

# *Metaphysical Archaeology of Lighthouses (Part I)*

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Bovbjerg Lighthouse on the west coast of Jutland in Denmark (Fmrir, Wikimedia)

Lighthouses are captivating structures, combining domestic and functional preoccupations of navigation, orientation and safety with the most inspiring issues of poetry and metaphysics. Every single lighthouse, of whatever scale and sophistication of design, proportion and detailing, is not only an elaborate typological equation and an algorithm of technical efficiency, but also a subtle and vibrant metaphor and metaphysical theorem.

Every lighthouse seems to be born from the light of the sky, as much as from the gravity of the earth. It descends from intensely shining stars holding it from above, pulling and stretching it smoothly as a wonderfully slender and finely crafted shaft, like a monumental and magic candle.

It develops as a living structure, growing, climbing, winding or piling up from the ground in smooth, precise and elegant volumetric moves and gestures. It appears to be lifted, pushed or driven by visionary telluric forces. Maybe lighthouses are generated by the fierce creative energy of some utterly concentrated Hephaisto, shaping with precision their appropriate form to merge the volcanic fires of the earth with the incandescent fires of the universe. Precise and appropriate architectural artifacts, masterfully sited and scenographically integrated, lighthouses mark beautifully and poignantly the geometrical-geographical and mythological-poetical intersection of sky, earth and sea, perfect, correct, true and accurate centers in the complex system of cosmic chaos.

Even if modern navigation technology has largely rendered obsolete the functional program of traditional lighthouses, their rich and generous typological and symbolical connotations are potentially valuable to contemporary architecture. They can be understood and instrumentalized in manifold strategies and contexts. They can act as pure monuments of vision, as sentinels of moral and material reconstruction, or as towers of light, suggesting reason, guidance and orientation. They suggest purposeful and wise action and constructive intelligence. They provide evidence and richness as symbols of cosmic coordination, and offer narratives for organic integration of the scales of the natural and of the man-made. Above all, however, they encompass traditions of sensitive architecture, articulating the significance of our existence in time and space.



Les Phare des Baleineaux dans la tempête - Île de Ré – France (per.per, Wikimedia)

They also stress the reality we are confronting in our contemporary world. In the context of built and natural habitats threatened by worldwide deconstruction and exploitation, we need to obstinately refer to scenarios of positive reconstruction, guided by enlightened vision and inspired by harmonious and convivial patterns.

Within lighthouses, the earth reaches to the sky from rocky or sandy epicenters of the universe, sculpting and carving the delicate figure around an “axis mundi,” modeling the aura of the ascensional forces, captivating and enchanting, or bewitching heaven in dense gravity fields and fertile irradiations of light, and gently haranguing the exalted sea, or meditating on the calm reflections of moonlight and clouded sky in the vibrant surface of the sea. Settled firmly but almost weightless, they are suspended on Earth along vertical lifelines, anchored in the sky by invisible streamlined patterns of sacredness. Attached along a central spine of soaring energy, of tense grace, they suggest the delicately breathing body of an immobile dancer or a young tree stretched in suspension in a windless night.



Farol da Barra, Salvador, Bahia, Brasil (Antonio Junior, Wikimedia)

One might envision materialized transcendence, purest blends of harmony, divine proportional patterns and contemplative intelligence in the middle of seasons of nights and days. In control of visible and invisible dangers, in convivial serenity with the infinity of seas and skies, superbly coordinating the movements of ships, planets and waves, lighthouses are superbly lonesome and solitary, yet still an intrinsically integrated part of a meaningful, all-encompassing order. Lighthouses inhabit natural and metaphysical landscapes like compassionate hermits who, by the power of their prayers and thoughts, attract beauty and love. They are not simply built into the landscape; the landscape exists because of them. They are catalysts of their context: they invent the patterns of their immediate and larger environment, and at the same time result from the inspirational sources of the genius loci. Solidly anchored on compact masses of stones, cement or rocks, settled and cast onto the most titanic, unalienable foundations (within the uprooting motion of clouds, galaxies, climates, artifacts and events), or eventually planted on thin piers or pillars (resembling sometimes the stiff legs of a giant insect), lighthouses seem to be attached to the very mass and whole weight of planet Earth, which, like alchemist magicians they metamorphose into lightness, light and delight.

