

# Reflections

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School  
of  
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University of Illinois  
at Urbana-Champaign  
No. 8

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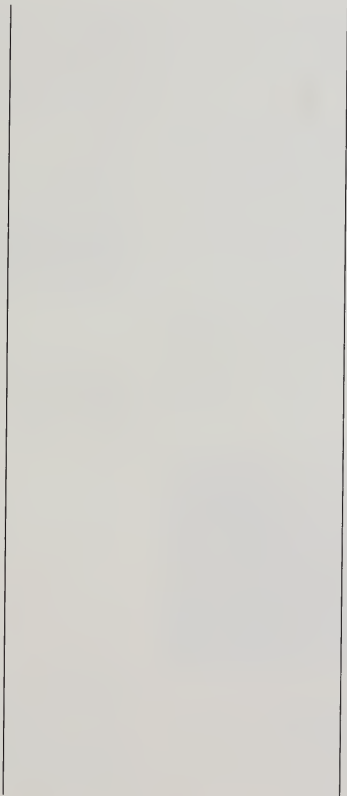
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The Journal of the School of Architecture  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign



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**Reflection** (ri flek shen) n. 1.) The act of casting back from a surface. 2) To happen as a result of something. 3.) Something that exists dependently of all other things and from which all other things derive. 4.) To look at something carefully so as to understand the meaning.

# Contents

|   |  |    |
|---|--|----|
| Robert Dell Vuosevich   | <b>Semper and Two American Glass Houses</b>  | 4  |
| Kay Bea Jones   | <b>Post Partum: Wexner Fragments</b>   | 12 |
| Brian Kelly   | <b>In Search of a Critical Middle Ground</b>   | 22 |
| Andrzej Pinno   | <b>The Many Faces of Architecture, or, Universal Civilization, Linguistic Insights, and Architecture</b> | 32 |
| Paul J. Armstrong and Jeffrey Poss                                | <b>Talking Takeyamese: An Interview With Minoru Takeyama</b>   | 38 |
|   | <b>Francis J. Plym Traveling Fellowship</b>  | 48 |
| A Forum with Gunnar Birkerts, Joseph Esherick and Minoru Takeyama | <b>Concept and Image: How Design Evolves</b>   | 54 |



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# Semper and Two American Glass Houses

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## Introduction

With the appearance of the Farnsworth House and the Glass House in the years just after World War II, a number of articles surfaced offering comparative criticism. Given the formal and programmatic similarities of the houses, and the mentorship provided by Mies van der Rohe for the younger Philip Johnson, the comparison was a natural and obvious one.

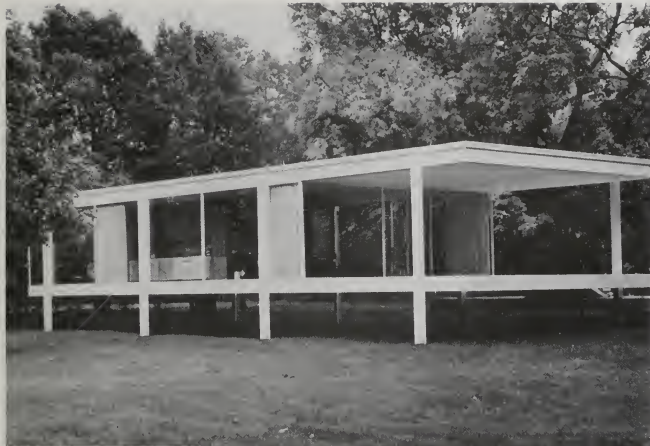
Criticism has focused on the compositional differences between the two houses as well as the differences in the architects and buildings which, however indirectly, have influenced them. Philip Johnson, in his book on Mies van der Rohe, traces Mies's ancestry to Schinkel (Neoclassicism), Frank Lloyd Wright (spatial continuity), and the de Stijl movement (overlapping planes in space).<sup>1</sup> Johnson admits to the influences at work in his Glass House: the Acropolis, Ledoux, paintings by Theo van Doesburg, Mondrian, and Malevich, as well as the architecture of Schinkel and Mies van der Rohe.<sup>2</sup> Schinkel appears as the common thread in the work of the two architects.

It is to Gottfried Semper, the greatest German architect of the generation after Schinkel, that this inquiry will look. Whether or not the direct or indirect influence of Semper's writings can be proven, a reading of Semper helps to establish a theoretical framework within which the Farnsworth House of Mies and the Glass House of Johnson can be re-evaluated. Two topics from Semper's writings on archi-

ecture and the applied arts are particularly helpful: the two forms of dwelling and the four elements of primitive building, as outlined in Semper's introduction to *Comparative Building Theory (Vergleichende Baulehre, 1850: ms 58, fols. 15-30)*, as translated by Wolfgang Herrmann.<sup>3</sup> In the opening paragraphs, Semper offers a justification for considering the dwelling as the original type in man's building activity. In an earlier Dresden lecture he had spoken of "the indisputable fact that if not architecture then certainly building, that is, joining materials into an organized form, was first applied to dwellings in the widest sense of the word."<sup>4</sup> To this day, the house, or dwelling, remains the foremost type in which the architect marshals his thought and compositional talents. This is certainly true of Mies and Johnson. Ideas concerning the "joining of materials into an organized form" are manifest in these landmark houses.

## The Two Forms of Dwelling

Semper wrote, "We can thus distinguish between two basically different ways in which human dwellings arose. First, the courtyard with its surrounding walls and, within, some open sheds of minor importance, and second, the hut, the freestanding house in its narrowest sense. In the first arrangement, the enclosure, which later became the wall, dominated all other elements of the building, whereas in the second, the roof was the predominant element."<sup>5</sup> Mies's work investigates both types. The brick and concrete houses of 1923 and 1925, their outstretching walls enclosing



*Farnsworth House, Plano, Illinois, 1945-50, Mies van der Rohe (Photograph: Hedrich-Blessing Studio, Chicago, Illinois, from David Spaeth, Mies van der Rohe, #124).*

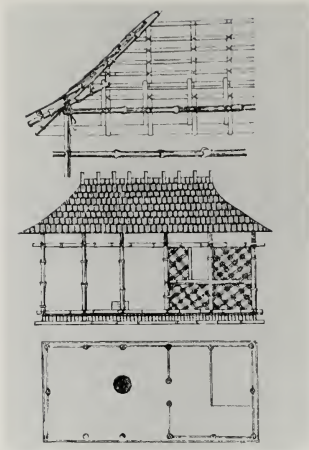
and directing space, and the court house projects of the 1930s, wherein the space of the court is more conventionally bound, are examples of Mies's preoccupation with court dwelling. In these schemes, as Semper claims, the wall dominates; floor and ceiling, serving to extend space horizontally, are neutral surfaces that accentuate the active role played by the vertical wall in defining and directing space.

Mies's work in the United States demonstrates the development of the second type, the so-called "freestanding hut," evidenced by Mies's first house in America, a guest house/dining pavilion for the Resor family in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, 1937-38, and achieving its fullest expression in the Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois, 1945-50. One can only speculate that Mies's move to America prompted the switch from court to hut dwelling; the figural space of the European atrium house and piazza is exchanged for the figural solid of the American house in the landscape.

The court and hut in Mies's work, identified

as the "court vs. loggia" opposition in Kenneth Frampton's essay "The Glass House Revisted," emerges in the design of the Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. Frampton writes: "In deriving his Glass House parti Johnson was caught between a loggia belvedere concept . . . and Mies's prototypical court house. . . . Johnson's early sketches for the Glass House seem to be compounded in part out of Mies's Resor House for Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and in part out of the Miesian court house—whose introverted form was patently unsuited to the site. . . . In Scheme IV the architect tries to return to the court concept more directly, only to abandon this strategy in Scheme X-A when the project begins to approximate its final form of a glass prism poised on a bluff, looking one way toward the view and the other toward the forespace."<sup>6</sup>

The object/hut, wherein, as Semper says, the roof is the predominant element, surfaces as the chosen type in New Canaan as well as in Plano. In both cases, the inwardly focused court scheme, most appropriate to an urban situation (note Johnson's own Ash Street House, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1947, or



Caribbean Hut from Semper (Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil*, 276, from Wolfgang Herrmann, Gottfried Semper, #24).

Mies's Lemcke House in Berlin, 1932), has been supplanted by an outwardly focused glass house, Semper's freestanding hut.

#### The Four Elements of Primitive Building

Having identified the hut as the dwelling type chosen by Mies and Johnson, it is instructive to consult Semper and the four elements of building that constitute the primitive hut. These basic elements are enumerated in *Vergleichende Baulehre* of 1850 and again in his 1851 essay "Die Vier Elemente der Baukunst." At the end of his preface to *Vergleichende Baulehre*, Semper illustrates the four elements with an Indian hut from Trinidad. As Wolfgang Herrmann points out, this appears to be the same Caribbean hut shown at the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, and referred to in a later lecture as "an instructive illustration of the system based on the four constructive elements of architecture."<sup>7</sup> This Caribbean hut appears as an illustration in Semper's *Der Stil*, 1860-63, marking the presence of "all the elements of ancient architecture in their most original and unadulterated form: the hearth as

centre, the mound surrounded by a framework of poles as terrace, the roof carried by columns, and mats as space enclosure or wall."<sup>8</sup> Hearth, platform, roof, and enclosure constitute the four basic elements of primitive building in Semper's schema.

In *Vergleichende Baulehre*, Semper begins with the hearth: "Before men thought of erecting tents, fences, or huts, they gathered around the open flame, which kept them warm and dry and where they prepared their simple meals. The hearth is the germ, the embryo, of all social institutions."<sup>9</sup> In protecting the hearth, the remaining three elements, the platform, the roof, and enclosure arise. "Protection of the hearth: There is no need to prove in detail that the protection of the hearth against the rigors of the weather as well as against attacks by wild animals and hostile men was the primary reason for setting apart some space from the surrounding world. . . . Thus, four elements of primitive building arose out of the most immediate needs: the roof, the mound, the enclosure, and, as spiritual center of the whole, the social hearth."<sup>10</sup> Looking at the Farnsworth House and the Glass House in light of these remarks, one finds some notable differences in the articulation and organization of the four elements.

Semper says further, "The hearth has kept its age-old significance up to the present. In every room the center of family life today is still the fireplace."<sup>11</sup> The hearth is more clearly stated as a center in the Glass House. Its placement within a cylinder, which also contains the bathroom, sets it apart from the rectilinear space and the rectilinear objects within that space. The enormous square firebox faces the seating area occupying the central bay of the house. In the Farnsworth House, the firebox is contained within a long wall of Primavera wood panels, two of which serve as doors to bathrooms. A central area for the water pump and heater, as well as the kitchen on the side opposite the fireplace, are additional items contained within the monolithic core. Although the hearth sits near the geometric center of the house and fronts the main seating area, its role as singular center





*Glass House, New Canaan, Connecticut, 1946-49, Philip Johnson (Photograph: Courtesy Philip Johnson, From David Spaeth, Mies van der Rohe, #147).*

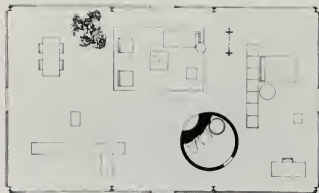
is diffused by the other elements competing for location within the core. With the bedroom wardrobe, a rectangular block finished in teak, Mies complicates the issue by placing a similar solid within the open space. One should note that in the Glass House, the form (rectangular) and the material (teak) of the wardrobe is distinct from that of the brick cylinder, which heightens the role of the latter as center.

Semper continues, "... making the settlements secure against the vehemence of the elements was more difficult. Mounds had to be built to protect the hearth against inundation by the nearby river."<sup>12</sup> Though in Johnson's case, protection from flooding is not a consideration (an artificial lake rests almost fifty feet down the hill from the house), the excerpt from Semper is particularly applicable to the Farnsworth House, located in the floodplain of the Fox River. Here, the two floor planes, one forming the entrance terrace at an elevation of +2'-8"±, the other forming the floor of the house proper and its entrance porch at an elevation of +5'-4"±, hover above the ground, attached by spot welding to H-

columns which rise out of the earth below. The contents of the house are thus protected from flooding by the upper platform which is treated as an independent element in the construction.

It is not without intent that Semper uses the word "mound," so associated with the earth were the early attempts to reshape the ground. The words "platform" and "terrace" are similarly associated with the ground ("terrace" from terra, or earth; "platform," basically the form of plat or ground). Though the ground plane is recreated at Farnsworth as a support for the hearth, it is the nature of its displacement (a floating plane with the actual ground continuing underneath) and its material transformation (a steel-channel frame, sandblasted, spray-painted white and surfaced with travertine) which brings about the sharp distinction between the platform and its progenitor, the earth.

Johnson, while placing the floor three steps above the ground, associates his platform with the earth. A concrete slab is surfaced in a herringbone pattern of brick and, at the



*Glass House: Plan (Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, From Kenneth Frampton, The Glass House Revisited, #15).*

edge, the brick turns down the outside face of a supporting grade beam where it meets the ground. The brick base sits firmly upon the ground, its terra-cotta color accentuating its tie to the earth. Johnson's platform, more closely than that of Mies, approximates the terrace described by Semper in an Assyrian-Chaldean example of primitive building: "The need for these terraces and waterworks must have arisen very early, in fact at a time when the dwelling still consisted of a simple tent. Work on these walls taught the art of masonry, which gradually spread to house building; in its upper parts, the house probably never lost the character of a light construction on a solid substructure. The country lacked timber and in parts even ashlar, whereas the firm clay soil, as soon as it was broken up, offered material ready for use in building. . . . Although kiln-dried bricks were known and used from early times, unburnt sun-dried bricks remained the most commonly used building material."<sup>13</sup> Johnson's choice of brick, effecting a virtual terrace as a solid substructure for the lighter construction above, accords with Semper.

Observations can be made at this point regarding the relationship of elements to one another. In the Farnsworth House, the Primavera wood-surfaced core containing the fireplace is materially distinct from the travertine floor; it is one of a number of elements, including the teak wardrobe, which vie for location within the single space. At the Glass House, Johnson firmly associates hearth and terrace, both made of brick. They are "of the earth" while the steel frame and glass walls

which partly contain the cylinder are "other than the earth." Johnson comments on this distinction: "The cylinder, made of the same brick as the platform from which it springs, forming the main motif of the house, was not derived from Mies, but rather from a burnt-out wooden village I saw once where nothing was left but the foundations and chimneys of brick. Over the chimney I slipped a steel cage with a glass skin. The chimney forms the anchor."<sup>14</sup> In the Farnsworth House, no such synthesis of Mother Earth and modernity is attempted, no history or combination of things past and present is imparted to the object; lifted off the ground, the Farnsworth House is positioned as the unqualified symbol of the modern age.

Semper writes, "In regions with a mild climate and in the plain, where people could live in the open air for most of the time, a light tentlike cover against the weather was needed."<sup>15</sup> In this passage citing a tent, and in other descriptions of primitive building, Semper treats the roof and its supports as a single element, given their shared role of providing shelter overhead. This point is critical in Semper's system, and makes it possible to assign the wall a nonsupportive role, that of making enclosure.

Johnson's "steel cage," the roof and its eight H-column supports, is a set of elements distinct from the brick platform and hearth. Both columns and perimeter beams (steel channels) are painted black, and except at the corners where the steel stanchions touch the ground, the cage sits firmly on the brick base. At the Farnsworth House, the details of



*Farnsworth House: Plan (Courtesy Hedrich-Blessing Studio, Chicago, Illinois).*

roof and platform are virtually identical, thus minimizing the distinction between floor and roof. Both are platforms in space, serving to define the "universal space" sandwiched between them.

A further observation can be made regarding the roof. It has been noted that Semper considered the roof and its supports as an element, and in the particular model he chose to illustrate this system, the Indian hut in Trinidad, the wood members comprising the roof and its supports, and the twine that binds them are exposed. "Here is the roof supported by columns of bamboo; its structural parts are tied together with ropes of coconut fiber; it is covered with palm leaves..."<sup>16</sup> From the outside, the "sheathing" of the roof with leaves obscures the connection of roof and support, but from within the hut one sees how the vertical bamboo poles are positioned to relieve the load of a horizontal bamboo pole that picks up the weight of the rafter poles. The tying together of poles at their intersections reveals how the frame works, basket-like, as a unit.

At Farnsworth, the steel joists and their joining with the perimeter channel beam are obscured by a continuous hung ceiling; at the Glass House, a similar white ceiling dominates. From within these two houses, the underside of the roof appears to be an element separate from the supporting structure; the reveal between hung ceiling and perimeter beam heightens this separation. Colin Rowe has commented on the importance of an "uninterrupted horizontal surface" at the ceiling in furthering the spatial objectives of International style buildings.<sup>17</sup> Mies and Johnson pay homage to the International style; both suppress the articulation of the frame and the way it works, in favor of expressing the "universal space" between floor and ceiling.

Semper writes, "But enemies too had to be kept away from the hearth; the much-coveted fields in the plain attracted the envy and rapacity of man, while the herds were exposed to attacks by wild animals. Enclosures, fences, and walls were needed to pro-

tect the hearth, and mounds were needed to make it safe from flooding and also to espy the enemy from afar."<sup>18</sup> At the Farnsworth House and the Glass House, the making of secure walls to protect one from one's enemies is hardly an issue; both structures open up to the surrounding landscape, a secure and private place. A curtain wall of plate glass encased in thin steel mullions provides both houses with the desired enclosure and transparency of surface; the treatment of the wall and its relationship to the other elements varies significantly.

