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Design Book Review

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HUMANISM AND POSTHUMANISM

HAYDEN WHITE, KATE SOPER,
and **JOAN OCKMAN**
on the legacy of humanism

JAMES S. ACKERMAN
on Andrea Palladio and
Sebastiano Serlio

MARTIN JAY
on architecture and nihilism

LUIS FERNÁNDEZ-GALIANO
on the responsibilities of the
architectural profession



“As humanity has become increasingly encased in machinery, man’s central position...has come more and more into question. The classical formulations of humanism seem dated in a world less dependent on metaphysical explanations and increasingly defined by **man-machine relationships.**”

D. Grahame Shane
Euclid's Garden

page 54

“**Reconstructing Architecture** attempt[s] to arrest the detracting doctrines of postmodernism.

But like the overly pious Jesuits who inadvertently helped ensure the flourishing of Protestantism through their zealous inquisition tactics, [the editors]... may be indirectly abetting the visibility of postmodern discourses rather than preserving the mantle of Marxism.”

Steven A. Moore
The Language of Counterreformation

page 130

“I know that architecture today has been kidnapped by the most trivial and vacuous type of art, and this has cut it off from the **rich and nutritious** ties it once maintained with other disciplines.”

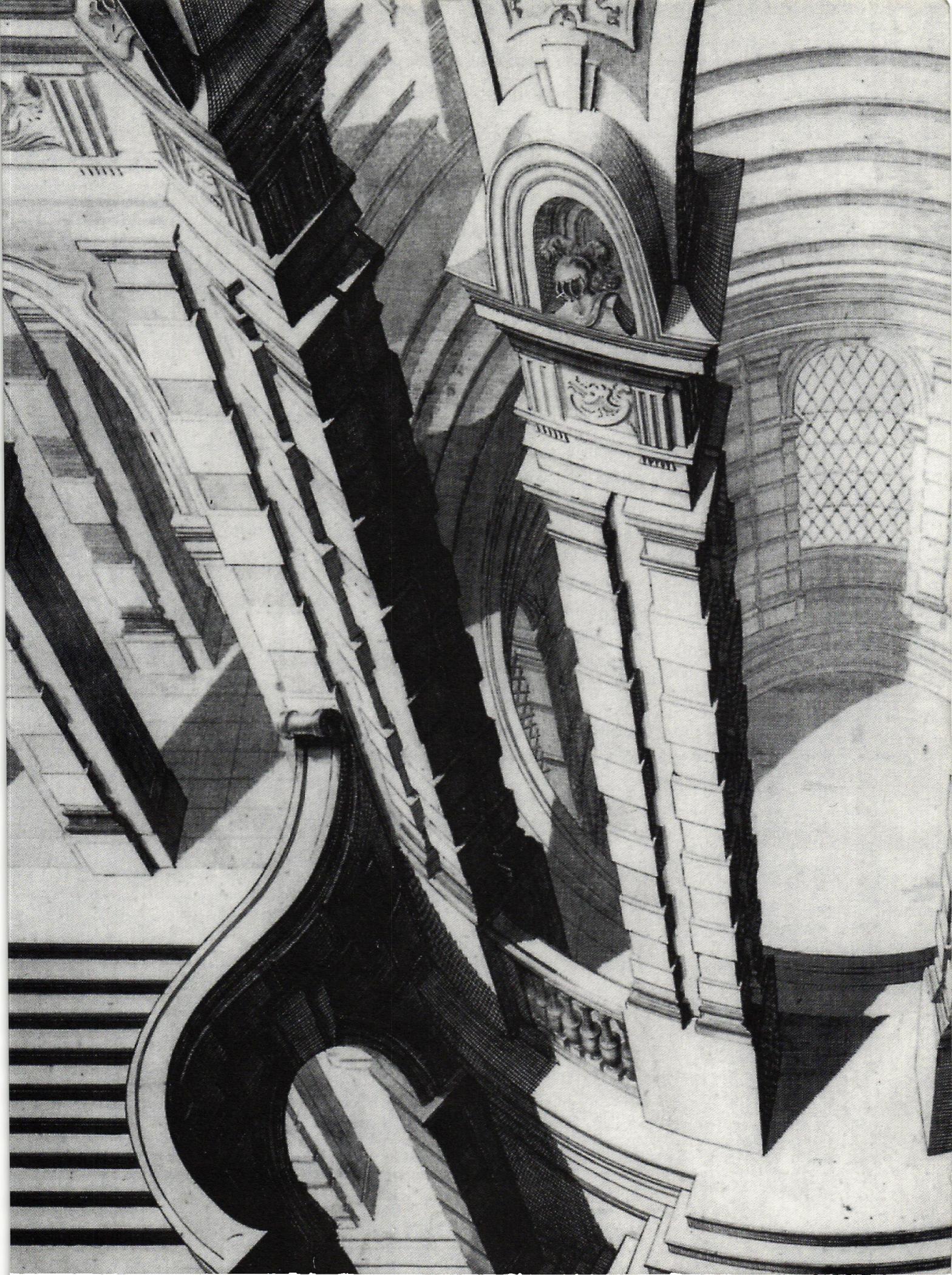
Luis Fernández-Galiano
Against Art

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opposite

A plate from Johann Jacob Schübler's,
Perspectiva Pes Picturae, 1719–20.

Schübler was a mathematician and theoretician of architecture who helped systematize the use of perspective to represent architectural space. (from Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Louise Pelletier, *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge*)



FROM THE EDITORS

This double issue of **DESIGN BOOK REVIEW** (DBR), titled “Humanism and Posthumanism,” explores the lasting influence of HUMANISM ON ARCHITECTURE. The first section of the issue focuses on the humanist tradition; the second addresses recent critiques of humanism’s key ideas.

We begin the issue by defining the terms HUMANISM, ANTIHUMANISM, and POSTHUMANISM. Following a short introduction by the editors of DBR, three leading scholars explore past and contemporary meanings of humanism.

Former DBR editors Cathy Lang Ho and Richard Ingersoll did much of the work conceptualizing, organizing, and editing this special issue.

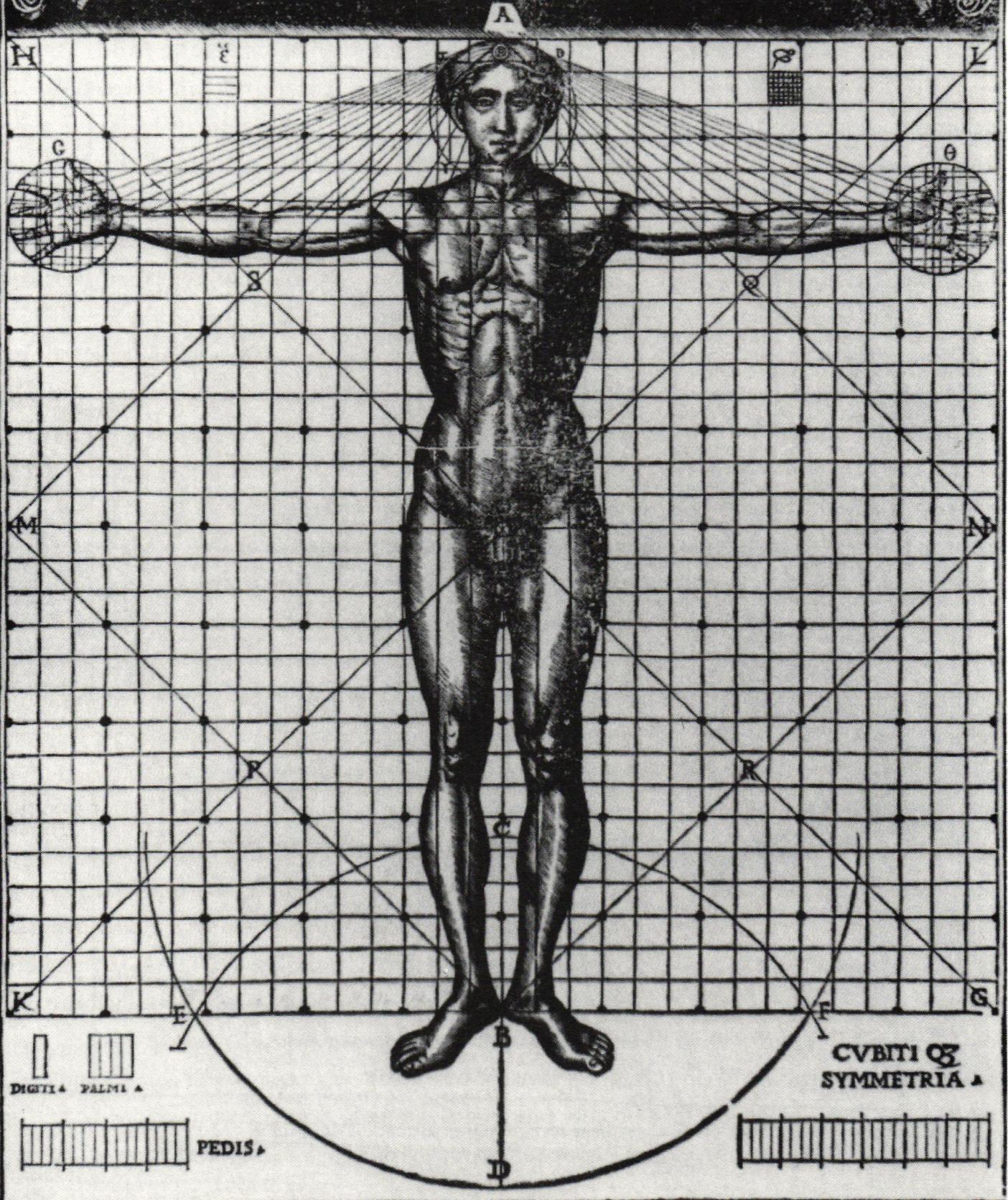
Designers Betty Jean Ho and Yingzhao Liu also deserve acknowledgment for their past contributions to the magazine.

