-in-the-world, acts to bond both individuals and societies with the world of everyday experience. Taken in this sense, myth is an essential component of both individual and societal understandingâ?• (187).

Myth is a key component in our understanding of traditional architectures. In the chapter he made clear though that to understand and learn from traditional architectures (particularly that of East Asia) and to restore the potency of myth, we need to develop an understanding that builds on our own particular intellectual standpoints.

He transitions to a consideration of metaphor, as a contemporary set of theoretical understandings developed in language and cognitive science. He makes the strong case that metaphor

> â??operates not only in the understanding of language and texts, but also in the understanding of sensation, cognition and logic. Processes of metaphorical understanding are radically fundamental to all human perception, thought and action. Metaphor, functioning by way of the
> hermeneutical circle, is â??priorâ?? to the use of logic, formal languages and scientific method; it is a primordial mode of rationality. Oneâ??s whole life can be seen as an ongoing process of understanding, of interpreting experiences by way of metaphorâ?• (188).

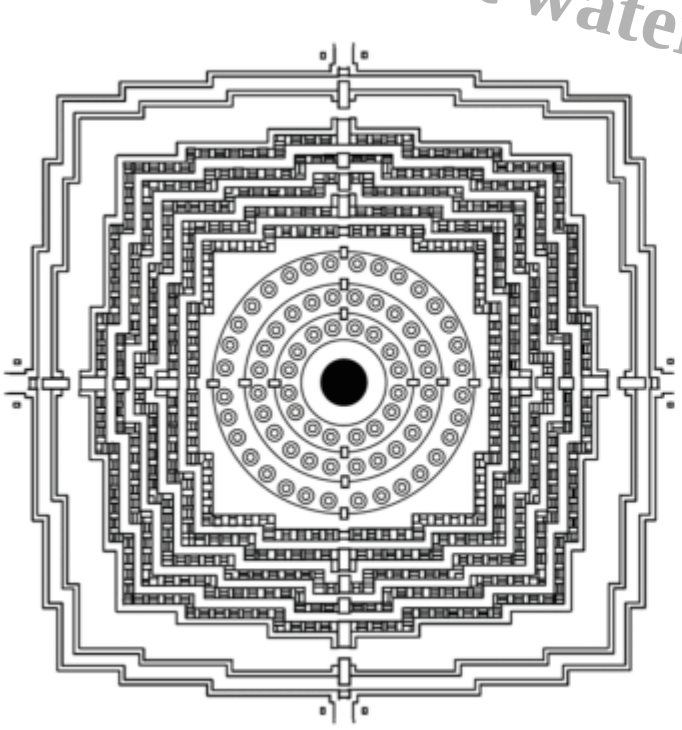
He demonstrates how certain traditional forms make explicit the embodied and metaphorical nature of architecture at its best. The mandala form, as exemplified in Borobudur, makes explicit certain features of our embodied experience, by providing

- a centred space, bounded by a defined periphery (centreâ??periphery);
- a defined space, bounded from out of an indefinite extension (insideâ??outside);
- a space oriented to the six directions (upâ??down, leftâ??right, frontâ??back);
- a space which graphs a path from the periphery to the centre;
- a chronograph, which maps the cycles of time;
- a graph of an interacting balance of cosmic forces.