Mies concerns himself with differentiating the roof and its supports (his structure) from the enclosing skin. The curtain wall at Farnsworth runs just behind the columns, and the reveal between the mullions and the H-columns or channel beams makes clear the separation of support and non-supporting enclosure. In the Glass House, as Frampton has argued most clearly, the structure is "suppressed"; the steel columns are set inside the glass wall, except at the corners, where the column is seen to support the perimeter beam.<sup>19</sup> The curtain wall, its thin mullions set out beyond the plane of the steel frame, asserts itself as an independent element bounding the volume of space within. The greater reflectivity of the glass at the Glass House further accentuates the surface quality of the curtain wall. The wall predominates in Johnson's work; in Mies's it is reduced to "*betnahe nichts*, 'almost nothing'" and structure is preeminent.<sup>20</sup>

Semper's remarks on Assyrian-Chaldean architecture challenge our understanding of the wall: "The primary material establishing the norm for the vertical enclosure was not the stone wall but a material that, though less durable, for a long time influenced the development of architecture as strongly as stone, metal, and timber. I mean the hurdle, the mat, and the carpet. . . . Using wickerwork for setting apart one's property and for floor mats for protection against heat and cold far preceded making even the roughest masonry. Wickerwork was the original motif of the wall. . . . Hanging carpets remained the true walls; they were the visible boundaries of a room.

The often solid walls behind them were necessary for reasons that had nothing to do with the creation of space; they were needed for protection, for supporting a load, for their permanence, etc. Wherever the need for these secondary functions did not arise, carpets remained the only means for separating space. Even where solid walls became necessary, they were only the invisible structure hidden behind the true representatives of the wall, the colorful carpets that the walls served to hold and support. It was therefore the covering of the wall that was primarily and essentially of spatial and architectural significance; the wall itself was secondary.<sup>21</sup> This passage opens a floodgate of possibilities in further interpreting the two houses.

One thinks of Mies's earlier work (Barcelona, Tugendhat) in advancing the free plan in modern architecture, wherein the supporting columns are differentiated from the walls which merely enclose or direct space. The sensuous materials employed (green Timian marble, vert antique marble, a tawny onyx, clear, gray, and bottle-green glass, a red silk drape at Barcelona; tawny-gold onyx, black and pale brown Macassar ebony, silver-gray Shantung silk curtains at Tugendhat)<sup>22</sup> evoke the richness of the earlier hung carpets described by Semper. Enclosure was simply made by hanging velvet and silk at the Exposition de la Mode in Berlin, 1927: "Mies and Frau Lilly Reich defined spaces within the large exhibition hall by draping lengths of black, red, and orange velvet and gold, silver, black, and lemon-yellow silk fabric over straight and curved rods which were suspended from the ceiling."<sup>23</sup> The silk curtain makes repeat performances in both the Farnsworth House and the Glass House, providing privacy, when desired, and helping to control the extremes of heat and cold.

But it is the glass curtain wall (the retention of the word "curtain" in the phrase, thus preserving the essential "motif" of the wall, would amuse Semper) which constitutes the true skin and enclosure at the Glass House and at Farnsworth. The skin holds in the space, given its counter-tendency to spread out horizontally between roof and platform.



*Glass House: Exterior (Photograph by Alexander Georges, from Kenneth Frampton, The Glass House Revisited, #52).*

This is evidenced even more so in the Glass House, where there is the greater "presence" of that surface. And it is in the greater reflectivity of that glass surface that the enclosing wall alludes most subtly to its primitive forebear. The surrounding foliage is reflected in the glass wall; patterns of leaves and branches animate the surface, recalling the ancient carpets.

Semper discusses the wall, its material transformation without the consequent loss of the essential motif: "The covering of the wall retained this meaning even when other materials than carpets were used. . . . For a long time the character of the new covering followed that of the prototype. The artists who created the painted or sculpted decoration on wood, stucco, stone, or metal, following a tradition that they were hardly conscious of, imitated the colorful embroideries of the age-old carpet-walls."<sup>24</sup> Though Semper acknowledged the transformation of motifs over time and could imagine a thousand-fold variations upon the four elements of construction in their treatment and combination, it is doubtful that the possibilities inherent in reflective glass for yet another transposition of the age-old motif ever occurred to him.

And certainly the use of steel in these two twentieth-century houses would give him pause. While Semper spoke well of the technical triumph of the Crystal Palace, he discouraged the use of iron in architecture, in a

passage reminiscent of Ruskin: "So much is certain that . . . architecture . . . must not have anything to do with this quasi-invisible material when it is a question of mass effects . . ."25 We hear this architect of a century ago passing judgment on Mies and Johnson when he calls the Jardins d'Hiver of 1847 an "enormous glass box (which) absorbs everything" and "leaves too small a share to architecture."<sup>26</sup>

These two glass houses can hardly be criticized for leaving "too small a share to architecture." There is a thoughtfulness and rigor in their assemblage which belies their simple nature. Semper helps us to forge relationships between these houses and those of their progenitors, to recognize archetypal elements which have preoccupied people through the ages. These two houses demonstrate a transformative process that connects, and at the same time separates, objects across time and place. We recognize the modernity of these structures; at the same time, we are witness to the "freestanding hut" in its original and simple state.

#### Notes

1 Philip Johnson, *Mies van der Rohe* (New York: Museum of Modern Art), 1978, 9-30.

2 Kenneth Frampton, "The Glass House Revisited." In *Philip Johnson: Processes*. Catalogue 9 (New York: Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, 1978), 39.

3 Wolfgang Herrmann, *Gottfried Semper: In Search of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984).

4 Gottfried Semper, in Herrmann, 168.

5 Semper, fols. 23-24, in Herrmann, 201.

6 Frampton, 42.

7 Herrmann, 169.

8 Semper, *Der Stil*, in Herrmann, 169.

9 Semper, fols. 18-20, in Herrmann, 198.

10 Semper, fols. 21-22, in Herrmann, 199.

11 Semper, fols. 18-20, in Herrmann, 198.

12 Semper, fols. 21-22, in Herrmann, 199.

13 Semper, fols. 104-106, in Herrmann, 211.

14 Johnson, in Frampton, 51.

15 Semper, fols. 21-22, in Herrmann, 199.

16 Semper, in Herrmann, 169.

17 Colin Rowe, "Neo-'Classicism' and Modern Architecture II" in *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984), 143.

18 Semper, fols. 21-22, in Herrmann, 199.

19 Frampton, 51.

20 Johnson, 140.

21 Semper, fols. 94-98, in Herrmann, 204-6.

22 David Spaeth, *Mies van der Rohe* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 75-76.

23 Spaeth, 52.

24 Semper, fols. 98-100, in Herrmann, 206.

25 Semper, in Herrmann, 175.

26 Ibid., 176.

# Post Partum: Wexner Fragments

**Kay Bea Jones**  
Ohio State University

The Wexner Center for the Visual Arts by Dick Trott and Peter Eisenman was revealed to the public in a gala opening on the campus of Ohio State University in November 1989. The long-heralded facility remained empty and on display for three months before the first exhibit, "Arts of Europe and America: 1950s & 1960s," was installed. I believe we can now ask, "Is it a building yet?"

The reply is a disappointing "Not really." By now almost everyone has become acquainted with the theoretical premises used to argue for its unconventional stature as a structure. In Eisenman's terms, it is intended somehow to "challenge the possibility of the boundaries of the accepted definition of architecture."<sup>1</sup> However, we do not know why such a challenge is a meaningful way to pursue architecture, and the Wexner Center is not likely to inspire an answer. The arcane reminiscence of the Jeffersonian grid and the long-since-demolished armory building have ceased to entertain. The collision of disparate fragments unhappily wedged between Mershon and Weigel halls, the pre-existing performance facilities, rings out a discordant call to the celebration of the arts. More identifiable as a parasite on found structures, some subdivided, others resurrected, Eisenman's members upset the ground plane as it seeks identity in mock archeology and lawn berms of prairie grass. With the intrusion of the mute, wracked white grid, the disappointment of the collage of contrapuntal parts is that the building is, in the end, speechless.

One must continue to refer to this building by dissecting it into identifiable objects, such as rebuilt towers and grids and berms, which have no particularly interesting relationship to the spaces they force into being. While Eisenman's aim was "not to make yet another object-shelter enclosure as a dominant value,"<sup>2</sup> he has not yet been able, with his borrowed vocabulary of abstract expressionless forms, to recognize or create an architecture of space. He is continually entangled in his own web of theory, too self-referential to assemble an architecture that merits value through relationship to its formal and cultural context. The result is an empty, cacophonous monologue. And in spite of his own attempts to conjure into being an empathetic group of form manipulators in the Museum of Modern Art's Deconstruction exhibit, he still plays alone.

Further disappointment lies in the paradox of the name of the "visual arts center," where indeed no center can be found. Varying pulses can be detected, but where is the heart? Neither a focus nor a conceptual center found a place in the architects' theoretical pursuit. Therefore, they satisfied themselves by leading visitors on a fruitless search through a place which repeatedly denies its own center. The voyage with no destination continues on, just as this style, called Deconstruction, must continue its search for a meaningful integration of space and enclosure to earn a place in the discourse on temporary architecture.



*Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, Columbus, Ohio, Peter Eisenman with Dick Trott, Architects, Detail of Passageway (Photograph by Ellen Stoner).*

The path begins by drawing the visitor down fraternal row or the sinking white framework of indeterminate length toward some unresolved intersection. Paths continue unrecognized toward unclear destinations. Hayes Hall, Arps Hall, and a parking garage are arbitrarily framed in an unresolved hierarchy. The draw from off-campus is prioritized, while a forbidding back side is presented to the Oval, the campus core. Fronting the university is a tilted flight of curved steps, unrelated to the theater space beneath it, and memorabilia in the form of clumsy, disproportionate brick towers which imprison office space. Among the choices of entry are two equally benign vestibules. Deflection off a reception desk either toward brown elevator doors or down a flight of stairs wastes not on the ceremony of gathering. The waste is reserved for the oppressive remnants of witless overhanging grids of varying scales. The stairs are received by a blank wall with the majority of spaces and incoming daylight at one's back, as once again the spatial sequence remains uncelebrated, and one is not aware of having returned to the sacred point of rotated axial intersection. The dominant concourse, which draws movement up to the left only to return to the ground plane of departure, aligns the gallery ramp with the entrance to the theater on the right. This axial relationship is spent on the two events least likely to be experienced jointly. Since the north vestibule remains locked, the tickets are sold elsewhere, and the opaque metal theater doors are uninviting, the buildup is a letdown.

The galleries which begin underground are fragmented. Visitors return to the coat-check desk at midstream. The monumental space to which all others are subordinated is a corridor which reiterates the exterior passageway it parallels. Translucent glazing avoids a dialogue between inside and outside. Here, uncontrolled east light is let into the galleries. The ramped concourse could have been integrated into the exhibition area for the viewing of art, as in Wright's Guggenheim Museum, but instead it is reserved as architecture for the sake of architecture. The barrier hides views into the exhibition halls



*Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, Columbus, Ohio, Peter Eisenman with Dick Trott, Architects, Detail of Entry Court (Photograph by Ellen Stoner).*

and narrows the corridor, making it an inappropriate place to show work. This reduces even further the disproportionate space for the display of artworks within the overall volume. This architecture of spatial and financial excess places attention squarely on the facility instead of on the art it was conceived to inspire. Thus it is all the more irritating that the planning oversight results in the glazed side of yet another vestibule terminating the buildup of axial space.

The cumbersome gallery alcoves whose wall surfaces and proportions are secondary to the grids, and whose daylight is impossible to control, caused considerable frustration to the curators in designing the first Wexner exhibit. Members of the staff have commented individually on their own responses to the challenge of the building as a gallery.<sup>3</sup>

Director Robert Stearns appreciates the building inspired by theory, and he believes that it deserves time and repeated visits. He has compared the Wexner to great modern works which embody meaning through minimalism, but which similarly encourage the





*Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, Columbus, Ohio, Peter Eisenman with Dick Trott, Architects, Detail of Exterior (Photograph by Ellen Stoner).*

*Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, Columbus, Ohio, Peter Eisenman with Dick Trott, Architects, Detail of Interior (Photograph by Author).*



public to be asked by the work: "Do you understand me?" He recommends that visitors consider the challenge "a little like [the way one responds to] some of the best art. . . Don't understand, just experience. That is, don't worry about the understanding." Therein, Stearns believes that generally the building can stand on its own. He is not critical of what he identifies as the "deliberate anxiety of confusion" achieved in the building. He suggests that the potential disorientation can become a "treasure hunt," and that with some "clues, discussion, and tours we can get around it" to suppress the viewers' potential anxiety.

Claudia Gould, co-curator, was more critical of the "overpowering overpresence" of the architects' formal expression, and of the lack of consideration for usable neutral gallery space. The third exhibit at the Wexner involved commissioning contemporary artists to produce works on site. The artists included Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Christian Marclay, and Barbara Kruger, among others, some of whom Gould noted, were "having a difficult time. There is no neutral space in this building. It is always a collaboration with Eisenman and Trott." Among the real diffi-

culties, Gould pointed to the baseboard mechanicals which separate the marble floors from the white sheetrock wall, and which limit the artist whose work requires a continuous, silent edge transition between planes. Recognizing the potential for a visual arts center that transcends a modern vocabulary to provoke contemporary work, Gould was disappointed with the degree to which the building borrows from things we have seen before.

Assistant curator Antonella Soldaini did not see a modern building in the Wexner, in spite of latent influences of Terragni. Rationalist modernism recognized the classical and cultural context within which it developed, so as to know what it was reacting against. Soldaini cited lack of rigor and polish in identifying Wexner as a baroque building most successful as "theater." Scenography, propaganda, and expressive excess of this modern baroque may signal a new counter-reformation.

In spite of difficulties, the curators successfully broached the problem of exhibiting icons of the fifties and sixties by constructing their own cells within the shell of the con-

tainer. Two installations were particularly noteworthy. Niki de Saint Phalle's suspended *Nana* allowed for focused reflection; the lyrical, voluptuous figure floated in a room, giving retinal presence to an otherwise leftover space. Near the show's beginning was a room dedicated to Louise Nevelson; here were three works spanning twenty years: *Sky Cathedral: Night Walls, Young Shadows*, and *Sky Cathedral Presence*. They enclosed the room like three surfaces of varying spatial depth, while a black couch defined the fourth edge. The coordinated assemblage presented in blue light was faithful to Nevelson's original intent, creating a somber, sanctified crypt. A place of sublime repose was made at the core of the downward spiral of spaces, replacing for this viewer the pulsing artificial heart which the gallery otherwise lacks.

Unfortunately, the curators cannot reconstruct office space within the brick shell for themselves and their staff. The extremely tight working conditions are made worse by the constricting shapes of the envelope. The metaphorical pleasure of working inside a tower wears off quickly when one cannot arrange furniture or store books. Windows



Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, Columbus, Ohio, Peter Eisenman with Dick Trott, Architects, Detail of Entry Court (Photograph by Author).



Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, Columbus, Ohio, Peter Eisenman with Dick Trott, Architects, Detail of Exterior Wall (Photograph by Author).

along the floor of the peripheral offices focus on the ground, eliminating the sky from the composition. One's gaze is shifted downward, away from the overhead blue fluorescents. The overcrowded staff aligned in the leftover middle areas must endure subordination to buzzing, cool-colored lightbulbs caged in mini-grids, while they have few windows and restricted views. Desk systems designed to accommodate the theory reintroduce gridlock. Twenty-six-inch-wide work stations are cramped with four-inch-deep shelves between empty formica casings, allowing further penetration of the relentless system. From here one has a privileged view of varied gravel tones which repeat the grid pattern even on the roof. Waiting areas with chairs backed up to glass walls and glazed offices and conference areas propagate an architecture of intimidation and control. Anxiety of confusion recurs as one wonders who is in the fish bowl.

The architecture of excess wears thin with the obsessive desire to subvert the building underground, which interrupts the continuous plane of campus. This results in exterior trenches and stony plinths that are not accessible. Underground staff offices with concrete block walls are windowless. The visiting fellows' studios, with their strange proportions and west-facing windows, have already been abandoned. The conceptually costly spaces will be most clearly recognized when the buried Fine Arts Library opens later this year. The repression of the building into the ground required an empty mass to raise the structure to the height required by the theory. The resulting unnecessary metal-clad boxes are facetiously referred to as "student housing."<sup>4</sup> So much for commodiousness.<sup>5</sup>

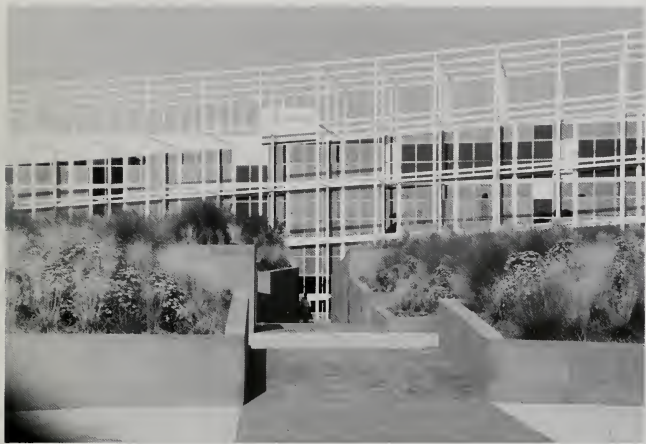
Eisenman's anticomfort architecture of inside jokes and black humor also leaves us with neither firmness nor delight. The frigid frame which gestures downward like a silent logo appears lifeless, like a bony skeleton or a sinking ship. It characterizes Baudrillard's enigma of America as long and low, and, I would add, limp.<sup>6</sup> So many poorly resolved intersections and weakly conceived spaces are without an architectural organizing strategy (note the basement and tower plans).

Habitation is sacrificed for conceptual rigor, which is ironically plagued by subjectivity. The disappointing sense of incompleteness is reminiscent of Eisenman's housing built in West Berlin. The inconclusive project at Checkpoint Charlie missed its potential in the collective courtyard which faced the Berlin Wall and became instead only another mute grid and diagonal red line, which can not be read, dominating a busy urban intersection. So much for innovation and contextuality.