We thank them for their efforts.

Renaissance treatise writers believed in the perfection of the human body and that it could be used to generate ideal measurements and geometrical forms. This Christlike image of the male form comes from a sixteenth-century translation of Vitruvius’s treatise on architecture.

*(from Joseph Rykwert, *The Dancing Column*)*

HVMANI CORPORIS MENSURA. ET AB EO OMNES SYMMETRIAS EVRYTHMIATAS & PROPORTIONATAS GEOMETRICO SCHEMATE INVENIRE. VTI ADEST FIGVRA.



DEFINING HUMANISM AND POSTHUMANISM

The philosophy of humanism took hold in Western Europe during the fourteenth century. Writers and philosophers of the era believed they could revitalize their own world by closely studying ancient Greek and Roman culture. Through analyses of classical texts and art, humanists came to understand that the individual—not the Church—could determine what is true and beautiful. Humanists believed that the tools of science, reason, and human observation could unlock the secrets of the world and the individual's place in the cosmic scheme.

Building upon both the ancient and medieval traditions of the liberal arts, humanism at first operated within literature, rhetoric, and philosophy. During the Renaissance, humanism came to encompass the visual arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, and landscape design. For architecture, humanism represented the possibility of creating buildings and urban spaces that reflected the deep structure of the universe. In their search for models of building practice, Renaissance architects looked primarily to the ruins of Imperial Rome and Vitruvius's treatise *De architectura*.

The humanist effort to develop rational and timeless rules for architecture informed generations of architects long after the Renaissance. The history of the profession is marked by frequent attempts to create an ideal architecture, a set of built forms that could somehow rise above the particularities of place and the contingencies of time. In fact, the recent modern movement—with its efforts to establish a fixed international standard for building design—can be interpreted as a last flowering of humanist ideals.

Over the past century, humanism has revealed a great many flaws. Despite ingenious efforts on the part of humanist academics, the experience of two world wars, atomic bombs, global colonialism, various genocides, and environmental disasters has taken a toll on a philosophy based on the supremacy of human nature and the belief in the equality of all individuals.

The rise of anti- or posthumanism can be
traced in part to the writings of

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, SIGMUND FREUD,
MICHEL FOUCAULT, and JACQUES DERRIDA.

Nietzsche castigated the humanist systematic approach to
knowledge, which he said suffocated creativity. Nietzsche not only
pronounced God dead, but he called attention to the
deadening effect of humanist rationality.

Freud's investigation of the unconscious, the prerational realm
of dreams and desires, was similarly threatening to the humanist sense
of order. Freud raised the distinct possibility that we are
as guided by madness as we are by reason.

Foucault sought to reveal that every systematic approach
to knowledge in the human sciences can be used as a means of
repression. Using examples of the prison, the hospital, and the school,
he demonstrated the insidious suppression he believed
was at the heart of all elaborate institutions.

Derrida's 1968 essay "Difference" signaled the downfall
of the humanist belief in an opposition between the sensible and the intelligible.

The essay also spelled an end to Immanuel Kant's
belief that human reason, and not experience,
is the ultimate system of nature.