Lighthouses successfully and inventively merge the metaphysics of gravity and of lightness, of darkness and of light, of the infinite and the finite into gracious tectonics. Resisting the combined or alternate stresses of twist, flexion, torsion, scission, contusion, pressure, shock and collision, lighthouses have the natural gift of solidity and strength. They are bound by gravity to the Earth, but their gravity is of ascensional character: it is a gravity which articulates geometries of vertical lightness. They strive toward a luminous liberation through an upper lantern, in a climax of dematerialization. Within their dialectics of weight and lightness, lighthouses seem to safeguard and fix the position and permanence of land. They act almost like guarantees of the existence and identity of edges and boundaries, and main topologies. Would lighthouses not be principal actors in balancing and controlling the integrity and constancy of property and lot lines, telluric fields and geodesic centers of land, sea and sky?

Are they not really endeavouring to prevent the Earth from detaching itself from heaven and ocean, or the oceans to invade sky, and the sky to leave the horizon, and the horizon to blur the terrestrial perspectives? It is as if the expansion of the universe were constantly threatening the material and spiritual coherence of our most familiar environment and its identifiable locus, always threatening to drift apart into new combinations of incomprehensible geography, to decompose, to dissolve by the force and violence of water and wind. One might imagine also that, because of man's fears, of both order and disorder, lighthouses ought to be architectural antidotes to those fears, so that the whole universe does not suddenly vanish into a mist of confusion.

Let the lighthouses be fearless fortresses of orientation rather than paranoiac symbols of safety and security.

Who knows whether lighthouses have not been invented to be the testimonies, or guardian angels watching over the majestic coordination of the permanent poles and nodes of the world, of its most significant intersections, intersections of reality, myth and ideal, of past, present and future, spirit and matter, of sacred and profane? Are the lighthouses not truly indispensable to accentuate the world's superb scenography of order and disorder, and to articulate elegantly, in finest punctuations, the mythological, geological and climatical choreography of the Earth? Lighthouses do not only light the routes of lonely ships, and guide the entrances to night-drunk ports, but they hold up vital lamps of beauty, reason, harmony, wisdom, strength and confidence in a world of dangerous passions, fanatical obsessions and haphazard opinions. Are lighthouses not really vital symbols of profound insight, truth and enlightenment in a world where poets and painters might get blinded by bright nights of noise, confused by the blurred perspectives of false horizons, by fake and virtual realities, and spaces without corners, edges and boundaries?

Lighthouses are like pillars of the world, celestial landmarks carrying the sky and holding the Earth. They are literally columns of light and temples of clarity and evidence. They are symbols of light, but not of the excesses of an undifferentiated light, which pollutes and infects both the eye and the vision, not of the type of flashing and blinding violence which acts like a cerebral drug, paralysing all mental capacities and sensuous faculties, but of a light of great sweetness and gentle and discerning modulation of life, of beauty, of reason, of compassion, of truth, in its full spectrum and chromatic complexity, its modular graduations of intensity and brilliance and its potential for nuances.

Lighthouses are also monuments of memory and of civilization. They celebrate the genius of places, virtues and events in the monumental mythology of mankind and of nature. While memory is betrayed by a globalizing collective amnesia, and civilization is critically threatened by the contemporary acceleration of intolerance, brutality, cynicism, false morality and lack of compassion, hypocrisy, short-sightedness, provincialism, fanaticism, ignorance and ugliness, let the lighthouses cast their light back into greatness and civilizing virtues and stand up heroically against the erosion of memory and intelligence.

Maybe lighthouses help us to believe that it is worthwhile to continue looking upward, to be in awe of the divine creation and the sacredness of life, the sacredness of nature. Maybe lighthouses are our allies in trusting the rumor of tempest and the brilliance of stars, encompassing beauty and harmony in our actions and our works. Maybe lighthouses ask us to indulge in poems, songs and prayers, reflect with scientific rigor

on the complexity of nature, life and the universe. They ask us to draw and paint nature as an act of vision bred by love and commitment, to build houses and cities based on principles of harmony and comfort, rooted in identifiable traditions and cultural patterns, to foster feeling and intuition, to cultivate reason and clarity of vision, and generally to be their accomplices in supporting the world as a project of beauty, comfort and permanence.