Vincent Scully found more delight in the Wexner Center than did the curators or maintenance personnel who must work with the building in the future.<sup>7</sup> Unable to define meanings for all this anticlimactic frustration, Eisenman turns to his quasi-critics to uncover delight for him. R. E. Somol entitled his critique of the building with an esoteric chess notation for castling, "O-O," which reads as a titillating sigh of pleasure (read "ooh").<sup>8</sup> Is the double naught a call for awe of the master? Is "oh-oh" what slips out after recognition of an error? Is it the author's self-referential call for symmetry, or a weak attack

*Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, Columbus, Ohio, Peter Eisenman with Dick Trott, Architects, Detail of Planter (Photograph by Author).*





*Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, Columbus, Ohio, Peter Eisenman with Dick Trott, Architects, Detail of Exterior Elevation (Photograph by Ellen Stoner).*

on the defensive king? If the writer's interest in communicating with words is like the architects' interest in communicating with forms, "O-O" becomes oops. With the denial of an architecture that respects its responsibility to satisfy graciously any functional needs, to shelter gathering, and to create well-integrated sculptures of space, delight is reduced to a selfish act. Therein, masked meaninglessness abounds.

Wholelessness is not far behind. With no gestalt, the assorted fragments rely upon cruel jokes, buried bodies, and banal references. While this architect satisfied his own intent of building a centerless Center, we must address the significance of this willful distortion. As a mannerist of modernist forms, Eisenman respects no past or pre-assigned formal meanings, like axes which terminate in significant events, or thresholds that celebrate passage into shelter. While speaking in theoretical tongues, his architecture is mute. Critics have speculated about the Wexner Center's possible messages, including nostalgia for the avant-garde, or contempt for social disorder and our oppression of the Third World.<sup>9</sup> Read more directly,

the building turns its back on the community to which it belongs and pays no homage to the importance of the cultural activities it was conceived to support. Ultimately, the conception is stillborn. Raised planes, cranked grids, and displaced foci deliberately deform the surroundings and deny the idea of center. The artist who nobly gathers in community to celebrate and recreate that imperfect world deserves not only a better place, but a symbol that bespeaks greater hope than the Wexner Center offers.

This art center was designed on the premise that conflict stimulates avant-garde thought and good art. Confronting conflict may be creatively productive. The world is so full of volatility and aggression that the last thing the artist or the public needs is provocation in an invented, self-conscious version trying to become a gallery. Even if the recurring presence of the dominating grid were a meaningful idea, can there be too much of a good thing? As when used in bad advertising, subliminal seduction has its price. It may initially help sell the product, but it doesn't last. Performances and installations live on as ideas, and need not be permanent. Have we

arrived at instant architecture with the nutritional value of a Big Mac?

During the building's inauguration, when prompted by the architect's query as to how this work might influence that of others, Richard Meier responded for all of us by saying, "Now that it has been done, we need not worry about it anymore."<sup>10</sup>

#### Notes

1 David Goldblatt and Kay Bea Jones, "An Interview with Peter Eisenman," *Anyfone & Zeto* 4 (Autumn 1989).

2 Ibid.

3 Conversations with Wexner staff members in and around the building offered valuable insights into the thoughtfulness required to curate for the galleries.

4 John Morris Dixon noted, "Looking up, one sees scaffolding members superimposed on grids of curtain wall and, at the top, the empty metal-clad volumes known as 'student housing.' . . . The 'student housing' at the top was to have a greenish color, complementing the red sandstone of the plinths, but the architects accepted a standard off-white for the prefinished cladding" (*Progressive Architecture* 10:89, 74 and 76).

5 "Firmness, commodiousness, and delight" have been relevant, if reinterpreted, concerns for architects since identified by Vitruvius in *The Ten Books on Architecture* two thousand years ago.

6 Jean Baudrillard wrote, "What is arresting here is the absence of all these things—both the absence of architecture in the cities, which are nothing but long tracking shots of signals, and the dizzying absence of emotion and character in the faces and bodies" (*America* [London and New York, 1988], 124-25).

7 Vincent Scully explained, "He [Eisenman] wants to do a lot of complicated things with his buildings, and one hopes he will continue in that vein. He also wants to be contextual, just as he is equally determined to rival

painting's capacity for experimental invention. By their very natures these two things are often in conflict with each other, and Eisenman is sometimes able to resolve their rival claims, sometimes not. Sometimes his 'deep structure' becomes an obtrusive and rather obnoxious graphic device. Sometimes it just seems urbanistically wrong-headed and visually unjustified. But sometimes it produces a lot of rich, fresh, invigorating architectural delight, and for that one is anxious to forgive Eisenman almost anything—especially those of us who don't care whether the theory is lousy if the building is good" (*Progressive Architecture* 10:89, 87).

8 R. E. Somol, *Progressive Architecture* 10: 89, 88.

9 Paul Goldberger, "The Museum That Theory Built," *New York Times*, November 5, 1989, 38, and Thomas Fisher, "Intro/duction," *Progressive Architecture* 10:89, 68.

10 From a panel discussion entitled "Pentamenti: Thoughts on the Future of American Architecture," Mershon Auditorium, Ohio State University, November 16, 1989.

Fort Sheridan, 698 acres in area, is scheduled for closure by the Department of Defense. Surrounded by prosperous North Shore Chicago suburbs, the army base sits on a plateau about sixty to seventy feet above Lake Michigan. Five major wooded ravines extend like fingers from the lake into the plateau. In 1888, the Chicago architectural firm of Holabird and Roche designed the initial buildings in simplified Romanesque Style. These buildings were grouped about a 54-acre parade ground and now comprise a designated historic district.

The redevelopment of Fort Sheridan was the focus of study for first-semester, first-year UIUC graduate students in the Fall of 1990. The study was supported by a grant from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. Selected master plan studies and/or development study segments are represented in the journal.



Mark Myers, Graduate Studio Project  
Expansion and Reuse of Historic District for Tech./Education Center, Ft. Sheridan, IL.  
School of Architecture, UIUC  
Ronald Schmitt, critic  
Fall 1990  
(Photograph: Ted Tinsman)

# In Search of a Critical Middle Ground

**Brian Kelly**

University of Maryland  
at College Park

*"Though I have to admit that my hands have been soiled by the scourings of past centuries. I prefer washing them to having them cut off. Besides, the centuries have not soiled our hands. Far from it, they have filled them."*<sup>1</sup>

—Le Corbusier

The architecture media of the 1980s gave considerable attention to contemporary architects' reactions to the tenets of the modern movement. While the beginning of the decade witnessed a rise of interest in historical precedent, the close of the decade saw architects seemingly preoccupied with manifestoes that would reinstate modern architecture to its former heroic position. There arose a debate between those who would adhere to a more traditional architecture, with its origins predating the industrial revolution, and those who found that the theories of the modern movement did not have the opportunity to be tested fully. Within this framework, we can understand the extreme positions that might be represented by Leon Krier, on the one hand, and by Peter Eisenman, on the other.<sup>2</sup>

Krier staunchly opposed the architecture of the twentieth century, arguing that modern architecture was antithetical, often hostile, and seldom complementary to the city. Therefore, it is not surprising that the majority of Krier's work is centered around urban design proposals. Krier's thesis is based upon a rediscovery of the principles of urbanism found in pre-industrial cities and, more directly, as seen through the tenets of classi-

cism. Because of this position, Krier wholly rejects the thesis of modernism, citing it as a failed experiment, an aberration in the history of architecture.

Eisenman, his theories and his architecture, can be seen to represent the other extreme. Eisenman and his followers feel that the experiment of modernism is not complete and continues to evolve in his present work. The realities of the industrial world and the philosophies that have been spawned in that context—most specifically the loss of a classical hierarchy—in the mind of Eisenman make the architecture proposed by Krier inappropriate to contemporary society. For Eisenman, the entire cosmology, the relationship between God, man, and nature, which produced Krier's beloved classical architecture, has been irrevocably disrupted, rendering that form of expression inappropriate for contemporary society. Eisenman sees architecture as a kind of mirror reflecting the salient characteristics of the people producing it. In short, he presents a reiteration of the old *zeitgeist* argument, that architecture is conceived of as the "will of the epoch translated into space." Krier, on the other hand, sees the problem of the *zeitgeist* as being outside the control of those who make architecture and therefore of no concern to the architect.<sup>3</sup> For Krier, architecture expresses timeless values that are independent of any particular culture or age.

The angst-ridden arguments of Krier and Eisenman provide good press and presumably sell copy. But, this polemic also produces





General View of the Neue Staatsgalerie (Photograph by Author).

a series of interesting questions. What are the ramifications of these points of view for the larger body of architectural theory and practice? Is either extreme exclusively capable of producing a truly viable and meaningful discourse on architecture? Is an architecture of retreat (that of Krier) a direction that can be embraced by the architectural community? And equally, is it desirable to pursue an architecture that adheres to urban principles that are largely antithetical to the city (that of Eisenman) and requires an esoteric knowledge of twentieth-century philosophy to uncover its significance? Both of these arguments are presented largely in terms of the forces of modernity and tradition that are irreconcilable. It seems that to embrace one or the other excludes the possibility of entertaining the merits of both.

It is not my intention to judge the value or appropriateness of either Krier or Eisenman's arguments, but rather to suggest that it might be of interest to concentrate upon an architecture that freely borrows, manipulates, and synthesizes aspects of both points of view without succumbing to the guilt that is often felt by the architect who embraces one extreme or the other. In this sort of inquiry we might see that the architect does

not simply choose a side and adhere to its tenets. Rather, the arguments of both sides can inform a more complex and difficult position that lies somewhere in between.

James Stirling and Michael Wilford's Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart represents an architecture that is not inhibited by the extreme arguments presented by the likes of Krier and Eisenman. Stirling and Wilford used aspects of both viewpoints to assemble a building that addresses traditional and modern concerns simultaneously. It is because of Stirling's interest in both tradition and modernity that this building forms the major focus of this discussion. James Stirling's own words provide a starting point for the interpretation of his work: "I'd like also to think of our work in regard to the context, referring briefly to some of our earliest projects which I would categorize as either 'Abstract' or 'Representational.' 'Abstract' being the style related to the modern movement and the language derived from cubism, constructivism, de stijl and all the isms of the new architecture. 'Representational' being related to tradition, vernacular, history, recognition of the familiar and generally more timeless concerns of the architectural heritage."<sup>4</sup>



*The spatial rendition of this event is adequately recognizable as Corbusian—the plan libre—and it is seen as being divorced from the precise spatial connections that might be associated with the traditional poche vocabulary of Schinkel (Photograph by Author).*

In his "self-analysis," Stirling cites earlier projects such as the Core and Crosswall House as illustrations of the "abstract," whereas he sees the Mavrolean House Project in South Kensington as an example of the "representational" aspects of his work. He concedes that in the St. Andrews University Art Gallery, elements of the "abstract" and the "representational" were combined in his solution. If we are willing to suspend judgment concerning his use of both of these words (for, is not all architecture at once "abstract" and "representational"?), we can see that Stirling continued to explore the relationship between these two concepts in all three of his German museum projects (the projects for Dusseldorf, Cologne, and Stuttgart). In the Neue Staatsgalerie, we find Stirling making use of "abstract" elements in the series of canopies that mark the entrances to the museum, in the boldly colored handrails, and in the piano-curved curtain walls. These elements clearly belong to the modernist "mind-set" of the architect, while the stone "chassis" of the building—the primary "representational" element—is indicative of his fascination with tradition.

Stirling's concern for both traditional and modern ideals is not confined solely to the aspects of the building's surface and to overt symbolic presentation. The architect is also concerned with a play of extreme strategies in the articulation of space. In this light, a traditional plan—an arrangement of discrete rooms—is played off against the icon of

modern plan-making: the *plan libre*.

Stirling's selection of precedent is critical to an understanding of the dialectical nature of the gallery. He relies primarily upon the references to Karl Frederick Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin, and to Le Corbusier's Palace of the Assembly at Chandigarh, India. The Altes Museum has been the most commonly cited source for the Neue Staatsgalerie. Schinkel's central rotunda and flanking ranges of gallery rooms are found to have corresponding components in the Stirling building. But, as has been pointed out, Stirling's building omits the grand colonnade that forms the facade of the Berlin building,<sup>5</sup> and many areas of the Neue Staatsgalerie plan depart from the discrete spatial vocabulary of the Altes Museum.

The departure from a discrete plan, or plan of traditional rooms, suggests the possibility that Le Corbusier's Palace of the Assembly also influenced the plan of the Stuttgart museum. Colin Rowe first suggested the compatibility of the plan of the Altes Museum and that of the Palace of the Assembly in his addendum to "Mathematics of the Ideal



*The traditional plan, an arrangement of discrete rooms, is played off against the icon of modern plan making, the plan libre (Photograph by Author).*

Villa," which appeared in his 1973 essay collection of the same title. Rowe described the relationship between the two buildings as "a conventional classical *parti* equipped with traditional *poché* [describing the Schinkel plan] and much the same *parti* distorted and made to present a competitive variety of local gestures—perhaps to be understood as compensations for traditional *poché* [referring to the Le Corbusier building]."<sup>6</sup>

Considering Stirling's long-time association with Rowe, one could easily apply the argument initiated in the "Mathematics" article to the Stuttgart gallery. The compositional characteristics of Stirling's building occupy a position somewhere between the Schinkel and Le Corbusier buildings, for it contains references to both traditional plan and the *plan libre*. The plan of the Stirling building bears greater superficial resemblance to that of the Schinkel building. The central rotunda certainly acts as the hierarchical focus of the plan, orchestrating the arrangement of suites of exhibition rooms around the edges in a manner not unlike that found in the Altes Museum. But, upon closer scrutiny, the influence of Le Corbusier becomes much more pronounced. Stirling's attitude toward axis forms a major departure from the example of the Altes Museum. The central axis in the Neue Staatsgalerie forms a line about which forms and spaces are woven and balanced. The promenade involves an active departure from and return to the central axis of the building in a manner that can be likened to the contrapuntal positioning of architectural elements in the hall of the Palace of the Assembly. Le Corbusier creates a stable perimeter to frame a field into which he interjects ramps, stairs, and other devices to create "a variety of local gestures." Likewise, Stirling anchors the perimeter of his composition with ranges of rooms that can be seen as an analogue to the galleries in the Altes Museum while simultaneously performing the compositional duties of the "bars" of offices found in the Palace of the Assembly.

Having established the perimeter, Stirling places the rotunda in a central position on the site and then proceeds to construct the

promenade. Ramps and stairs positioned perpendicular to the main axis of the museum direct the visitor's promenade away from the central line of organization and invite movement along the leading edge of the composition. The entry returns one to the scheme's center of gravity, but the entrance hall is deliberately positioned off-axis and presented as if it were in a dialogue with the neighboring rotunda sculpture court. The spatial rendition of this event is adequately recognizable as Corbusian—the *plan libre*—and it is also seen as being divorced from the precision of spatial connections that one might associate with the traditional *poché* vocabulary of Schinkel. Axiality is reestablished by the sequence of the ramp and its connection to the sculpture court.

The ramp, which exists as both a feature of the interior promenade and an extension of a local promenade at the urban scale, is a recurring theme in Stirling's oeuvre. The unbuilt project for the North Rhine Westphalia Museum, Düsseldorf, exhibits a similar interweaving of urban and internal architectural promenades. In the Düsseldorf project, Stirling employs a vocabulary of elements almost identical to the one in the Neue Staatsgalerie to maintain an existing pedestrian passage across the site. Had the project been realized, the pedestrian would have been permitted to move along an extension of the Ratinger Mauer, through a cylindrical court, beneath the bulk of the museum building and, with the aid of ramps, could have ascended to the level of the entry portico strategically located on the Grabbeplatz. A variation of this organizational scheme appears in the development of the unbuilt project for the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, in Cologne.

Given Stirling's propensity for a referential architecture (not to exclude the possibility of self-reference), it is certainly not surprising to find the reappearance of the Düsseldorf promenade in the Stuttgart museum. Stuttgart provided Stirling with the opportunity to employ the cross-site urban promenade developed in the earlier German museum projects. In this case, the urban pedes-

trian is permitted to traverse the site, ascending by a series of ramps and platforms from the level of the Konrad-Adenauer-Strasse, through the central rotunda sculpture court, to the level of the Urbanstrasse. The separation of the urban-pedestrian promenade from the ground plane of the sculpture court signifies a refinement of the Dusseldorf *parti* in that it allows for controlled access to the Stuttgart building's sculpture court. The Dusseldorf scheme, owing to the location of the urban-pedestrian promenade along the ground plane of the court, would have rendered the space entirely public. The Stuttgart variation on this theme allows the interweaving of public and limited-access promenades. The notion of interfacing urban and internal architectural promenades in this manner, though a rarity, is not without precedent. Most clearly Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, can be seen as a predecessor of the Stirling promenade.<sup>7</sup> Le Corbusier's use of the ramp as a device for allowing the pedestrian to traverse the site and interact visually with the inner workings of the building might seem to reflect the refinements exhibited in the Stuttgart building more readily than the earlier Dusseldorf project.

The interface between the urban and building-scale promenades sustained by the ramp extends the traditional/modern dialectic to the civic realm. In doing so, the argument is expanded to include reference to both the physical aspects of the context and the cultural/historical memory associated with the locale. It is the latter of these two aspects, the cultural/historical memory, that is of particular interest in the Staatsgalerie. It may be argued that there exist two Stuttgarts. There is, of course, the traditional Stuttgart—a city that once served as home to the rulers of land of Württemberg. That Stuttgart, the city of the Schloss and its magnificent gardens, the home of a dignified, albeit military-dominated culture, and birthplace of Schiller, had come to an abrupt end during the later stages of World War II with the massive Allied bombings. Photographs made after the German capitulation show almost complete devastation of the once-elegant city. Esti-

mates concerning the destruction of the city range in the neighborhood of 60 percent. Within this context we might also consider a second urban scenario, that of the postwar city—modern Stuttgart. This city retained little of the charm of the traditional city and wherever possible the signs of the firestorms and aerial bombardment have been expertly eradicated. The war provided an opportunity to rebuild the city according to modernist ideals. Probably the three best examples of postwar urbanistic strategies can be illustrated by the destruction of the formal axis of the Schloss gardens (for the National Horticultural Show of 1961), the construction of the object-fixated Landtag (Parliament) building adjacent to the Schloss, and the intervention of an urban autobahn along the line of the Neckar-Strasse (renamed Konrad-Adenauer-Strasse, the street that the Staatsgalerie fronts). These projects along with numerous other infill and rebuilding schemes made a conscious effort to distance themselves from the traditional city. The task of looking back, for the average Stuttgarter, did not produce a particularly romantic view of history. The images of almost total devastation coupled with the shame of German war crimes made for very difficult memories.