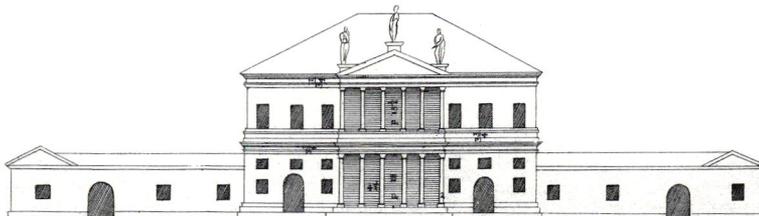
Even as our fascination with psychoanalysis and
poststructuralism is changing, the notion that humanism can continue
to privilege the European classics and the solidity of reason
is an increasingly tenuous position. Few contemporary writers
are willing to rely on grand narratives that pretend to be a definitive
statement on a culture, movement, or all humankind.

Fewer still dare to pronounce totalizing judgments on beauty or truth.

Few attempt to write as gods.

After humanism's long stint of hubris,
we write today in a
humbler world.

—Mitchell Schwarzer and William Littmann



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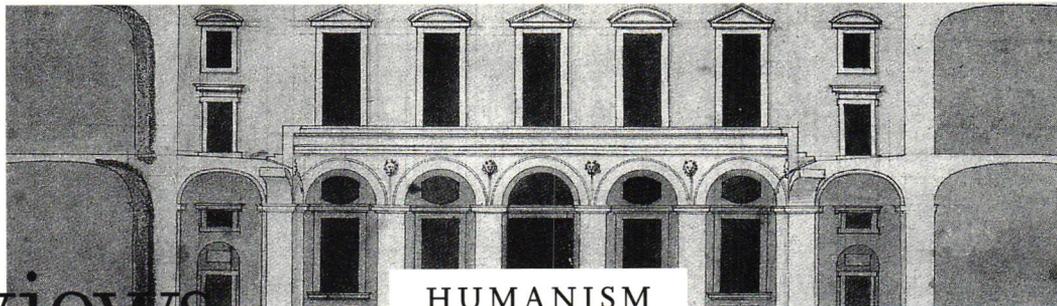
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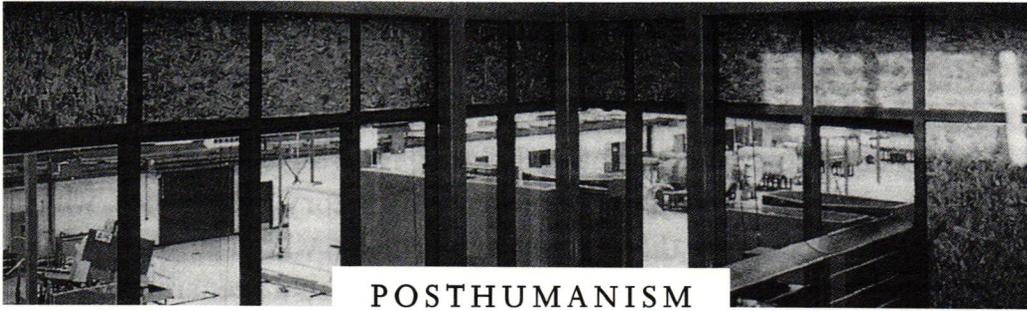
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The term “humanism”
presumes a domain of being or existence distinct
from the “divine” or supernatural,
on the one hand, and “nature” or the merely material, on the other.

And while it is not necessarily atheistic, neither is it specifically “contra nature.” Humanists believe in continuities rather than discontinuities among different domains of being, existence, and time. This is why humanistic discourse typically speaks of “rebirths” rather than “beginnings” and “translations” rather than “originals.”