Documenting Borobudur

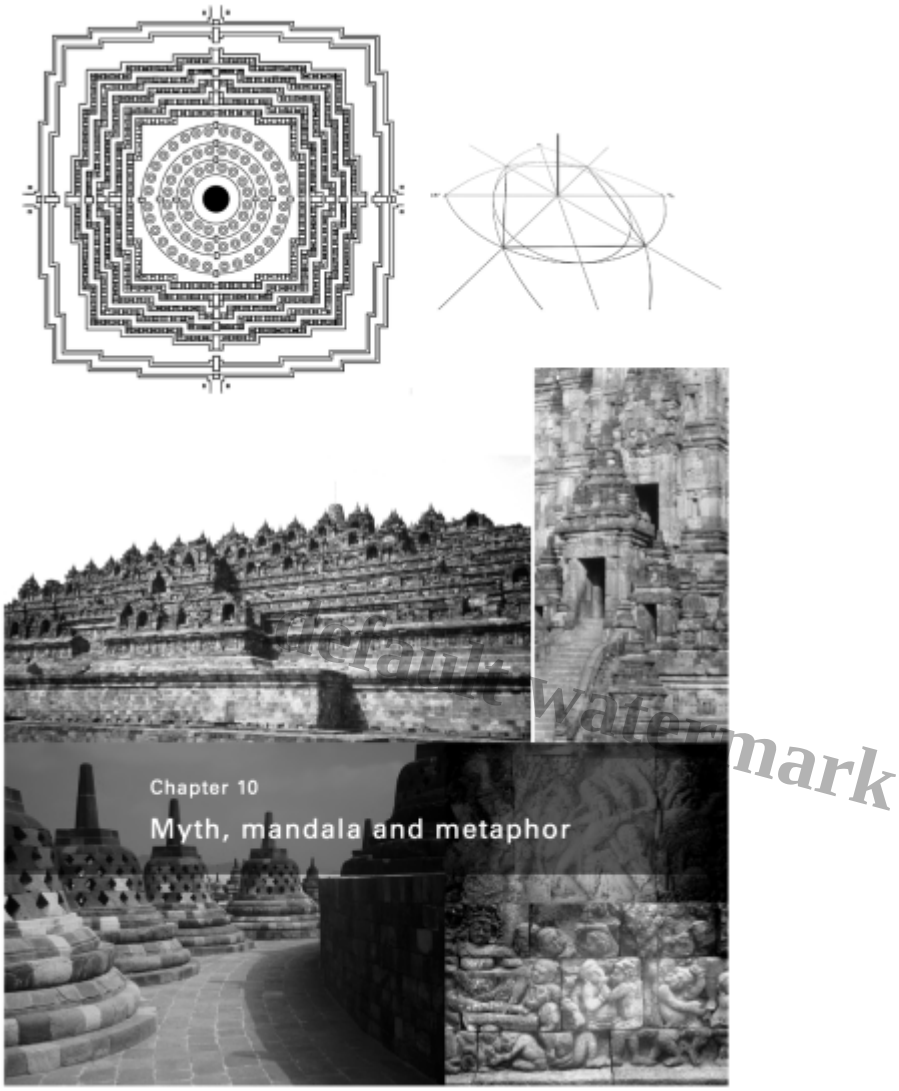
My contribution to this chapter involved some minor edits and the graphic elements on the chapter title page. I redrew the plan of the Borobudur Mandela from several textbooks, and conveniently rendered the central rings of stupas as forming close to circles, whereas itâ??s not like that from the air (via Google Earth).

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Hereâ??s the title page of the chapter. Photographs were by Stephen Cairns.



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Borobudur now

Here are some of my own collection taken while at the heritage site yesterday. Visitors can no longer access the terraces. I think that several factors overwhelm the visitorâ??s experience. Repeat visits, study and contemplation on its qualities as an alien and â??otherâ?• form of architecture may eventually allow it to speak to us.

In the mean time we have to be content with marvelling at its scale, wondering at the politics and power of its construction, stories of discovery, restoration, rationale, and not least its function as an object of photography and the tourist gaze.

For my part the building and attendant theories will continue to develop as a challenge to my thinking about cognition, attention, consciousness, creativity and automation in the built environment.


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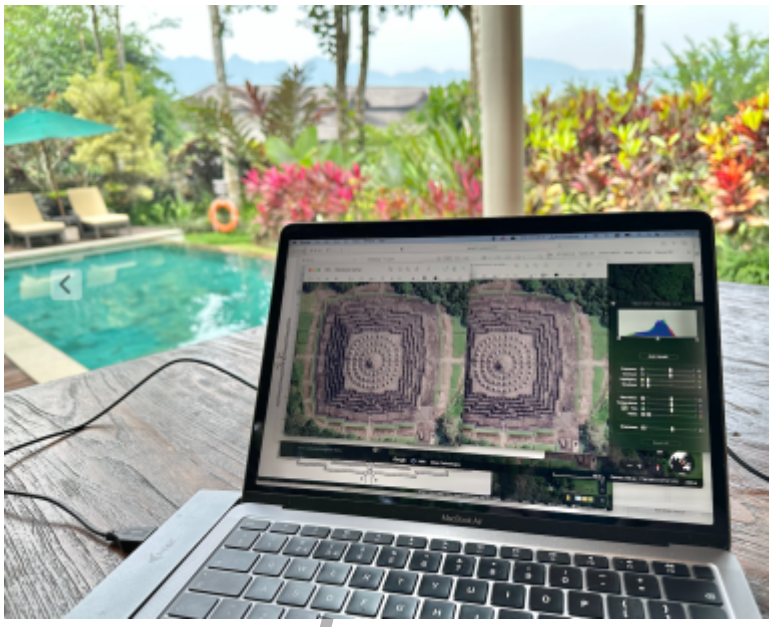






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Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. artificial intelligence
2. language
3. mandala
4. metaphor
5. symbol

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