As a consequence of "soiled" memories and in response to the unstated but widely understood need to look toward the future (as opposed to "backward," into the past), postwar Stuttgart architecture can be said to be particularly fascinated with an heroic vision of modernism. The Schloss and select historical survivors were tolerated, though the style and implications of the character of their architecture were certainly disdained. The ideological focus of the region's architecture shifted from the floor of the valley, the location upon which the city had been built, to the surrounding hillsides—particularly to sites such as the Weissenhofsiedlung, where it was perceived answers to the problems of reconstruction might be found. This architecture subscribed to a different vision of the city, to a different vision of the role of the building within the city, and to a different reality of construction than the traditional architecture of Stuttgart. Consequently, the

city that post-dated the war became alienated from the city that had preceded it.

Stirling's solution to the dilemma of prewar and postwar Stuttgart was to allow aspects of both cities to exist simultaneously upon the site. He accomplished this partially through the employment of both "abstract" and "representational" elements that allow interpretation as icons of modernity and tradition, respectively. That is, the architect exploited the confrontation between contrasting stylistic elements to achieve his ends. He used these devices to build a perceptual/visual argument that informs the viewer as to the existence of the dialectic. In addition to the perceptual strategy, Stirling engaged a face-off between precedents to establish the argument at a conceptual level. He produced a building that, as is the case with the Villa at Garches, simultaneously evokes associations with the present and with the distant past. He achieved this conceptual framework by allowing his building to benefit from both the traditional spatial strategies of the Altes Museum and the modern paradigm of the Palace of the Assembly. The confrontation between tradition and modernity could have ended here, but Stirling chose to employ a through-site public promenade by means of the ramp. In doing so, the architect produced an essay that confronted architectural themes of style and composition, but he extended the argument to evoke memories of the city. Through the inclusion of this public, urban-scaled promenade he positioned his building to be interpreted as a theater of memory in a city where the memories were vivid and often best forgotten. He achieved this task by subscribing to urban and architectural ideals that are at once modern and traditional. The Neue Staatsgalerie alludes to both traditional and modern paradigms of the city. The building performs the task of forming space by participating as a fragment in the traditional fabric; but it also is a discrete object that stands out against the urban backdrop. The architect was conscious of traditional construction techniques in his allusions to solid masonry walls, yet he was true to modern methods by using *trompe l'oeil* effects on the wall surfaces, effects that

are explained by close inspection.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, the architect created a narrative that involves the building and the viewer in an examination of the memories of the two cities of Stuttgart.

The presentation of the building in the Rizzoli monograph *James Stirling, Buildings and Projects* cannot be discounted as a clue to the architect's intentions. On the first page of the section discussing the building, two images appear to suggest a general approach to the project.<sup>9</sup> An historical engraving of the existing Staatsgalerie building is reproduced to establish a general historical context, and below, an aerial photograph of the building is presented.<sup>10</sup> It is this photograph, curiously a construction photo, that initiates our interpretation of Stirling's motives. By the date of publication, aerial views of the completed project would have been available to the architect. But, a photograph of the site, somewhat in disarray because of construction—or might we infer, reconstruction—was chosen. The Neue Staatsgalerie conjures images of the almost total destruction of the city during World War II. Its rotunda, now deprived of a crowning dome, leaves the central space exposed to the elements. The assorted implements of construction scattered about the site might be seen as fragments of the building that were dispersed by a catastrophe. The same event, we assume, was responsible for the collapse of a facade—one that may have been not unlike Schinkel's facade for the Altes Museum. If we look further, we see that the floor of the rotunda has been raised in an awkward manner, causing a portal to be half-buried below the ground plane of the central space; this is probably due to some unknown requirement of retrofitting the old building, and is certainly not the type of error to be made by this virtuoso architect.

Further examination of the monograph will reveal the architect's intentions more forcefully stated. Any serious Stirling-observer is aware of the architect's cameo appearances in publications of his own work, which we might liken to the appearances of Alfred Hitchcock in his own films. Stirling's own

publications are full of visual jokes and light-hearted self-presentations. Wherever possible the architect seems to select a staged photograph to serve as an illustration of his work. With this in mind, one cannot discount the photograph of the "Visitor to the Staatsgalerie,"<sup>11</sup> no doubt a staged photograph, and an indication of the architect's somewhat sinister sense of humor.<sup>12</sup> Though allusions to Hitler are certainly in bad taste and indicative of the architect's cynical personality, the inclusion of the photograph no doubt serves as a key to the architect's intentions.

The presentation of the building in the monograph may serve as only the beginning of this interpretation, for a discussion of the building as a ruin can be continued to include the fragmentary masonry blocks carefully strewn about the building's edge along the Konrad-Adenauer-Strasse. And, more recent photographs of the rotunda/sculpture court, with its planting in place, show, from the inside, vegetation emerging from the position that we might imagine was the spring line of a once-glorious dome. This internal view recalls images of the construction of St. Peter's or the ruins of the Baths of Diocletian, when neglect permitted plants to spring from the lines of the vaulting. From the exterior, the effect suggests a funereal tone. We can imagine an association with the Mausoleum of Augustus or Hadrian.

Through the combination of both "abstract" and "representational" elements in the same scheme, Stirling distinguishes himself as an accomplished *bricoleur*. The presentation of both types of elements serves to blur the temporal origins of the building without becoming preoccupied with a discussion of *zeitgeist*. Stirling's building hit quite close to home for the German press and architectural community. It certainly evoked memories. Unfortunately, many who made their sentiments public revealed their own inability to consider a tradition prior to the Third Reich.<sup>13</sup> The building addresses the monumental and timeless qualities necessarily associated with civic architecture. That is, the architecture of the civic realm can not afford to resist or deny memory. Civic archi-

ture should encourage and provoke memory and association with both ideals and realities.

Stirling's building forms a critique of the present inability of architects to deal with the consideration of a civic architecture. Since its ultimate codification in Beaux-Arts architecture, the civic building has served as a theater of memory, an embodiment of the ideals and aspirations of the public realm. This form of architecture was complemented in the world of painting and sculpture by means of history painting and civic sculpture. The heroic themes contained in these art forms enabled the viewer to make associations between the past and the present while speculating about what was yet to come. With the dissolution of the public realm and the waning ability and/or unwillingness of modern architects to consider the role of tradition and memory, the art of making the civic building has been all but lost. Many contemporary examples of civic architecture appear crude, somewhat dislocated temporally and stylistically from their pre-modern predecessors.

At Stuttgart, Stirling calls attention to the need for the rebirth of a civic architecture in a sober and forceful manner not to be found in the work of many of his contemporaries. He does so without rejecting the richness and validity of our western architectural traditions, and equally, without dismissing the critique provided by the architecture of the first half of the twentieth century. In this context, Stirling poses what might be seen as a "critical middle ground" upon which the forces of history and modernity might be engaged in a meaningful discourse. The Staatsgalerie is not heroic in the traditional sense—the missing facade, discussed at length in numerous articles, is symptomatic of this compromise. Cleverly, Stirling avoids a canonical reassertion of heroics and provides instead a dissertation upon those themes that have eluded the architecture of this century and what might be explored in the next. In Stirling's own words: ". . . So, freed from the burden of utopia but with an increased responsibility, particularly in the civic realm, we look to a more liberal future



*The architect not only produced an essay that confronted architectural themes of style and composition, but he extended the argument to evoke memories of the city; the building serves as theater of memory (Photo by Author).*

producing work perhaps richer in memory and association in the continuing evolution of a radical Architecture."<sup>14</sup>

Though the *avant-garde* posture maintained by Krier, Eisenman, their contemporaries, and their antecedents will continue to have an effect upon architectural polemics and will appeal to impressionable architects, it is unlikely that it will sway architecture significantly in one direction or the other. Architecture, history shows us, has an uncanny ability to absorb extreme movements and persist in spite of the agendas of its assailants. The points of view articulated by Krier and Eisenman ultimately are manifestations of determinist attitudes. Krier rejects freedom of choice for the authority provided by classicism, and Eisenman abdicates all responsibility when he sees architecture, and the architect, as a vehicle to mirror the spirit of the age. The unique quality about an architecture of the "middle ground," of choice and free will, is that the architect is charged with a "responsibility" that can be neither ignored nor down-played. These responsibilities are not to be found in any one book; rather they can be observed in the whole range of precedent that architecture provides, including the distant past, the recent past, and the present. The proposition is not an easy one, the solutions cannot be readily categorized as a simple right or wrong, victory or defeat. But then, if either Krier or Eisenman were correct in their point of view, what would be the point in going on? Stirling illustrates at the Neue Staatsgalerie that extreme polemical positions can be engaged in a dialectic and synthesized into a meaningful whole. He is like the man described by Stendhal: "Thus, he was already considered by his fellows a *free thinker*. He has been betrayed by a host of little actions. In their eyes he was already guilty of one enormous vice: *he thought, he judged for himself*, instead of following blindly authority and precedent."<sup>15</sup>



Through the combination of both "abstract" and "representational" elements in the same scheme, Stirling distinguishes himself as an accomplished bricoleur (Photograph by Author).



## Notes

1 W. Boesiger and O. Stonorov, *Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret, Oeuvre Complete, 1910-1929* (Zurich: Les Editions d'Architecture, 1964), 11.

2 For a record of this ongoing debate see "Interview—Leon Krier and Peter Eisenman," *Skyline* (February 1989):12-15. Or, one might be reminded of the 1989 ACSA National Conference, in Chicago.

3 *Ibid.*, 13.

4 James Stirling, "The Monumentally Informal," *Neue Staatsgalerie Stuttgart* (Stuttgart: Finanzministerium, 1984), 9.

5 In his introduction to the 1984 Rizzoli monograph *James Stirling, Buildings and Projects*, *James Stirling Michael Wilford and Associates*, Colin Rowe laments the building's lack of vertical surface. He constantly returns to this point after each analysis and praise of the building's attributes. As we shall see, the missing facade is, I believe, in part connected with the establishment of Stirling's iconography for the building. For further discussion see Anthony Vidler, "Losing Face: Notes on the Modern Museum," *Assemblage 9* (June 1989).

6 Colin Rowe, "Mathematics of the Ideal Villa," in *Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976), 16.

7 This phenomenon of an interwoven pedestrian circulation at the urban and building scales appears to have a limited number of precedents. Some of my colleagues have suggested that this form of circulation is a relative of the galleria, but due to the proportions of the spaces involved, I hesitate to assert the connection. Rather, the scale of the connection might be better likened to movement between the forecourt and the gardens at the Palazzo Barberini, in Rome—yet this is most certainly not a public/private weave.

8 Stirling employed a method of hanging stone veneer that renders the spaces between

the panels as voids in opposition to the conventional technique of grouting between panels to give the effect of mortar and true load-bearing masonry construction. Upon inspection at close range, the visitor can peer into the depths of the wall, beyond the veneer, to discover the actual means of construction. Despite this "truthful" display of construction technique, the effect is rather disappointing since little thought was given to the space between the facing masonry and the weather barrier. Rather unattractive masonry hanging devices, insulation, and other articles are found in amazing disarray behind the stone panels. Considering the climate of Stuttgart, one might question the advisability of allowing "weather" to penetrate beyond the outer membrane of the wall.

9 Peter Arnell and Ted Bickford, eds., *James Stirling, Buildings and Projects*, *James Stirling Michael Wilford and Associates* (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), 252.

10 An aerial view would be particularly attractive to an ex-parachutist in World War II.

11 Arnell and Bickford, 256.

12 An examination of other photographs of Stirling's work will provide us with a host of images of his work in which the architect makes a series of Hitchcock-like cameo appearances. In this one, however, the character is certainly not Stirling.

13 Look to the contemporary publications and in particular to the dialogue reprinted in *James Stirling, Buildings and Projects*.

14 Stirling, "The Monumentally Informal," 17.

15 Stendhal, *Red and Black* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1969), 143.

# The Many Faces of Architecture, or, Universal Civilization, Linguistic Insights, and Architecture

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Octavio Paz in his Nobel lecture says: "Modernity is an ambiguous term . . . But what is postmodernism if not more modern modernity."<sup>1</sup> The present "modern/postmodern" world, however, seems to be facing the dawn of a new era: a global civilization dominated by multinational business, threatened by ecological disasters, and unsure of its new political order. The magnitude of its challenges makes the present tension between modernity and postmodernity almost irrelevant. The paper argues that this tension overshadows the approaching conflict between modern/postmodern architecture on one hand, and architecture of the emerging global civilization on the other. It suggests that the present architectural discourse is dominated by an understanding of languages as self-contained and autonomous systems which alienate architecture from the world and hinder its ability to participate constructively in the transition to the new age.

The coming "global village" introduces new opportunities, but also new predicaments. Yet architecture shys away from them and concentrates instead on its own intrinsic problems of aesthetics and form. This attitude is understandable. The "moral stand" of the Modern movement and its struggles for progress disappointed many, and the linguistic insights of semiotics, structuralism, and poststructuralism distanced architecture from problems lying outside its internal order. In contradistinction to the enthusiastic mood of modern architecture, especially in its heroic period, postmodern architecture

seems to be introverted and indifferent. Can this attitude change? Can architecture regain an active role in shaping the built environment? Can language support this role?

Language, whether verbal or visual, is a tool for describing the world, for agreeing on what is real or unreal, true or false. But language is also a set of rules, independent of reality, which binds us the moment we want to share information. In *Metaphysical Horror*, Leszek Kolakowski argues that this "set of rules" originates in civilizations. He adds, however, that people see the world through their own interests, preconceptions, and prejudices.<sup>2</sup> That is, they perceive the world from different perspectives. Thus the languages of the poet, the scientist, or the salesperson, for example, offer us distinct and almost untranslatable interpretations of reality. As Hans-Georg Gadamer explains: "Everywhere that communication happens, language not only is used but is shaped as well."<sup>3</sup> Thus understood relationship between language and the world means that when we choose a language we accept the world as established by its rules.

But as the number of observation points is unlimited, so is the number of languages they spawn—languages that constitute separate and self-contained systems, independent of each other. Thus being able to express only one aspect of civilization and only our own mental and emotional preferences, we are unable to understand each other. Religious and scientific languages, for example, depict two different and incompatible world views

and express the chasm between them, despite attempts to bring them together: on one side the incomprehensibility of mystical experiences for the scientific mind; on the other, the irrelevance of scientific reasoning for a mystical revelation. The lack of a single point of reference to which languages can be related, compared, and judged forces us to acknowledge that once we submit to the rules of language, we surrender any claims to objectivity.

The jumble of languages we use, whether professional or ordinary, describes reality with more or less accuracy; some express our thoughts with a great deal of precision and some do not. There is, however, no way to prove that one language is better than another. A language that is used to formulate a theory cannot be used to prove this theory's superiority. Hence we are condemned to live in a world in which various languages co-exist independently, all claiming supremacy, none possessing it.

Kolakowski suggests that this linguistic confusion arose when Reason displaced the relatively stable universe in which the spiritual, moral, and material worlds possessed a unified meaning.<sup>4</sup> The real could be clearly distinguished from the unreal, good from evil, and the true from the false. When philosophy rejected this order, it built another one rooted in rational thinking based on the senses and logic. And since Reason could establish its own criteria of validity and its own concept of truth, it usurped for itself absolute knowledge. Anyone applying Reason could decide

what was true, valid, and meaningful and what was not. Thus languages, communicating this plurality of views, became self-referential closed systems, merely different one from the other.

The forces of rational thinking make their impression on architecture too, and lead it into a multitude of fragmented ideas and concepts. Languages of architectural theory—the semantic ones—and languages of architectural forms—the iconic ones—offer examples of such fragmentation. A discussion between Peter Eisenman and Christopher Alexander published in *HGSD News* of May-June 1983 represents a confrontation between two theoretical languages unable to comprehend each other. One can clearly distinguish the two languages based on different premises and used to express incompatible views. While Eisenman represents an elitist intellectual attitude, Alexander bases his work on a populist common sense; while the first turns to his mind for direction, the second relies on an "empirical background." Neither one understands the other, and neither wishes to. As Eisenman says: "I feel the seriousness of your undertaking, but I feel it leaves me out, as I leave you out." Similar disparity exists between the writings of Robert Venturi and Robert Stern on one side and Bernard Tschumi and Daniel Liebeskind on the other. The situation in iconic languages is not unlike that in semantic ones. The architectural forms developed, for example, by Michael Graves and Frank Gehry differ radically from each other, and the formal vocabulary, syntax, and metaphors they

use represent totally different concepts and approaches to architecture. Some critics laud this situation as a victory of the versatile Postmodernism over the uniform Modernism, while others deplore it as anarchy and nihilism.

This linguistic impasse, whether in architecture or anywhere else, illustrates a postmodern condition in which a meaningful discourse seems not to exist and not to be needed. The emerging global village, however, the growing awareness of the interdependence of peoples around the world, the ecological threat of global warming, environmental pollution, and nonrenewability of natural resources, may provide us with a new purpose and hope. It may generate a new understanding of the relationship of people to nature and people to people; a new approach to ecology, economy, and politics; a reevaluation of the old rivalry between competition and coexistence; a new attitude toward the world.

Can language assist us in the transition to this new world? Can our long-lost roots to nature be restored; and can they displace the self-referentiality of languages? Kolakowski seems to suggest that we cannot sever our roots to the world because our language, "no matter how it is stretched and twisted, is not capable of breaking out of its origin in the perception, imagination, and logic which the universe has imposed on us."<sup>5</sup> Thus he reminds us that language not only represents syntax but expresses content as well, that language is not only an object of its own self-analysis and an endless deconstruction of meanings it tries to convey, but is also our bridge to the world—a means through which we can reach it. He adds in another place (*Modernity on Endless Trial*), "The world is not simply reproduced in language, it is appropriated only in the form of language."<sup>6</sup> Thus, although we can only grasp the world through language, we can grasp it nevertheless, and hence coexist with it.