Posthumanism and the

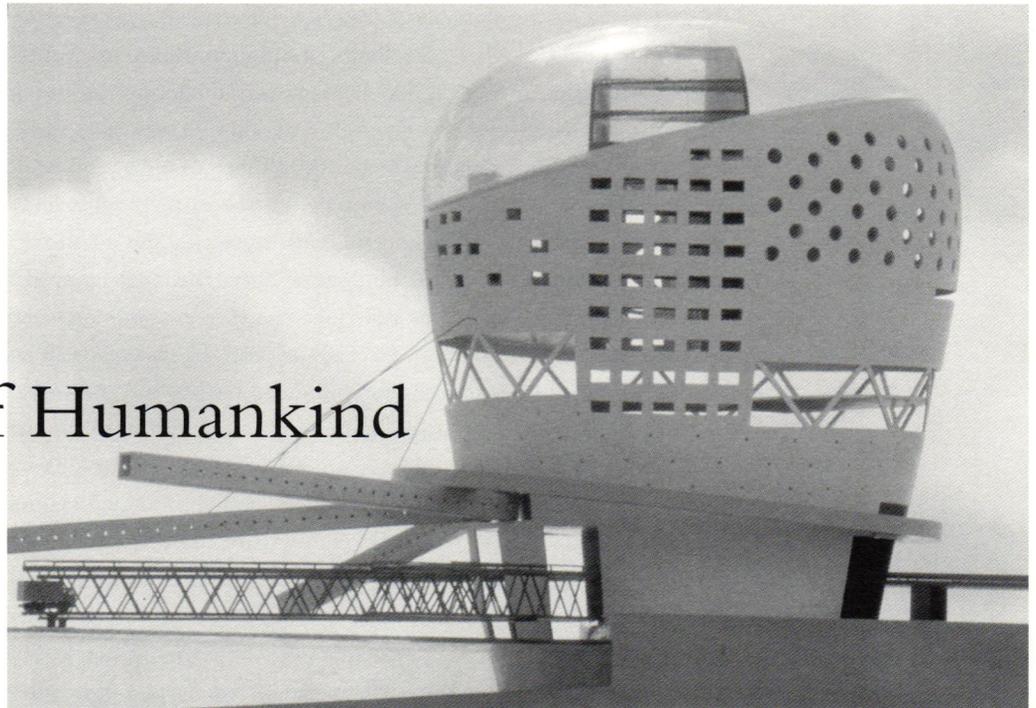
by HAYDEN WHITE

Humanism is more “translationist” than transcendentalist. To be sure, it presumes an essence of human nature that may manifest itself in any time and any place (even in Paleolithic caves). It also presumes that this essence manifests itself only in time and space—in other words, *in* history rather than beyond or outside of it. Such manifestations may be analyzed in terms of their intensity and reach. And certain times and places may be taken as paradigms of a specifically human creativity (e.g., Greece in the fifth century, Rome during the Republic), but such paradigms differ in degree, not in kind, from lesser or less extensive manifestations occurring elsewhere at other times. This is the reason humanistic notions of creativity in art or thought or politics feature conformity to or compliance with a paradigm rather than originality or mere novelty. As a manifestation of an essence, a specifically human mode or instance of human creativity must be substantially the same as all other manifestations. Thus, although a given manifestation of the human spirit may be apprehended as “new,” it can never be totally original. It must be, in some sense, a replication. It is this essence of the human that authorizes faith in the possibility of adequate *translatio* between different times and different cultures. Even with regard to the various “modernisms” that appear in the history of humanism (from Saint Augustine through Peter Abelard to Francesco Petrarch, Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, G. W. F. Hegel, and John Stuart Mill, on to Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot), it is the “novelty” of the use to which the manifestation is to be put, rather than its substantive “originality,” that is stressed.

What about antihumanism? Antihumanism may take many forms, but what distinguishes it from any worldview that might be defined as simply nonhumanistic or posthumanistic is its own self-definition as the contradiction of humanism. Antihumanism, whatever else it may be, conceives of itself not merely as humanism’s contrary (a positive alternative to what is considered a negative position on a matter of common concern) but as a negation of humanism’s postulated negativity. Thus, Fundamentalist Christianity needs the negativity it perceives in humanism to define an aspect of its own positivity. Antihumanism is not only for God, the Bible (King James Version),

Hayden White is professor emeritus in the History of Consciousness Program at the University of California at Santa Cruz. He is the author of *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) and *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

Liberation of Humankind



the saved portion of humanity, and itself; it is against any worldview that is for humanity, secular culture, pagan ideas, worldliness, and any version of human “reality” that valorizes bodily “pleasure” rather than the stern obligation to turn desire into the task of converting the world to its version of Christian belief and duty. Because it defines in part its own positivity as the negation of a negation (humanism), there is no possibility of a compromise with or negotiation between Fundamentalist Christianity and any version of humanism. It is not as if Fundamentalist Christianity is not concerned with “human well-being”; on the contrary, it is probably more intimately concerned with it than any version of humanism currently on the historical scene.