Lindau Hafen (Bodensee) Lighthouse (Axel Flumm, Wikimedia)

Lighthouses might rise up stronger and stronger as monuments of vision, encouraging our endeavors, our imagination and our projects not to be conditioned by fear and hate. They might convincingly guide us—with firm arguments and sound reason, common sense and sentiment—to reach out, explore and move ahead, steering toward infinite ideals and wide spiritual horizons. Maybe we should really insist far more on maintaining and marking locations and territories of resistance and faith against the forces of darkness and dissolution, consolidating material, scientific and poetic “lighthouse” positions, for the sake of nature, the stars and the birds in the sky, the waves and fishes and animals and plants of the seas and the shores, for the sake of man, his cultures and traditions, his achievements. Every surviving lighthouse could be revived in a perspective of ecological and humanist resistance and reconstruction,

and many new lighthouses can be built as projects for a better world, within a variety of functional programs supporting the moral guidance of metaphysical lighthouses.

We ought to rely on the wisdom of lighthouses and the lessons they have learned over millennia from the observation and study of nature. Through the intersections of natural complexity patterns, lighthouses operate as a lively network of centers at the juncture lines, transitions, immersions and contacts of land and sea. They lift, raise, diffuse and propagate glimmers, waves, auras or flashes of powerful, intensely bundled or softly conditioned and nuanced light. They project, sweep, brush and irradiate it into the limitless depth of the universe. The incandescent intensity of this light, seemingly produced by the sky itself, as if it had originated from the fire of domesticated suns, and assisted by the brilliance of stars and rotating comets, reflects mysteriously in fractal designs on the restless surfaces of the seas and oceans. The gracious elegance, delicate forcefulness and solid lightness of the slender lighthouse structures confront the majestic and colossal forces of an unpredictable Neptune eroding both foundations and shorelines, and assaulting in powerful waves buildings and ships in a voracious appetite for disorder and wrathful instability. The unchained forces of the universe, winds and storms from the Poles and the Tropics join into this cosmic-mythological scenography, in which the lighthouse seems paradoxically to draw an immense inspiration of harmony and grace.

## FIGURE AND MEANING

Lighthouses are built in appropriate and significant locations, on coastal heights, islands, rocks and eventually right into the sea onto artificial islands. They guide, warn, mark, alert, lighten and highlight dangerous coast areas, difficult passages, complex obstacles and entrances to harbors, city ports and shallow estuaries. Their expressed purpose is to carry light in the most remarkable and visible manner, so that even distant ships can be warned or guided. Even through the darkest nights, through the most opaque and starless universe, heavy storms and fogs, the lighthouse's warm and familiar signals can be perceived. Whether the lighthouse sits almost like a sturdy tower-house on a higher cliff, hanging over the sea, or grows up to a monumental height, it is programmed to verticality and ascensional dynamics. The ascensional character is settled in its typological genealogy and is an essential aspect of its character.

In fact, the first principle of lighthouses combines various ascensional movements: the dancing figure of the flames of fire, the curling and whirling movement of the smoke, its spiraling aspiration creating a monumental columnar figure, suggesting the helicoidal movement of interior stairs, ramps, the stepping of the terraces and the compilation of rock masses. A second principle consists in the radial, hemispheric and horizontal projections, perspectives and reflections that encompass and reinforce the

axial nature of the lighthouse. They stress the centrality within its immediate locus and the wider territory. They support the horizontal distribution of light and the perspectival fields pivoting around the central axis of the lighthouse. The vertical staging and stepping of ascensional dynamics from ground to heaven, from matter to light, the horizontal sweeping movement of light and vision projected into the combined realities of sky, land and earth, merge deeply into realms of visionary symbolism and metaphysics.

The rotational and spiraling-helicoidal forces, both in vertical and horizontal directions, support a high degree of life and dynamic complexity, both in the composition and the functional aspects of lighthouses. The interacting and simultaneous static, tectonic and telluric energies, as well as the dynamic ones, are integrated in the figure, symbol, type and morphology of lighthouses, reflecting a larger dynamic pattern of the universe. To understand the typological poetics of lighthouses, we need to discuss its origins and its typological maturity, as achieved perfectly with the antique Lighthouse of Pharos in Alexandria. We will discuss specific examples of the ancient tradition in Part II of this essay.

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- See more at: <http://www.nccsc.net/essays/metaphysical-archaeology-lighthouses-part-i#sthash.OZXj66Tt.dpuf>