Against these linguistic insights we can discuss the role of architecture on the shrinking planet and ask whether architecture is ready

to face the new reality. Unfortunately, the postmodern deliberations of formal issues in architecture appear to be limited and insufficient for this task. Something else is needed: ideas that recognize the rich diversity of architectural languages as well as the universal power of architecture to shape the built environment; ideas that treat architectural languages not merely as formal systems but primarily as instruments of thought and action; ideas that see architecture not as a world in itself but as an element of the complex reality that surrounds us all.

It seems that a reconsideration of Modernism's concerns with social issues and another look at language as a system of communication could offer us a basis for such ideas in architecture. If so, the current indifference of architects to world problems may be a temporary state of mind—an aspect of recent trendy theories. Since architecture encompasses a multitude of problems—from art to science, from poetry to engineering, from design to management—it needs and generates many languages. And it is with their help—in their form—that we can "appropriate" the complexity of the built environment.

The growing environmental consciousness suggests an urgency that architects should not disregard. Energy conservation, for example, is a major problem facing societies today and goes far beyond the fashionable passive solar energy of single-family houses. It may be rather the larger-scale problem of mass transportation versus the private car, hence a problem of higher densities and different lifestyles. Since these issues are formulated in different nonarchitectural languages, should architects ignore them or delegate them to sociologists, civil engineers, or transportation specialists? The continuous rapid growth of urbanized areas, especially in Third World countries, creates another problem much more complex than the "form of a city." Should architects remain concerned only with the formal languages of urban design and leave all other aspects of this complex and important problem to economists, politicians, or planners? The

relationship of architecture to nature, climate, or local materials and techniques poses another challenge to architects, but it is often lost in the present abstract imagery of “deconstructive” iconic languages. Such controversial problems as those of the homeless, or of “the relations between architecture today and poverty,” both of which Jacques Derrida mentions in a letter to Eisenman (in *Assemblage 12*), are basically disregarded by architects. Although solutions to these problems surpass the ability of architects alone and require commitment and a concerted effort of societies and governments, they cannot be solved without architects either.

As our ability to perceive the world through language makes it accessible to our minds, the problem still remains of how people, be they architects, specialists, or laymen, can communicate and work constructively together if they are concerned with often incompatible problems and use “untranslatable” languages.

A world lost in the plurality of languages is a world of ambiguity and incomprehensibility. How then do cultures and civilizations develop in such a world? Paul Ricoeur says that “cultures are incommunicable; and yet the strangeness of man to man is never total,” and later he adds, “certainly everything does not come out in a translation, but something always does.”<sup>7</sup> This partial understanding can be achieved, according to Ricoeur, by the human capacity for imagination, sympathy, and empathy which complements languages in the intricate process of communication. These human traits, although held in low esteem by the present fragmented society, will be needed indeed in the face of the coming universal civilization. For while the reckless exploitation of nature was closely related to the ego-centered “ME” generation which ridiculed responsibility and celebrated indulgence, the awareness of the fragility of nature and the necessity to develop a bond with it may stimulate goodwill toward the world, nature, and fellow human beings. Whether this new situation will lead to mutual understanding and a “WE” generation shall be seen.

Do these ideas represent wishful thinking about a golden future? Do they project another utopia? It does not seem so. Mutual understanding does not have to be an amorphous mixture of varying opinions, a way of homogenizing intentions and actions. Mutual understanding is not the opposite of conflict, but rather a means of overcoming conflicts, a form of conflict resolution; a proof that “the strangeness of man to man is never total.” And this understanding we begin to see everywhere: *The New York Times* of 28 June 1990, for example, quotes Richard Benedick, U.S. observer at a meeting of the World Wildlife Fund in London: “We’re seeing something completely unprecedented in the history of diplomacy. Politicians from every block and region of the world are setting aside politics to reach agreement on protecting the global environment. Governments are backing off hardened positions to get an agreement and even the customary disagreements between North and South—the developed nations versus the developing nations—lack their usual edge.” This “unprecedented” approach, based on imagination, empathy, and common interests, may become a dominant force in the coming global civilization. It may overcome our present bias toward the autonomy of languages and lead to an architecture actively involved in world problems.

Such concepts in architecture already exist. They spawn a multitude of architectural languages and show many faces of architecture. Some contemporary architects try to understand the new world and seek approaches appropriate to these new challenges. It may be too early to tell which are the new directions and who are the architects that will usher us into the twenty-first century, yet some of them can be suggested here. Could it be Erskine, who, in the Byker Wall, tried to relate architecture to its users without compromising either one, or Stirling, who in the Stuttgart museum tried to mediate tradition and progress? Could it be Utzon seeking in the Bagsvaard church a dialectic between the technological and the spiritual universes, or Hollein struggling in the Moenchengladbach museum for a balance between contextual and idiosyncratic as-

pects of architecture? Could it be Fathy proving that a meaningful architecture can be built with poor materials and primitive techniques, or Legorreta searching for a poetry of simplicity? Could it be Pietila, Hertzberger, Botta, Piano, Predock, or Nouvel? Could it be the concept of Critical Regionalism formulated by Frampton and Tzonis and inspired by Paul Ricoeur's essay "Universal Civilization and National Cultures"?

What links these architects and what gives importance to their work is their search for roots "in the perception, imagination, and logic which the universe has imposed on us." Their architecture deals with the multiplicity of issues, attitudes, and solutions concerning everybody and therefore understood by everyone. They seem to engage in what Ricoeur calls a conscious and critical struggle between universal civilization with its progressive but generating mediocrity, forces of science and technology, and the diversifying forces of local cultures which protect spiritual heritages but often hinder progress and material well-being. They approach architecture not only as an aesthetic experience but first of all as an important cultural force. They see architecture not as a self-referential, abstract language but relate it to societies and individuals, nature and civilization, technology and poetry, human needs and human dreams.

In our complex world a multitude of architectural languages is needed as never before. We should, however, understand languages not merely as autonomous, alienated entities, but first of all as "instruments of exchange" which can overcome the fragmentation of the present society, and can be used by architects and allied professionals in their common activity. It is not enough for architects to "celebrate" architecture in itself and for itself. It is not enough for architects to indulge in formal exercises while abandoning responsibility for the built environment. What is needed is their active participation in the great and never-ending task of "building the world." What is needed is architecture with its roots in nature and society. Such architecture does exist and its long and rich

tradition is as alive as ever. The global village, announced over two decades ago by Marshall McLuhan, is becoming reality, and architects may contribute their talents to its well being. It is up to them to choose either indifference or empathy.

#### Notes

I wish to thank Bill Ruzicka for his help in the preparation of this paper.

- 1 *New Republic*, January 7 and 14, 1991, 36.
- 2 Leszek Kolakowski, *Metaphysical Horror* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 98-104.
- 3 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 4.
- 4 Kolakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, 110-12.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 6 Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity and Endless Trial* (Chicago: University Press, 1990), 35.
- 7 Paul Ricoeur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures," in *History and Truth* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1965).



*Ann Reisinger, Graduate Student Project  
National Cemetery Reuse of Ft. Sheridan, IL  
School of Architecture, UIUC  
Henry Plummer, critic  
Fall 1990  
(Photograph: Ted Tinsman)*

# Talking Takeyamese: An Interview with Minoru Takeyama

**Paul J. Armstrong and  
Jeffrey Poss**  
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*Minoru Takeyama was the 1989-90 recipient of the Plym Distinguished Professorship in Architecture at the School of Architecture, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. While he was in residence he met informally on March 3, 1990, with Jeffrey Poss and Paul Armstrong of the School of Architecture to discuss his work and some of his views about architecture. Their tape-recorded conversation forms the basis for the following dialogue. The tapes were transcribed and the transcription was edited; each participant then had the opportunity to review the resulting manuscript, and to make further clarifications.*

**Jeff Poss:**

In your educational and professional experience you've had the privilege and opportunity to work with several great architects: Le Corbusier, through your affiliation with Sert's office; Isamu Noguchi, who was doing architecture and sculpture; as well as Arne Jacobsen and Jørn Utzon in Denmark.

Could you describe your experiences with these gentlemen and the impact you feel these mentors have had on your development as an architect? Not just with the types of things you build, but with the philosophy of the building in general.

**Minoru Takeyama:**

Starting in 1959, I was in the states for three years. Out of the three, I was a student for one year at Harvard, in the thesis studios. By that time I had my Master's in Japan, so I could get my Master's (from Harvard) in one

year. That one year was sort of an orientation period at school. I met some interesting students—some from Europe, some from other places in the world. Altogether, there were about fifty graduate students. In my thesis studio there were only ten or twelve, creating a nice, intimate feeling. Among the instructors, we had Jose Luis Sert as a dean, and Mario Romaniac, from Cuba, . . . who at that time was doing interesting work in some Latin American cities such as Havana, Cuba, and many other Spanish cities. In the late fifties there was tremendous focus on Team-10, which had a certain reputation in town planning, especially in the heart-of-city schemes. All these interesting architects were brought together in the studio. After graduation I started to work for Sert for a year on Corbu's Visual Arts Center for the campus of Harvard in Cambridge. After one year I switched to landscape architecture, working for Hideo Sasaki for a couple of months. Sasaki was kind enough to put me on an interesting job, which was an aquarium, a marina.

**JP:** Was that the Boston Aquarium?

**MT:** Yes—that commission. To begin with, they were asking people around the state to look at nice aquarium(s) all around America, so I had a chance to travel. I enjoyed that. However, some kind of accident on the client's side caused the project to be delayed. Later I found out that a friend of mine, Peter Schmile, built that scheme.

**JP:** In Sert's office, you had an opportunity



to meet Corbusier while you were working there.

**MT:** A couple of times. One of the presentations was very impressive. Everything, including the room, was white, of course. In all the preliminary drawings I found no dimensioning at all. The first drawing job I had to do for Sert was to determine the specific dimensions, such as floor height, the height of the door. I was requested to make a bunch of questions for Corbu's office and send him all the questions. An answer arrived months later without specific responses to the questions. Instead they sent the book about the Modulor, and the golden triangle. He asked us to determine the dimensions we liked, as long as we maintained the Modulor.

While we were doing working drawings he came a couple of times, in a very relaxed mood. Somehow I liked that relaxed feeling. And I knew at that time he was doing a museum in Japan in the same fashion. He picked up three disciples among Japanese architects at that time; he sent the preliminary design to them and they all worked on the working drawings. When the building was done he came to Japan for the first time. He didn't say much. He was rather disappointed with the final product. He felt they had done too nice a job, because the surface of the building was so neat. Corbu wanted to make it much rougher. So, knowing that fact, we tried to be as informal as possible and still strictly follow his advice.

I proposed to make a very interesting entry:

the 8 foot (2.16 m) ramp went completely through the building. In the center of the corridor it was still outside; I proposed to adapt to the seasons, so that in the winter the center would become an anteroom. I proposed that idea to Sert, but he didn't accept that. He said in winter it would be cold. Anyway, I enjoyed this work very much.

**JP:** And then you went to Sasaki's office?

**MT:** There I worked on several schemes, including the St. Louis Zoo and site planning of SIU (Southern Illinois University). Then somehow I had to go to New York, so I came to New York. I couldn't find a job. Sasaki suggested that I work for his old partner, Paul Lester Wiener. He again is the hero of CIAM in planning. With Jose Luis Sert, Paul Lester Wiener proposed some interesting urban design schemes for Latin American cities. I didn't stay so long at Wiener's because, besides planning at that time, he was doing lots of building. Somehow that didn't interest me. I was quite interested in regional and urban planning. At that time, there weren't many planning commissions in his office.

I went to work with Isamu Noguchi in his studio. At that time Isamu was collaborating with SOM New York, Ben Thompson, and Louis Kahn. He was doing several schemes in Manhattan, including the sunken garden at the Chase Manhattan Bank, and some sculpture gardens with Louis Kahn. I had to make all the drawings for his sculpture gardens. He didn't make any drawings at all. He made the very accurate clay models. I made the

drawings from this clay. I had to measure the clay very exactly.

At that time I also went to Columbia, because I was on a Fulbright. On a Fulbright Scholarship you could carry out more than academic work. For the first year I was a student at Harvard; for the second year I worked for Sert. By the third year I had to work at both practical training and school. While I was working for the summer I had to be at Columbia in order to be in New York. And the dean, at that time, was Charles Colbert, from Louisiana, and he had a very interesting scheme in which I worked as a research fellow, and that was to do the urban design of downtown Dallas. We stayed there for a month or so in order to do certain surveys. I like that. Especially the southern states—to see that part of the United States. However, after visiting the southern states, we came to the planning stage. And then some problems started. Mr. Colbert strictly adhered to a symmetrical composition, creating a symmetrical city. The highest order could be expressed only by symmetry. In order to justify that he would present his ideas to us. After every presentation he would ask if there were any objections. There were only two fellows in the studio—me and my friend Frederich St. Florian, from Austria—who raised our hands. We kept doing that so many times. Frederich ended up being a top student, then a teacher at Columbia. I was kicked out of the studio—I couldn't stay in America anymore on the Fulbright. I had to leave the country. So I wrote letters asking for jobs in Europe.

My first choices were to work with Jørn Utzon in Denmark or for Max Frey in England. Frey's answer came first: Come to Nigeria ASAP. There was considerable work at that time in Africa. But somehow I didn't go. I like living in the northern hemisphere. I did not want to go south, because I was born in the north. Then a month later an offer arrived from Jørn Utzon, which I accepted. Then I left America.

Today I think Mr. Colbert tried to do some

interesting schemes in the education of an architect: that is, to steer all the projects at the school in a very practical and pragmatic direction. He had a huge office in Louisiana at that time. All the office commissions were brought to the school. All the fees that the office got as commissions, he would give the students as financial aid.

**JP:** So actually, the academic studio itself would do the complete design and construction documents for the individual buildings. Teaching and working occurred at the same time and in the same environment, much like Wright's Taliesin Fellowship.

**MT:** I was rather fascinated at the first stage, but somehow I couldn't compromise to make everything in symmetry at that time. I ended up in a rough situation, and he wrote this official letter to the Fulbright committee, so I had to leave the country and the Japanese Embassy. Knowing that I was in trouble, all the instructors at Harvard, as well as Noguchi, helped me a lot, so that I could spend a couple months before I had to leave.

Then I went to Europe to work for Utzon for a couple of months. When Utzon left for a couple months to go to the site office in Sydney, he found a job for me with Arne Jacobsen. I was on the Assembly Hall in Semanubuti, Pakistan. However, I couldn't last long because Utzon's way of working was almost 180 degrees different from Jacobsen. Jacobsen couldn't take me as his assistant, so I had to leave.

**JP:** What were the characteristics of their working methods that made such a tremendous difference?

**MT:** First, I think their starting viewpoint. Jacobsen kept saying that my sketches were too brutal somehow, or too wild, or something like that. Second is a more practical aspect. To make good form, we would try to reduce or sacrifice certain practical aspects, such as a roof solution. He kept saying that this is a point where the roof leaks. And look at Jørn Utzon's buildings.

Then I went to work for the interior designer Finn Juhl. He was the interior designer for the United Nations Assembly Hall in New York. Also he was a disciple of Hans Wedner. At Finn Juhl's office I was requested to do a lamp design for an Italian firm. We spent a month trying to come up with something interesting. I still remember the day of the final presentation. Some businessmen came from Italy. We decorated the whole room. After looking at the presentation, they were so disappointed. They said it was exactly the same design they had in Italy. Even so, they decided to take the design. The reason was that Juhl's name was so well known in interior design. In a few years that original design would be forgotten, and Finn Juhl's design would become preminent.

Then I received a teaching job at the Royal Academy in Denmark. While teaching, I worked with Henning Larsen on the international competition for the Free University in Berlin. I enjoyed that job very much. Often we traveled through East Germany. Although at that time it was difficult for the Japanese to go through East Germany, we took a chance to see the wall from both sides. I have experienced it so many times. Ultimately, I think the work experience with Jørn Utzon was the most influential.

**JP:** Did you feel an affinity with him—perhaps a stylistic or philosophical similarity to your own approach to architecture?

**MT:** Maybe in the very broad sense of his conception. He defined architectural meaning in a very broad sense—like natural landscape or vegetation. Not so much in a historical context, but more sort of geographical or even geomorphological. And that kind of imagination appeals to me now.

**Paul Armstrong:**

Do you think that's characteristic of Scandinavian architecture in general?

**MT:** Jørn Utzon once told me about his experience working for Alvar Aalto, although he stayed there only three months. Sometimes he felt Aalto's architecture was not so

honest in completion. One example is the famous stool: In Finland they use laminated wood, and one of the stools consisted of three legs. In Utzon's office we had the same example. One day he cut the leather apart with his knife to expose the inside and he noted how dishonest the finishing was. Laminated wood is like the natural circumstances of a tree itself: that small line continues organically. That small piece had a circular spot in the middle and then three legs. The connection between these circular parts and the legs was very artificial. That part Utzon didn't like. He wanted to bring the laminate in continuously. Then his challenge started. Besides working on the Opera House, I was put on the stool—a project to find more honest variations. The final product was quite ingenious: we used very simple geometry so that we didn't need to hide the connection with the leather. It turned out to be too expensive to produce, however.

Utzon came to Japan when he won the Sidney Opera House competition in the late fifties. At that time he walked around the ancient cities of Kyoto and Soon. The amazing thing is, he went up behind the seating to see what all the members consisted of. Sometimes he even went under the floor. I think it's very remarkable to see the extent of his observation. Later he even wrote about it in a very naive way. A Japanese floor in a house is a piece of furniture. That's the reason we take our shoes off. From our study, we thought Chinese and Japanese floors were very much alike. Utzon extracted the dimensions, and found them different: A Chinese floor is an extension of the ground, whereas the Japanese floor is lifted in the air. That way of observing the object was new to me. Utzon was the only person to pay attention to a syntax more accurately. Therefore, he was very influential for me. At that time the training discipline was not to lie. Not to make any false statements. That was one of the essential statements of modern architecture planning.

**PA:** The truth-to-materials concept.

**MT:** Yes. Truth of composition, too.

**JP:** Do you feel there's some connection between the truth to materials that you see in Utzon's work and a similar attitude in traditional Japanese crafts?