It is quite a different case with the kind of antihumanism that many writers identify with the

legacy of that unholy trinity: **Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud,**
and **Michel Foucault.**

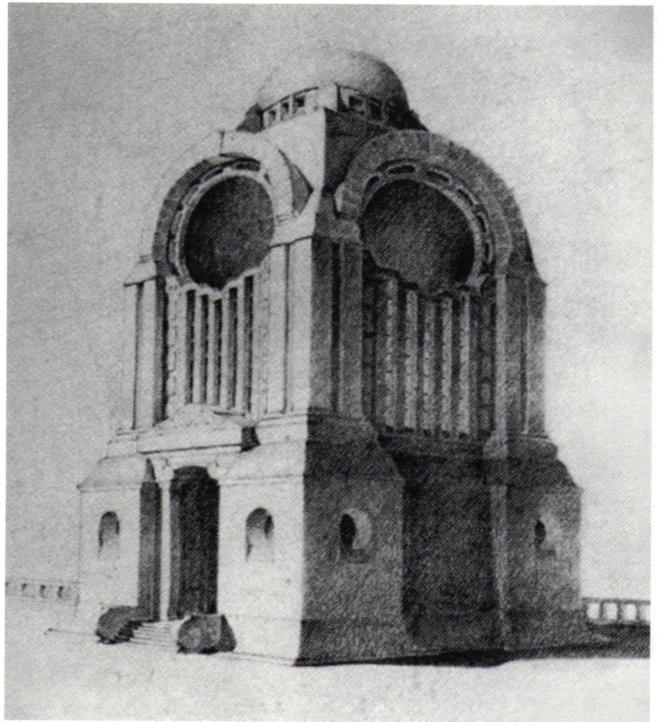
I prefer to call this legacy posthumanist rather than antihumanist. Although all three representatives can certainly be characterized as critical (to say the least) of the nineteenth-century European bourgeois version of “humanism,” they all come to this critical position out of a cultural formation that has its origins in the secularist, materialist, and aestheticist strain of Renaissance art and thought (e.g., Niccolò Machiavelli, Pietro Aretino, Leon Battista Alberti, Galileo Galilei, and Francis Bacon), rather than in its Christian, Platonist, and moralistic counterparts (Marsilio Ficino, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Desiderius Erasmus). But, more importantly, Nietzsche, Freud, and Foucault are uniformly opposed to any notion of an “essence,” human or otherwise, that supposedly informs every manifestation of “the human” in all times and places and that provides the basis for that belief in the substantive sameness of human nature in all

Office for Metropolitan Architecture, project for a Sea Terminal, Zeebrugge, Belgium, 1989. Architect Rem Koolhaas claimed that this terminal, designed as a conference center, office building, and transportation hub, reflected Europe’s growing unification. He believed it would help fulfill the utopian dream of integrating the continent’s different populations. (from Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity*)

times and places. It is this rejection of “essentialism” that leads this trinity to criticize even the secularist, materialist, and aestheticizing variant of Renaissance humanism with which, in other respects, they are so much in sympathy. Like Nietzsche, most posthumanists are as opposed to essentialism of the materialistic kind as they are to its religious, Platonic, or metaphysical variant. Like Nietzsche, we posthumanists conceive ourselves to live “after metaphysics.”

One thing that Nietzsche, Freud, and Foucault have in common, then—the thing that makes it legitimate to characterize them as “antihumanistic” in principle, if not in fact—is their distaste for any worldview of a deontological kind. *Deontology* is the term philosophers use to characterize what they conceive to be “the science of obligation or duty.” Deontology (its root is the Greek *déon*, or “that which is binding”) is the study of what underlies and informs all ethics concerned, as Immanuel Kant informs, with answering the question: “What should I do?” What some writers characterize as the nihilism of Nietzsche, oneiricism of Freud, and (anti)repressivism of Foucault can all be said to be functions of a shared hostility toward the various techniques of self-subjection or “self-binding” deemed necessary in all societies for the moral, and not merely physical, “well-being” of individuals considered normal members of a group. The trinity’s work was undertaken in the interest of “unbinding” individuals from the structures and procedures by which they were made ill in the very process of seeming to be endowed with the (moral) attributes that supposedly elevate them above a merely natural or animal existence. Traditional or classical humanism, no less than its bourgeois counterpart, can be shown, with only a few exceptions, to serve these moralizing or self-repressive interests. The exceptions have to do with the libertine or aestheticist versions of humanism, those versions that can be construed to advance the interests of what Freud called the pleasure principle over the reality principle. For what always gets “bound”—constricted, restricted, controlled, channeled, or otherwise oppressed—in every social system is the pursuit of pleasure. This is why art itself must be controlled and oppressed or turned to the service of moralizing purposes in every society—humanistic or no—insofar as it conduces to the cultivation of the pleasure principle rather than the reality principle. At least so it seems based on the thought of our unholy trinity of antihumanism.