**MT:** To a degree, yes. Also, how to compose elements into one is important, too. So one of his schemes was made out of precast concrete—he painted each member a different color—not for an aesthetic reason, but to show to the person who reads the building how it's made.

**JP:** That's the joinery in Japanese architecture. A kind of shrine. The importance of the pieces and the way that they fit together. The reading of constructional method. Do any of those instances or attitudes come into play in your work? The expression of pieces that combine together to create a whole?

**MT:** To an extent, but not in such a successful way. In Japan, my work cannot be as peaceful as Utzon's work can be in Denmark—to concentrate my attention only on the building; maybe that's one of the reasons why I don't pay so much attention as Utzon did to truth of material, truth of composition. Rather, I find more important things in the architectural roles here—somewhere between the architecture and surrounding society. When I came back after being absent for several years outside of Japan, the first thing I wanted to do was to switch my profession from architecture to politics. To an extent I found that cultural support of architecture is not yet complete in Japan. For instance, the client dictates to the architects. The architectural message in society is not so stable. There are so many things I found you had to do before we could enjoy architecture peacefully. I tried to be a politician a little while but I couldn't do it. So I stayed in architecture. And being an architect, perhaps I could try to do that. Maybe I'm still doing it, but it takes time.

**PA:** One of the myths that has been handed down from modern architects has been the idea that modern architecture could have an impact on social conditions—that architecture could alter people's social conscious-

ness, improve living and working conditions, etc. Do you feel that that's still possible?

**MT:** It is possible—Insofar as architecture keeps sending a certain social message as a public art. At least I hope so.

**PA:** How can it accomplish that, do you feel?

**MT:** In our training I think we're not yet ambitious about changing society by the power of architecture. We're rather passive in predicting the society or what would happen. Therefore, in order to do so we are not allowed to use any preconceived idea. Ideas have to be generated from our effort. That is our lesson today. Somehow, I think we can express certain ideas in an architectural message. Among these ideas, sometimes we can bring up certain political messages. Again, in Denmark, for instance, when the whole nation tried to participate in the European community, there were national votes. I think it was the early 1970s, actually '72. The role of architects at that time was to visualize that future. Then they saw the whole nation as a living environment would change through regional planning or landscape or even urban landscape. Therefore they're so busy, not in building but in conveying that message to the people. I found that's very good. That's what our role should include. That kind of architecture is very, very rare in Japan. But today an architect's name is beginning to be known among the public just as a name. If you ask the same people, "What sort of a building would this architect make?" nobody could answer. Even so, they can't appreciate the work of the architect. I think in Japan it takes more time to arrive at that stage in which the architect's role carries beyond a kind of physical state.

**JP:** The architect's name is in some ways another commodity; a symbol of quality or recognition rather than the actual product itself. It's advertising.

**MT:** Or simply because they appeared on a television program. Sometimes they get mixed up with a singer.

**PA:** You use the word “syntax” in a specific way when you described how materials went together as being a syntactic expression. In discussing the three-legged stool, for example, you described the laminated wood forms and the connection as a syntactic condition. Syntax also appears to translate into your work. In your Atelier Indigo project you had a cube on top that’s been described as a kind of Rubick’s cube; you could manipulate the panels of the cube itself to change the form of the building periodically. Is that related to what you were just talking about when you used the term “syntax”?

**MT:** To an extent, yes. I think that much of the landscape—not the actual language but the architectural language—seems to be three-dimensional—one, there’s a syntactical dimension; second, a problematic kind of thing; third, the semantic aspect. My meaning of the syntax or syntactic message lies in eliminating all these problematic aspects and semantic aspects. The rest as a whole is syntax. So that sometimes it is the composition of each element or sometimes even the composition of space as language. And often in teaching architecture we concentrate so much on the problematic aspect by using the word “home” and “functions.” However, I think it is rather difficult to stipulate function as a universal art source. Therefore, the only way we can teach is on the syntactic aspect. The semantic aspect, I think, is very much dependent on your personal judgment of how you see the world or society. My firm belief is that the only thing we can teach at school is syntax. So I’d better say syntax. Such is the case of Atelier Indigo. First of all, it was my own thing, my own building, so I couldn’t send much money. So I had to choose a very limited variety of material. The concrete we poured ourselves, so that the material we used in that is only local—wood, lumber. The compositional structure of the framework is itself very simple. Because it’s a snowy place, first we tried to make a graded roof but the site was too limited and we couldn’t use it. We tried to use a flat roof. It’s almost impossible to make a flat roof out of wooden timbers. And the looks just came out of external materials and internal logic—very simple.



*Atelier Indigo, Sapporo, Minoru Takeyama, architect (Photograph: Botond Bognar).*

Sometimes restrictions, based on economy, create very honest, simple, or naive solutions. We couldn’t use any synthetic material or insulation.

On the roof, as I mentioned before, that was rather intentional because I wanted to make a form which didn’t have any fixed form but a different image. I don’t know how to correctly describe this. Image and form somehow are different. Image is some kind of impression you get from the form. For instance, my hand can create different images, but the form stays the same. That kind of feeling I try to bring into architecture.

**JP:** We associate the image with semantic and the form with the syntax?

**MT:** More or less. What sort of aesthetic statement can we find in Eastern sculpture, such as a statue—a statue with multiple faces, or a statue with a thousand arms? Depending on how we read it, some persons can read all thousand arms at once. But some read among these different combinations only one pair, or a combination, and get meaning out of it. To me, somehow I’m still working on the differentiation between form and image.

**JP:** So the form is of constant value, and the image is based on the inconsistencies; the image aspect of it can actually change. How does this awareness of the differences begin to make form-making decisions in some of your more urban projects?



*Niban-kan Building, Tokyo, 1970. Minoru Takeyama, architect (Photograph: Botond Bogнар).*

**MT:** If somebody committed a very sinful crime and the police department posted a wanted poster, as we often see in American film, in that case they show only one shot of his face. That special image may represent a common form: the composition of his face. Similarly, sometimes I want to design a form with the hope that this form will create different images, like a facial expression. That was the case a few years ago. The other way around is that we determine the form and let form flow as people who use the building change. For instance, in one of my commercial buildings, like Niban-kan, I made a special form with a special image by painting the building, hoping that it would continue changing its image and accommodate every sort of image possible—like multifaceted modern art—but still keep a certain constant form based on a different image. Or sometimes I duplicate the image in one situation. I'm rather interested in that. As an analogy, I can bring up a costume, for instance—some kind of see-through costume. Sometimes we read the outside, sometimes we read through

the see-through; we leave something behind. And we get a double image. Sometimes we read the outside and sometimes we read the inside. That kind of thing is more appropriate to today's living. Or observing, or reading. The relation between form and image seems to be constantly changing, as I observe. But the unfortunate thing is that while I live in the city, or enjoy city life, I cannot depend upon such a naive way or such a simple way that once interested me. But some day I'd like to come back to that way, as I once enjoyed in Denmark with Jørn Utzon. That is too naive to hope for, it seems.

**PA:** In an earlier discussion you were making some statements about history and the teaching of history to students, and students learning and being able to understand history in terms of architecture and precedent. There is a debate going on in the architecture community today about the value or relative value of history. Gropius at Harvard had consciously eradicated history from the curriculum. How do you feel about history and its role for the architect? Do you agree or disagree with Gropius' point of view, and do you even acknowledge when people use the term "historicism." Do you acknowledge that as being a valid term, or is there another way to look at history?

**MT:** Gropius's idea of eliminating historical styling from the contemporary statement, I could agree with. Somehow we use words like "heritage" and "tradition." Even so, I think we have to learn about heritage—not to continue what has been done but to bring that idea up into a contemporary theme. That is valuable, too, I think. Today I still think that is important. Because we realize that without knowing what they have done before we could consider what *we* are doing is so original, so inventive. Therefore, just simply to orient our conceptions along the right track, I think we should know what they have done. I'm not so inclined as Michael Graves is. He graduated from Harvard at about the same time. He mentioned at that time that he wasn't so happy about Harvard. After he arrived at Rome on a grant or something, he got some enlightenment after looking at historical

models, and I think it's understandable. But in that respect I think Japan is somehow isolated because there's a certain historicism among Japanese architects. But they always translate Western historical monuments or Western historical styles in contemporary Japanese. But no Japanese will find specific memories in these statements. For them it is work which they haven't experienced. It was just about a hundred years ago, or a little more than that, that by a governmental law Japanese were forced to change their style from traditional to contemporary. I still feel that was funny compared with the rest of Asia. There still sometimes are strictly traditional values. It is a similar case, I think, with architectural statement. At that time they invited Western architects to oversee the design of public building based on the Western styles.

**PA:** It seems to me that the issue of historicism was raised particularly or especially with the introduction of Western culture to Japan.

**MT:** That is true not only of Westernization. When Buddhism came to Japan, say in the seventh century, more formal influences arrived, such as the way of building houses.

The way of drawing, even the styles, everything arrived first. Also language, because we borrow so much from Chinese, the expression and written language. Similarly in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, when Dutch people came to Japan, for them it was sort of as missionaries for the Japanese, and they borrowed certain conveniences or certain tools, especially weapons, like guns. Throughout the history of Japan, always some sort of physical influence overwhelms. If, instead of a physical influence, the influence became more metaphysical, I think Japanese history would have had a certain revolution. Because things went the other way around, Japan has never experienced revolution, but always evolution. They adapt. That is the certain uniqueness of the Japanese. And as a Japanese I sometimes question my slight deviation. Sometimes I

justify why I did it. Maybe things will continue like that.

**PA:** The question I was asking earlier was related to historicism and how this dialectical response has been formulated over a period of the past twenty years in architecture, as related to historical syntax. I think that the negative aspects of most late modernism or postmodernism have been its cavalier appropriation of architectural styles and imagery by raping history—as opposed to a more profound kind of discussion that has been acclaimed in architecture, which is more of a reopening of certain debates or discussions in architecture. These discussions were constrained or even abrogated by modernism itself—modernism became almost a dogmatic kind of structure, and aspects of modernism prohibited such dialogue continuing in architecture. What are your feelings regarding this kind of situation, in which this discussion has been raised about history and its application to architecture, either from a cultural point of view in Japan or in a broader sense.

**MT:** First of all, I consider architecture as one of the media by which we achieve communication, to the same extent as our language. In that respect I think modernism has a very limited scope of reference; therefore, our communication was limited—sometimes so limited that it happened only among the architects. Therefore, in that respect, we can name it postmodern as a whole, any kind of effort that brings this rhetoric, frozen rhetoric, into the public. I can easily agree with that too, because I feel honest in the same way. Like my personal efforts to switch from being an architect to being a politician; in fact, I wanted to let people understand what architecture is. However, to bring that effort into a historical aspect by emphasizing styles so much, I somehow disagree. Like what they call postmodern classicism, it's beyond my control, beyond my commission. Therefore, my effort is to share with others to give architectural language a much broader scope, sometimes introducing more of a natural language. As long as the area where

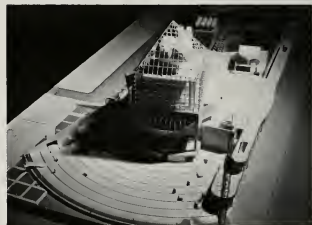
I live stays as commercial as it is today, I have a mind to bring up some commercial vernacular, too, or sometimes the industrial vernacular. Increasingly I am thinking about this consumption orientation we somehow get into in the end. In other words, we consume too much imagery. So my personal view for explaining what they call the deconstruction movement is a certain self-restriction of this image consumption—so that to bring up that kind of “discount sale” of images again, to bring it into some kind of limited value. I see among these deconstructionist architects, they don’t have any statements in common. . . .

**JP:** You talked a little bit about working methods and their results; I wonder if we can talk more specifically about your working method of design—or do you rely upon CAD?

**MT:** I wish I could use it more. In the states, as far as I see at schools, they use it a lot—even here. Last year I found so many people presenting their work on CAD. Maybe it’s too late, but I’m encouraging my office people to use CAD. The quite unfortunate thing is that CAD is being used as a presentation tool. I think very soon it should be used as a designing tool, to let the computer “think.”

**PA:** Frank Lloyd Wright used to say he designed everything, saw everything in his head before he set it down on paper. Of course, that was a myth that he perpetuated about this design method which was basically a cognitive process. How do you go about designing, in other words, conceptualizing a project to its fruition?

**MT:** In most cases I decide everything on the paper or model. Always, somehow, I’m not so content with things happening in the drawings or models. I would like to see things in reality. Sometimes it’s very difficult unless we have a generous budget or much time. I always use a very sneaky way around this. On the project, I draw something extra for the contractor, so they make something in reality, full scale, before they begin the construction—like tiles. Initially I didn’t like tiles so much. Tile is somehow durable today com-



*Tokyo Port Terminal, 1991. Minoru Takeyama, Architect (Model Photographs Courtesy of Minoru Takeyama).*

pared with other materials. So at a certain stage I have to use tile. And now to decide about the tile, I ask the contractor to save extras for testing—a bit more than what is budgeted for material costs. Like the factory I did for the candy store—within this project we could make every kind of effort, like deciding colors or testing, mounting tiles on the wall. But this particular technique doesn’t work with government or public work because they prepick supplies in advance. Only in rare cases can we do that. I always like to see the things on the site, I like to feel them with my hands. For most Japanese buildings, for instance, especially traditional buildings, they didn’t use any drawings until quite recently. Only a century ago they started to use drawings. We may see in the future, maybe something will happen in the age of the computer. We won’t need any drawings. We’ll simulate everything on computers. That’s my dream.

**JP:** Do you think in Japan, in general, there is less reliance on drawings because of this



tradition? Is there less need on the part of the contractor to rely for every detail specifically on the architect's drawings or specification, or is there more freedom to alter things, at least in the private realm, than perhaps you'd find in an architectural practice in the United States?

**MT:** In that respect I think everything is similar to the states. Because of that tradition, as you mentioned before, a few architects can do that—like Maki, he loves to change the design on site. On a limited basis they are allowed to do so. Perhaps I mentioned before that when I was working on Corbu's building in Sert's office, he didn't specify dimensions. He gave us the book about the Modulor. I think that is a very traditional way of doing it in Japan. The master builder had only one scale and he visited the site and measured higher or shorter.

**PA:** You mentioned that an ideal scenario might be to narrow the distance between design and execution, to make it possible for the architect to communicate directly in a building process. Or the computer simulator might simulate the actual experience of the building and communicate that directly without using any other intermediary kind of language. Is there a way that we can bridge this gap that's been created between architect and contractor, for instance, or are we living in a superspecialized age in which that schism is going to become greater and greater?

**MT:** Maybe some effort is possible. The construction document is a document which has a certain legal message, especially in the states. The contractor and the client make a contract on that document. The lawyer always has control. I think that message should be removed from the contractual document. Then we should make a contract not from that detailed condition but from more basic conditions like the architect's professional, ethical attitude toward the job, or the financial aspect such as a fixed budget that shouldn't be changed. If we could achieve that stage of the contract, then that

may become possible. It may be difficult in a society like the one in the states, where everything has to be in the contract. But in a society like Japan, which is, I think closer to a kinship society, it may work a way we can achieve. But if it goes to an extreme, that's terrible. The only important thing is our ethical attitude toward our profession.

**PA:** What is the Japanese cultural perception of the role of the architect and the education of the average person as to what architecture is? Do you sense a difference in the Scandinavian countries, for instance, in Denmark specifically, where the architect perhaps had a different role? Was there a different understanding of architecture in that culture?

**MT:** I do. Still I do. One of the examples is, if you count Copenhagen, you pick up a taxi, and you ask the cab driver to bring you to an Arne Jacobsen work of architecture. I'm sure any taxi driver can take you to not just one but two or three. But if you do the same in Japan, ask him to bring you to any masterpiece done by Tange, only a very, very few taxi drivers can identify who Tange is.

# Francis J. Plym

## Traveling Fellowship

*The Francis J. Plym Traveling Fellowship in Architecture is for travel and study in Europe for at least four months. The competition is open to graduates of the School of Architecture of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The award is based on the scope and quality of professional development since receiving an architectural degree. Preference is given to applicants less than thirty-five years of age. The following is a listing of recipients of the Fellowship.*

|         |                               |         |                                |
|---------|-------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------|
| 1911-12 | Donald Graham, '07            | 1938-39 | Leonard Wayman, '35            |
| 1912-13 | Edward R. Ludwig, '11         |         | Thomas J. Imbs, '37            |
| 1913-14 | Max A. Montgomery, '12        | 1939-40 | Bernard Holmes Bradley, '38    |
| 1914-15 | Charles B. McGrew, '13        |         | Howard E. Phillips, '39        |
| 1915-16 | Alexander R. Brandner, '13    | 1940-41 | Alexander Kouzmanoff, '40      |
| 1916-17 | Roger C. Kirchhoff, '13       |         | Kenneth W. Brooks, '40         |
| 1917-18 | Henry Dubin, '15              | 1941-42 | Richard E. Drover, '40         |
| 1920-21 | Ernest Pickering, '20         | 1950-51 | William C. Muchow, '47         |
| 1921-22 | Floyd William Ray, '21        |         | Robert P. Link, '47            |
| 1922-23 | Edward Lawrence Hubbell, '22  | 1951-52 | Sheldon Leroy Hill, '51        |
| 1923-24 | John Donald Tuttle, '23       |         | David Keith Pyle, '50          |
|         | George C. Hewes, '23          | 1952-53 | James Arthur Scheeler, '51     |
| 1924-25 | Earl Victor Gauger, '23       |         | John Edward Severns, '50       |
|         | Reuben Pfeiffer, '24          | 1953-54 | Richard Edward Nevara, '51     |
| 1925-26 | Albert Reyner Eastman, '23    |         | Delbert Everett Allison, '50   |
|         | Keith G. Reeve, '25           | 1954-55 | Jim Kazuo Maeda, '54           |
| 1926-27 | Frederich Harold Naegele, '25 |         | Donald Eliot Thompson, '53     |
|         | Harley J. McKee, '26          | 1955-56 | Harold Campbell Young, '51     |
| 1927-28 | Granville Spear Keith, '27    | 1956-57 | Jack Mitchell Goldman, '51     |
|         | Edwin A. Horner, '22          |         | Joseph Robert Deshayes, '50    |
| 1928-29 | William Piers Crane II, '28   |         | George Wesley Reihmer, '50     |
|         | Emory M. Searcy, '28          | 1957-58 | Donald Emil Sporleder, '53     |
| 1929-30 | Donald Port Ayres, '29        |         | William Paul Wenzler, '52      |
|         | John D. Jarvis, '29           | 1958-59 | James Lee Caron, '50           |
| 1930-31 | Francis Joseph Heusel, '30    | 1959-60 | Richard Elmer Carlson, '55     |
|         | Harlow Panhorst, '30          |         | Herbert Schneider, '57         |
| 1931-32 | Charles T. Masterson, '30     | 1960-61 | Thomas David Green, '59        |
|         | James E. Branch, '29          | 1961-62 | Leonard Algot Peterson, '59    |
| 1932-33 | Kenneth Nels Lind, '31        | 1962-63 | Donald E. Evenson, '61         |
|         | E. Todd Wheeler, '29          |         | William Peter Milbratz, '54    |
| 1933-34 | Charles G. Rummel, '33        | 1963-64 | Russell Victor Keune, '61      |
|         | Richard L. Troxell, '29       |         | Frederic Derr Moyer, '60       |
| 1934-35 | William Vernon Reed, '30      | 1964-65 | Raymond Stanley Chocholek, '60 |
| 1935-36 | Eugene Ferdinand Stoyke, '35  |         | Ronald Kent Sawyer, '62        |
|         | Carl John Sterner, '31        | 1965-66 | William Arthur Doyle, '61      |
| 1936-37 | Harris A. Kemp, '34           |         | Helmut Ajango, '58             |
|         | Rudard Artaban Jones, '36     | 1966-67 | Donald Raymond Sunshine, '57   |
| 1937-38 | Jedd S. Reisner, '34          |         | Charles Clyde Lozar, '64       |
|         | David B. Runnells, '38        |         |                                |

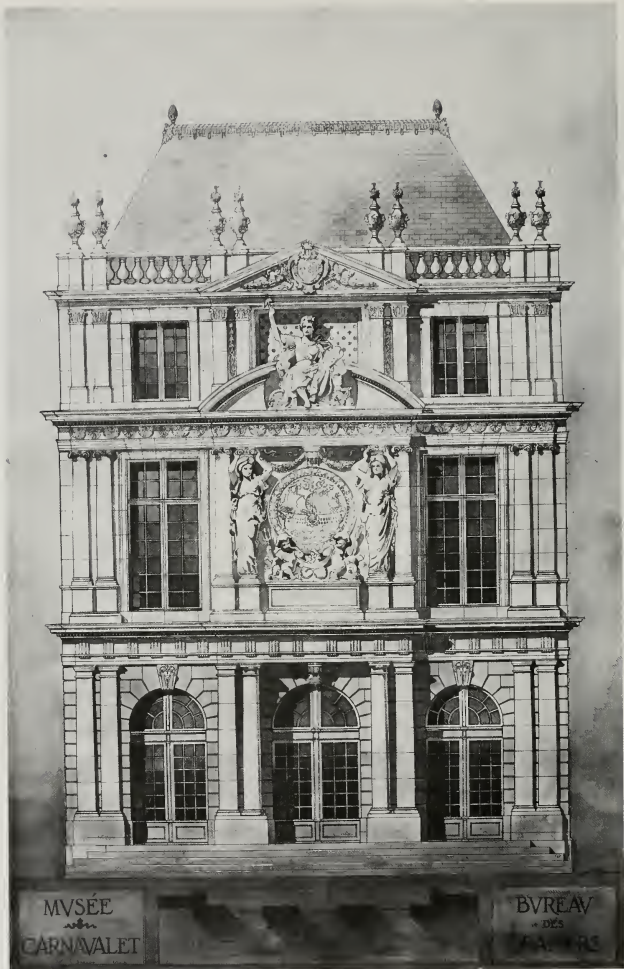


Francis J. Plym, Student Project  
 "A Museum of Painting and Sculpture"  
 Department of Architecture  
 University of Illinois (now UIUC) 1897

- |         |                             |         |                           |
|---------|-----------------------------|---------|---------------------------|
| 1967-68 | William F. Schacht, '62     | 1978-79 | Louis Wasserman, '73      |
|         | Robert T. Mooney, '62       | 1979-80 | Ralph E. Johnson, '71     |
| 1968-69 | J. Stroud Watson, Jr., '60  | 1980-81 | Gary W. Stluka, '73       |
| 1969-70 | Calvin H. Peck, '67         | 1981-82 | Kevin T. Triplett, '74    |
| 1970-71 | James P. Warfield, '65      | 1982-83 | Carol Ross Barney, '71    |
| 1971-72 | William J. Voelker III, '65 | 1983-84 | Randall S. Lindstrom, '77 |
|         | Richard T. Banks, '62       | 1984-85 | Robert E. Fugman, '71     |
| 1972-73 | Edward G. Raap, '66         | 1985-86 | Randall G. Dixon, '76     |
| 1973-74 | William B. Bauhs, '65       | 1986-87 | Thomas A. Kubala, '73     |
| 1974-75 | Eugene H. Clements, '67     | 1987-88 | August F. Battaglia, '74  |
| 1975-76 | Douglas R. Okun, '67        | 1988-89 | John F. Kelley, '81       |
|         | Michael J. Plautz, '67      | 1989-90 | Walter E. Miller, '79     |
| 1976-77 | Leon Goldenberg, '71        | 1990-91 | Lucinda Schläffer, '77    |
| 1977-78 | John R. Smart, '68          |         |                           |



Francis J. Plym, Student Project  
 "A Museum of Painting and Sculpture"  
 Department of Architecture  
 University of Illinois (now UIUC) 1897



Ernest Pickering  
Plym Fellow, 1920-21  
Erwois, 1922

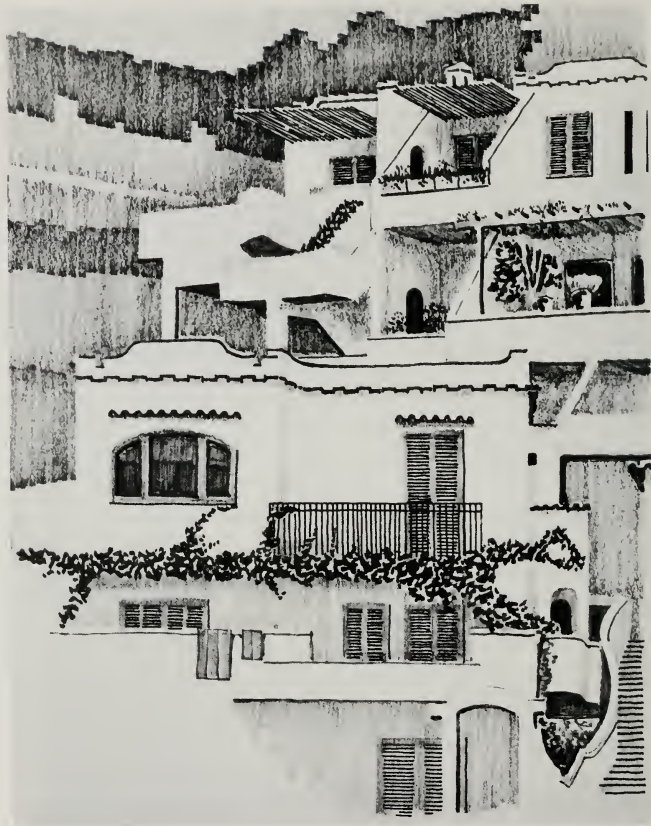


Donald R. Sunshine  
Plym Fellow, 1966-67  
Travel Sketch: Chartes  
June 15, 1967



la CHAISE DIEUX,  
FRANCE

Frederic Derr Moyer  
Plym Fellow, 1963-64  
Travel Sketch: la Chaise Dieux  
September 1964

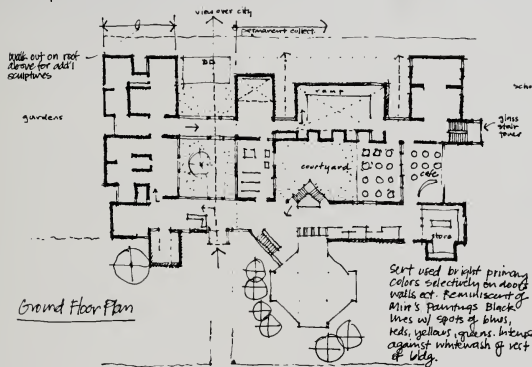
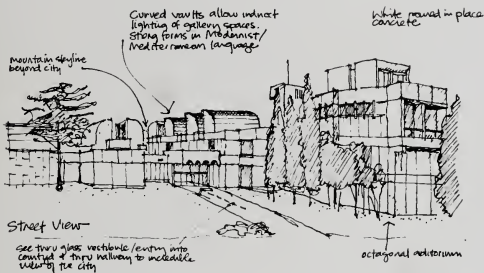


Douglas R. Okun  
Plym Fellow, 1975-76  
Travel Sketch: Positano, Italy  
1976

# Jaun Miro Foundation

Josep Lluís Sert 1972-73

Parc de Montjuïc



John F. Kelley  
 Plym Fellow, 1988-89  
 Travel Sketch  
 October 1989

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# Concept and Image: How Design Evolves

A Public Forum with  
Gunnar Birkerts,  
Joseph Esherick, and  
Minoru Takeyama

*The School of Architecture hosted a convocation of Plym Fellows (Illinois graduates who had received the Francis J. Plym Traveling Fellowship in Architecture) in September 1989 on the Urbana-Champaign campus. A major event of the convocation was a public forum with Plym Distinguished Professors in Architecture. The Plym Distinguished Professorship was endowed by Lawrence J. Plym and initiated in 1980. Since its inception, four internationally recognized architects have held the position: Gunnar Birkerts, Paul Rudolph, Joseph Esherick, and Minoru Takeyama. Only Paul Rudolph could not attend the forum. A. Richard Williams, Professor Emeritus of the School of Architecture, was the forum moderator. The public forum was held at the Festival Theater, Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, on Friday, September 14, 1989. The following is a transcription of the forum edited by Ronald Schmitt and Paul Kruty, members of the **Reflections** Board of Editors.*

## **A. Richard Williams**

We have a theme for our discussion this afternoon titled "Concept and Image: How Design Evolves." I wouldn't attempt to go into Webster's dictionary for an explicit definition of "concept" or "image." Instead, we hope to let this meaning be defined by the discussion this afternoon.

## **Gunnar Birkerts**

I think Webster's got away easy by its definitions of the topic that we have. I think design,

or creativity and concept has a mystique. Architects have searched forever to explain how ideas come about, how concepts are created, how we think, how we transmit ideas from our brain to paper, but actually to a building. As I mature as a professional, I design more and more and I talk about it less and less. I wouldn't say that I've *found* the way but that I'm nibbling at the way.

I would like to use a metaphor to describe design as I see it. The metaphor for the architect is that of a storyteller. There's a story, he has a core that is the basis of the story, then he uses alphabet, then he uses syntax, and then he uses a lot of confidence in order to tell the story. A good storyteller can tell a beautiful story that can carry us away and can create a picture, the images. The architect is doing the same, although his core is the information that he gets about the project, that he collects about it from the site through the plan characteristics through budgets through whatever is affecting the building design pragmatically. The alphabet is his knowledge, his culture. It is what he has learned, what he knows, and how he feels about the other arts. How much he carries is in his heritage, his culture and form. The syntax is what we learn in school. That is the "how to," the technology of how to put things together. And then, finally, there is self-confidence. Only through self-confidence can you create freely. If you are not confident, if you have apprehensions, you are hampered in the process of creating. So I think a storyteller needs all these things, and that is, in a way, design.





*Photograph of Participating Plym Distinguished Professors. (from left to right) Gunnar Girkerts, FAIA, Joseph Esherick, FAIA, and Minoru Takeyama (All photographs courtesy of School of Architecture, UIUC).*

### **Joseph Esherick**

What we do as architects is a reflection of our world view and how we go about living our lives. Life is most important. In this, I think, we all are more or less the same. But our interrelationships are extraordinarily complex if only because of the enormous differences in interests and, indeed, world views. Because of this simple notion, I, as an architect, aim to provide settings that help but don't get in the way and are capable of being interpreted—"read" would be the fashionable word—in different ways. So what do I do? First, I try to be as attentive as possible to my clients, to listen and to confirm what I think I hear. I used to try to start a job with questionnaires and asked clients to write essay; then I would go into the backroom, draw something, and present it to the client. I found that this worked with relatively small groups, but the client was in a position of attacking my proposals and I was in the position of defending. I really didn't have anything to defend because it wasn't my building. It's the client's building. And an adversarial relationship grew up that I found very unsatisfactory. So what I do today is to work directly with clients and to get things answered right away. I find that if I'm working by myself, as soon as I get an idea I

immediately get a sort of counter-idea and then I find I don't have enough information and I need the client to inform or support me. I take this to be fundamental, that site, the environment, and technical issues have to be dealt with in the most effective way possible. One might recall Hardy Cross's aphorism that strength is essential but otherwise it is unimportant. All the issues I've mentioned are similarly essential and they usually come from established knowledge, experience, or from analytical means combining knowledge and imagination.

What is interesting is where the important things come from. I can say that I try to avoid preconception, style, established method, or any of the numerous orthodoxies available—orthodoxies in the public domain or purely personal. On the latter, while it seems inevitable that there will be some personal traces one leaves, I deliberately try to avoid any singular personal imprint. The Beaux-Arts training I had certainly left an imprint. And while I can't get rid of it, I try to avoid letting it get in the way. What we do as architects is to design stuff that hopefully gets built. Space and light are what we work with. I am most concerned about fit, with site, with use, and with intentions. How do I know some-

thing will fit? I don't. I guess. And I base my guesses, in part, on direct experience. In part by vicarious experiences of looking and listening plus a lot of reading—not architectural reading, a lot of which I don't understand, but fiction and history. What do I look at? Usually ordinary everyday things. Just as I listen to ordinary folks. To me it is easier to achieve a better fit in ordinary ways with ordinary means. The real problem is to make the fit complete and to sublimate the ordinary—but still not allow whatever is done to dominate or demand our attention or divert us from getting on with enjoying life.



### **Minoru Takeyama**

To me, architecture generally has three attitudes. First, how to make it right, which is related to language or syntactics and how it will be used by the people. The second, pragmatics or function. But, thirdly, architecture is something beyond these interrelationships and it is more metaphysical and meaningful. And to me, since architectural expression has meaning, I became an architect. (Before I became an architect, I intended to be a writer, however, I had to give up.) This meaning of architecture seems to me to be something equivalent to writing fiction or a novel. Most important is creative expression. Architectural creativity, however, has two dimensions: One, imagination or conceptualization; and two, technology in the broadest sense. If we miss either of these, I think our creativity cannot be expressed. I try to bring technological discipline to a building or, before that, persuade the client on a certain technology. At the same time, in order to achieve creative expression, you have to depend on a way of getting an image or concept. In my creative work, I try to have at least three attitudes already in mind. One, I don't hold a pencil until I get a clear image. I stay away from a drawing tool, otherwise I depend too much on the technology side of my expression. Two, I try to observe things as creatively as possible. To me, "to see things" is the starting point of creation. In that sense, I try to observe things as creatively as possible. Three, I try to always be "self-teaching." To me, teaching is always learning.

### **Williams**

Lets look at that magic moment when all those voices are at work in generating a synthesis to a new building. No matter how modest or how complex, there is a transformation somewhere that clicks, a feeling when it is right. I remember Lou Kahn's eloquent expression of this particular moment as knowing somehow "what it wants to be," what this whole circumstance wants to be, becomes clearer. How would you think about that transformation, when it really is "this is it"?

### **Birkerts**

Concept can only take place after we have fed all the possible information into our brain. Whatever we get from the client defines the problem. Once you know what the problem is, we do our own research. We plug in all the other considerations: the site, climate, orientation, vegetation, budget, available technologies, material, context, etc. That all becomes the core when you start telling your story. After that, verbalization may take over and you start talking about it. You probably would not be talking with a pencil but, after a certain level of maturity, you'll be doing it in your mind. You don't have to close your eyes, really, as you do it in your mind. You can visualize; you can begin to achieve forms, things. You have to start getting images that have been created by the saturation of information. If you are missing pieces, you are going to misfire your concept. With all the pieces, you can make a statement, either verbally or graphically, and you can then draw.

I would like to make one thing clear about conceptualization. It is subconscious. Architecture goes beyond stating the concept. After that, there's a good deal of support as some twenty people besides you may be designing and this may be normal design; however, it is still working within the concept. When you say "the concept" architecturally, you're really at the same time stating down to the detail and then you follow through and see if that interpretation by others is following the same. So concepts really are containing. Strong concepts contain all the direc-

tives that your brain can give to yourself and to others. And that is, I would say, almost the whole secret about design. Don't preconceive, know enough about it, have enough culture in yourself, and, make a statement that can be conveyed and which has meaning in society. You have to be responsible enough to make a statement that is understandable and can stand for a hundred years because you have said it.

### **Esherick**

I agree with you completely that concept is not some *a priori* thing into which you fit everything. If something has a concept, it's a matter of giving coherence to a lot of information and to some sort of proposal later on. I have long believed that this question you hear from design critics some places—"what is your concept?"—is a carry-over from the Beaux-Arts system. What we had to do was to produce, in eight hours, an esquisse, and you did a little thing on a piece of paper which was the basic scheme and, in the American version of the system, you were required to stay with that scheme and if you deviated from that scheme your proposal was simply turned down. It was not even judged. There were all sorts of wonderful biblical terms, judgment and so on, that come into this. I long argued that the Beaux-Arts system is alive and well. It's just extraordinarily well disguised in the schools.

### **Williams**

I gather from what you are pointing out that concept is intrinsic as design evolves. The whole vocabulary—space, material, structure, even furnishing down to the most finest detail, is all part of the concept. The Beaux-Arts is a thing we still are trying to nail with its virtues in this school and others because it defers the beauty of the detail as simultaneous with the rest.

### **Birkerts**

It is not that. Conceptual design is the process of synthesizing all the factors. In a way, organic architecture wasn't Beaux-Arts. Because the Beaux-Arts buildings already were boxes with columns, or Postmodern, or whatever, and we fit things into it and we have

to follow through and make it way do or die. Really, architecture should be an organic process. Design is a process; and, in the process, you respond to all the ingredients that are affecting you and the client. This may be the biggest ingredient. You have to respect that. And with the design of the building, you carry all the messages there are—the client, the times, the culture, and everything. It is not predestined image: an image is arrived at in the process of design.

### **Williams**

It is a process of control and development, a controlled evolution.

### **Birkerts**

You are, but the architect isn't [controlled]. We are engaged almost like agents to do a certain job and then we are judged probably by what we had done previously. The ones who have style go by the style, and those without style, like we here, are judged by a process of doing things.

### **Takeyama**

My native language is Japanese, therefore in translating the word "image" it is something like "shape of soul." "Concept" can be translated into "something that lies in the brain." Maybe the word "image," to begin with, is nothing visible. It is something that comes in your mood or attitude. Therefore, as image, itself, we can see a visual effect. Concept comes much later, after getting all the ingredients. Therefore, we have to depend on our idea that we just reached. It comes from our brain; it goes to different functions of our brain.

### **Birkerts**

In a way, when you are working toward a concept, you are doing a kind of minuet with minor conceptualizations that allow you to ask more questions. You don't have to define initially a final concept, but for me to get to the final concept I have to "fake" other concepts or have safe concepts going, in a sense, in order to extract more questions which may come; and so it's a step in the total process that you visualize something that you do not end up with. But it is a kind of vision which

is a step, sometimes, to a final [point]. I think a concept can be said verbally. At the moment you can verbalize what you are thinking, you are O.K. You can come up and you can start drawing.

### **Williams**

The fact is that it isn't so much vision as it is something lying deeper. Image implies something more than a picture. In the midcontinent, we're aware of our heritage: the Chicago School and Prairie School. We're aware that these labels—and there's certainly many more labels than these—refer primarily to the outward, visual aspect of building. Art historians and architectural critics tend to give us stylistic labels. I get from what you're saying that we search for things that are invisible too. The vocation of meaning is a very complex thing made of up of many things, that perhaps image, in our case, is certainly much more profound and includes invisible things—spirit, if you will.

Perhaps now we can have questions from the audience.

### **Botond Bognar**

(Professor, School of Architecture)

When we generate image, is that image just a kind of visual feature or is it much deeper than that? Gunnar said it's perhaps pretextual. It's not textualized or not verbalized in that sense. The second question is the "fit" or "not fit" kind of syntax and so forth—the poetic aspect of architecture when the poetic language is the violation of the taken-for-granted syntax. It's perhaps also a mode of discovery, maybe design in the process of image/concept which we very conveniently put into a sequence. How is that taking place in your own personal way? Is there any kind of personalized mode, an experience perhaps, in designing wherein this pretextual image, a world view, can take shape in and against these rules?

### **Esherick**

Let's finish with image, if we can. It seems to me that English tends to adopt meanings which migrate over time, and then specialties, presumably using English, tend to have

their own specific uses. The profession, architecture, is great for mindlessly adopting words from other enterprises. Postmodernism started as a literary term and was really quite clear with quite different intentions than what architecture means. I think "image" does the same thing. I think the architectural use of image is closer to the advertising man's use of image. The notion is there's a kind of singularity and a sort of icon that you are producing which isn't really so interesting as Minoru's definition. You have included an intention in the image. And even when you do have a specific iconic image, that image has behind it intention. That seems to me to be much more useful.

### **Birkerts**

Back to poetry, I think there can be poetry in architecture. Actually I think architecture is talking. If you are an architect, buildings talk to you. There are buildings that are friendly and there are buildings that are not friendly, aggressive, and so on. They talk. But also they can say poetry. We have poetry in structures, Nervi for instance, is usually poetic, and like Nouvel, the Frenchman. You can read that he's talking. Of course he has to talk about the Arabic world but he's saying it very eloquently. Coming back to image: if you work in architecture with metaphor, we are really getting into an image problem. However, take Saarinen and his airport terminal: it's a metaphor, a very strong image again. So metaphor sometimes creates strong images and along the way they can be judged.

### **Esherick**

It's interesting that there's an architectural, English meaning of poetic. It seems to me it may suggest romance, a kind of elegance and grace. (But), it wouldn't be shared by all poets. Powerful poetry is not always poetic in the sort of graceful, elegant way, but may have a penetrating quality to it. There are a lot of modern poets that are anything but graceful. I think we tend to narrow the field again.

### **Birkerts**

Minoru has talked about a metaphoric house

of symbols; yesterday, in your lecture, you talked a great deal about symbols and how you use symbols in your architecture.

### **Takeyama**

Before going to symbol, I would like to talk about this "intention." I intend to express something about a goal in my statement; however, people who use the building is read, or maybe this is a better translation for a way of understanding, the building so different from what I intended. At first, I felt very sorry about this but now I feel happy about this misunderstanding or misreading of my intention. I question why. Maybe as a storyteller this is really wrong. But at the same time, I'm still not saddened. Maybe it is better that my buildings can be read in various ways by various people far beyond what I intended.

### **Williams**

Not necessarily fully understood.

### **Takeyama**

Exactly. Maybe that is due to the communication pattern of the Japanese language. In daily communication, intention is not so straight, therefore very indirect. Also, concerning metaphor and symbol: metaphor remains within a limited subculture. When I was working for Utzon on the Sydney Opera House, I was surprised to find so many interpretations of that shell. All these meanings of metaphor go far beyond what Utzon, as the architect, considered it to be. Therefore, I think metaphor remains within a very limited cultural climate. But, the symbol has to be very conventionalized through some historical time, otherwise "symbol" cannot evolve.

### **Birkerts**

Symbol also has its boundaries. Let's say you use a Japanese symbol that I wouldn't necessarily recognize; I might—but its related to cultural knowledge.

### **Takeyama**

I hate to bring up the use of symbols. It's possible to create a landmark, but the symbol comes much later. I think architects cannot make a symbol to begin with. Symbol has to be made by the people who use the building.

### **Williams**

The evoking of meaning is a continuing process. You don't have to make sure all your symbolism is instantly perceived. It can enfold and unfold over time. In fact, that's what users do, don't they? They come back after say a year or so and now begin to see what you were trying to do. So this function of time may be important in image formation and perception. Again, back to all the things we invest, all the factors in a particular case constitute a very rich mix for which we are the agents. The building may end up to be very powerful and have a depth of meaning that is constantly coming out over many, many years.

### **Birkerts**

I think it's the historical component that allows you to do that. I like to do architecture as a creative time-line, in a way, as a historical progression from the past to now and into the future. And when I'm asked about paying homage to historical precedent and all that, I'm very careful because I may be superficial in doing so. I believe that I carry many historical aspects in me, in my culture, in what I have learned, and in what I have seen. I can perhaps make more direct allusion to a divine force, but I like to be current; I like to be expressive of our time. I think it's too bad if we build "warmed-up somethings" that just indicate a society that suddenly became insecure and builds buildings that are steeped only in the past. The reality should be of today and the future.

### **Henry Plummer**

(Associate Professor, School of Architecture)  
How explicit or how latent should an architectural English be? In particular, do you see any danger of images that are too fixed in expression with regard to the observer or inhabitant free to form his own images from out of the subconscious? In other words, is there a danger in imagination expropriating the imagination of the dweller?

### **Esherrick**

I think some architects would like to think so, or, would like to think that they have that power. I think Minoru's comment is realistic.





My own preference is to do things that have enough ambiguity so that they can be interpreted in a lot of different ways. Then you don't demand the user or the viewer or whatever to have only a single, almost totalitarian dictated response. You liberate the user so the viewer can form his or her own opinion. I think a designer can consciously do that. I think there is a danger of trying to be too fixed and too explicit. The anachronism in all that, or the conflict, is in certain classes of structures and monuments where you may have some specific agreement about a kind of message that you're trying to get over. I know how much ambiguity would be tolerated by politicians, say a monument to George Washington or Lincoln or anybody. That sort of thing I think is suppose to be unambiguous. I can immediately think of why it shouldn't be.

### **James Warfield**

(Professor, School of Architecture and 1970-71 Plym Fellow)

There seemed to be agreement that we wanted to try to demystify the design process here. Yet, Joe talks about literature and how he derives design from literature; Gunnar, we've talked many times about the subconscious and how that enters into the design process and how we really don't understand exactly how it works; and, now a new contribution by Minoru today. He closes his eyes and that's the first step to the design process. Is it really possible to demystify the design process? Are we trying to define something like soul, or jazz, or poetry? Something that maybe has no real definition but lives in each one of us?

### **Birkerts**

Personally, I believe that by saying that the creative process, on a highest level, is subconscious—is demystifying. There is no mystique about it. That's what it is. And it is the creative process, period. You don't expect that Mozart wrote on and on and on and put note to note and then came through with a symphony. As we go to school we learn how to synthesize. You cannot have your subconscious working at that point as you are supposed to draw instead. You do a sketch and

you like it or don't like it. You do another one and another one. And then you have a pile of yellow trash and you look through all of them and you find that something that has been guiding you all the time as you draw your line over and over again. So you're slowly saying, well, it looks like I've drawn it ten times. This must be a concept. (But) buildings are not created that way. Architecture is more conceptual. I think that the mystique still is . . . just recognizing that this brain of ours is guiding us and why not admit that that's what it is.

### **Esherick**

We must have our confessions because I see buildings in my head. As Minoru said earlier, when he draws something it's to draw what he has already thought. I find I do the same thing. What I end up drawing might influence my thinking. I find that I think it out and so on. I think the question was demystifying designing. That is trying to define what it is and I don't know anyone who's demystified thinking. I think designing basically is a kind of *directed form of thought* with a specific objective at the end. I don't feel badly that I can't define it.

### **Takeyama**

If I narrow the meaning of architecture into a built architecture, I always think that my major efforts should be during the construction stage and not the conceptual drawing. Sometimes, to make a drawing for the building is, somehow, not as satisfying as the building statement at full-scale detail. I think, how long will it be on the drawing board before we get from the image to the built building?

Maybe in the future, we won't depend on drawing at all. I think that the Japanese carpenter has a way of doing this and doesn't depend on drawing. I don't know how soon, but maybe we won't depend on drawing at all but, conservatively, on a helpful computer, unfortunately (I say unfortunately because I don't know keyboarding). If that happened, then what? Our image will just go straight into reality. That is my question with which I have to find a solution for myself.

**Donald Sporleder**

(1957-58 Plym Fellow)

I appreciated the development of the sense of "fit" throughout many of the approaches taken by our distinguished Plym Professors in their own work. There is a relation to particular places. My question relates to how does one really come to understand a place so that one can gain this necessary fit?

**Esherick**

For me, it's extremely difficult. A place consists of a geological and topographical sort of form along with the vegetation and the climate that goes with it. There's a cultural aspect of it that I think is more difficult. I had the advantage of having grown up in south-eastern Pennsylvania where, with good luck and on a good day, you could see about two blocks, and then going to California where it's not unusual to be able to see a hundred miles. All sorts of things were different. But probably more different than form and climate and everything else are the social and cultural characteristics and attitudes. Understanding that is much more subtle. Fortunately, California and Pennsylvania are still in the same country, so I had some advantages. I think it's extremely difficult to go to another country and work there and understand the country and respond properly because you're not building this thing for yourself. If you're doing some tourist getup where you're not going to have anyone but folks falling in from an airport, all of which are the same, it's okay. But if you're trying to do something that is used by the people there, it is much more difficult, and I think one has to be much more tentative.

**Birkerts**

How do you design a United States embassy in a foreign country? You have "foreign" forces coming from the fact that it is American. There are also forces coming from the contracts and culture.

**Esherick**

My notion isn't exactly the same as the State Department's. Both of us are working on embassies right now. Having designed the embassy in La Paz five times, they finally said

five was enough and I think we're going to build the last one. My notion would have been to try to do something that had some indigenous characteristics but acknowledged the fact that it was being designed from off-shore; i.e., not in Bolivia. There have been a lot of different traditions about this. The embassy, since it is the property of one country on the soil of another country, doesn't look like the host country; it looks like the guest country. I think it's difficult. It includes all sorts of wonderful ethical issues about how you would be expressive without being arrogant. We tried to do something in Bolivia that was relatively modest. Today's security problems with these folks around telling you that the windows are such that you have to make the thing look kind of like a 19th-century battleship, it's very difficult to do something that isn't somehow arrogant and unpleasant. You do the best you can. How did you do it?

**Birkerts**

We had problems too. I tried to work with the geology of the area, this is for Venezuela with its mountains. I tried to work with the rock and the cliff and all of it with the strength of the geology, where it sits on different mountaintops. That wouldn't go over very well because their local administration felt that it should be really Spanish Colonial which would pay some homage to the host country. Then I went around and I talked to Venezuelan architects and they said, "Hell no. Colonial Spanish is . . . we hate that Spanish Colonial. Our architecture is indigenous you know." Indigenous like pole buildings in the sea, that's why it's called Venezuela, little Venice. Then there's the stucco. Lately they say "our architecture is contemporary architecture." Every architect in Venezuela will say it's Le Corbusier [the influence]. Everybody wants a modern architecture. They say colonial architecture is the past. So what do you do? I stay with my cliff and my rocks and I am still with the rock and we'll see how it goes.

**Williams**

Minoru showed us his design for the Egyptian embassy in Tokyo. It was a very interesting response to this same issue, "what is place?"

**Frederic Moyer**

(1963-64 Plym Fellow):

This discussion has reminded me of a statement once made by another Plym Professor, Paul Rudolph who's not here today. He stated some years prior to his tenure here that "the artist with pencil poised above blank sheet of paper has suspended there everything that has ever been and everything that will ever be." I then had the occasion of finding students who could get the pencil poised above a blank sheet of paper but couldn't think of anything. Louis Sullivan said, "the solution lies in the problem itself." To what extent is it necessary to, in fact, live with the pieces of the problem without any prejudgment as to an image? I might suggest that both phases may well require a pencil, or in today's role, a computer.

**Birkerts**

I would say that I would follow the client's requirement to the last reasonable request. I like to please the client as much as I can because I also desire to satisfy him and then, after that, I find that I have a little more leeway—maybe shape it with what I want to do. Primarily, you want to have a building that is functionally correct, that is also affordable, and to be visually expressive, not just acceptable. It has to be expressive of the client. In addition to the client expressing himself functionally, the client also has the question of image. Whatever you do for the client, it becomes *their* image. The building is the image, ultimately. The client is judged and you are part of it. I will satisfy him functionally if he lets me work on image.

**Esherick**

We're acting as though every program fits every budget, or every program fits every building code; fits every range or technical possibilities. They often don't. There's a negotiation that goes on. The honored relationships with our clients are good. We don't fight.

**Donald Sunshine**

(1966-67 Plym Fellow)

We don't hear much these days about an American architecture. Is that too provincial a thought? Is it really regionalism? Should

there, is there, can there be an American architecture to a status of Alto, who certainly gave an architecture for his country?

**Esherick**

I would hope that some day there could be. But there's all sorts of forces that mitigate against it. Economics works pretty much the same all around the world, technology works pretty much the same, and machinery is used to do things that have become pretty homogenized. I think it can only arrive with a greater local sensitivity. I wonder how conscious one can be about it. I think it's a responsibility for us to try. Back when I went to school, what's now called modern architecture was called the International Style, or something like that. The other place where the International Style has really succeeded is in airports. They've got the same damn chairs, there's always an automobile parked in the lobby, at least one. There's the same level of confusion. Even if you understand the language it's almost impossible to understand what's being said on the loud speakers. It's a kind of characteristic, international environment. I think that sort of thing, that colonization of the world by a single industry, is just plain unfortunate. The local sensitivity and the loss of social and cultural identity is too bad.

**Birkerts**

The original is still here. Our model, our high-tech architecture, is American to begin with. It quickly spread. I think modern architecture is much broader. The International Style, is one bad scene, actually. Then there are others. Alto is a modern architect, right? There are many other facets. The worst one is the International Style which makes every building the same whether it's in Alaska or in Timbuktu, wherever. They all have the same systems.

**Esherick**

My point was that the objective at that time was that modern architecture should be international. I think it was a deliberate objective.

**Birkerts**

There are so many good facets.



**Williams**

More facets, more illumination. As much as we would like to be neat and tidy, we cannot summarize this fascinating subject with a few inferences and agreements. I would like to thank you all on behalf of the University and the School of Architecture and hope that we can all come together again very soon.

## Reflections and Urbanism

*Reflections* is the Journal of the School of Architecture and is dedicated to theory and criticism. *Reflections* 1-4 and 7 contained articles and papers focusing on design theory and pedagogy. *Reflections* 5: *Teaching in Architecture* and *Reflections* 6: *Landscapes, Townscapes and Memorials* were thematic.

**Reflections 7** contents:

**Scandinavian Architecture  
During the Late 1930s:**

**Asplund and Aalto vs. Functionalism**  
William C. Miller

**The Legacy of Mies van der Rohe**

Louis Rocah

**Mies and the Baukunst:  
An Oriental Connection?**

David Spaeth

**Between the Ends and the  
Means of Architecture**

Andrzej Pinno

**A Framework for Theory in Architecture**

David Walters

**other place(s):**

**An examination of "place" in the  
Work of Aalto and Terragni**

Brian L. McLaren

**How Quickly Does Fast Change?**

Alan Stacell

**Tech Heads and Paper Tigers:**

**Theory vs. Technology in  
Architectural Research**

Charles F. Morgan

### Manuscripts Invited

The Board of Editors invites articles and papers relevant to architectural theory, criticism and/or pedagogy for consideration of publication. All submissions will be reviewed by the Board of Editors. All articles must be submitted in the standard ACSA format. Microsoft Word IBM or Macintosh 3.5 diskettes are preferred. All photographs must be 8"x10" black-and-white glossy prints. Authors take full responsibilities for securing required consents and releases and for the authenticity of their articles.

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