Forgive the pedantry of the above ruminations. It is my customary, repressed (but, I hope, not necessarily repressive) mode of expression. My point, to put it in a few words, is that the questions about humanism, antihumanism, or posthumanism raised in this magazine and their relation to contemporary architecture have led me to focus on the extent to which art (including architecture) can be said to contribute to the project of “unbinding” human beings from the condition of self-servitude that was the shared concern of Nietzsche, Freud, and Foucault. All of them viewed art that was used in the service of morality as art that “bound” individuals to the conditions of their own self-servitude (or servitude to a socially created “subjectivity”) rather than freed them to “make themselves,” which humanism in most of its historical incarnations claimed as its wish to do. The liberatory programs of most secular, as well as all religious, humanisms have typically ended by handing over the individuals or groups they have sought to “unbind” to another system of “bondage.” The work of the unholy trinity of Nietzsche, Freud, and Foucault is aimed at or presupposes an art that stops at the task of “unbinding” and postulates no morality—of art or anything else—to which “unbound” individuals “ought” to submit themselves, including the art of “unbinding” itself.



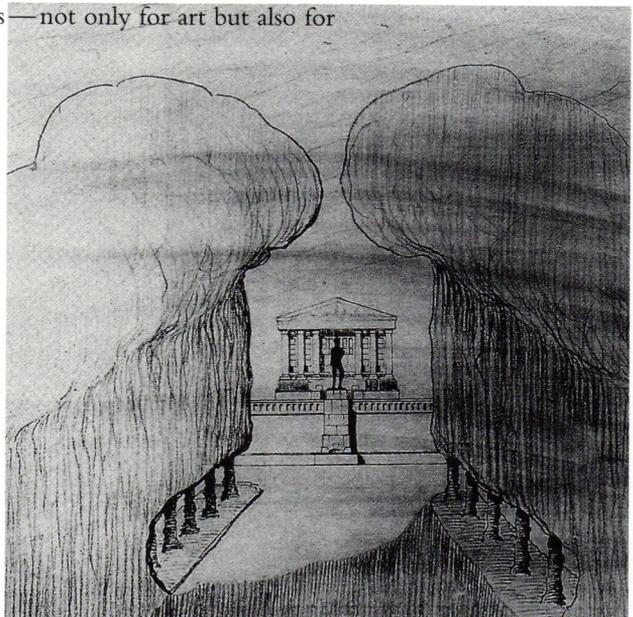
The English language contains a word that might aptly name the effect of an art devoted only to “unbinding” the individual from the condition of self-servitude: it is *deonerate* (marked “archaic” in my dictionary). Its root is the Latin *onus*, or “burden.” It could be used to designate an art (and thus architecture) that is more concerned with “de-burdening” individuals rather than laying another burden on them.

So, finally, I pose the following questions: First, do the examples of architecture that seem to “correspond” to the antihumanistic principles of the unholy trinity (nihilism, oneiricism, and antirepressivism) conduce to the “unbinding” of individuals from the “burden” of their “humanity,” or do they simply or predominantly conduce to another kind of “oneration?” Second, could the recent examples of Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and Richard Meier’s Getty Center in Santa Monica be profitably compared in these terms?

As architectural monuments built to serve the cause of “art,” can they be assessed as to their relatively liberatory effects — not only for art but also for

“human well-being?”

Two unbuilt designs for a Nietzsche monument for Weimar, Germany, by architect Henry Van de Velde in 1911. (from Alexandre Kostka and Irving Wohlfarth, eds., *Nietzsche and “An Architecture of Our Minds”* [Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999].)





Humanism in Western Culture

by KATE SOPER

IT MIGHT BE WORTH DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT MEANINGS AND IDEAS ASSOCIATED WITH “HUMANISM” IN WESTERN CULTURE—AND PARTICULARLY BETWEEN WHAT MIGHT BE CALLED IDEOLOGICAL THEMATICS, ON THE ONE HAND, AND THE MORE THEORETICAL ARGUMENTS DEVELOPED IN SO-CALLED CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY, ON THE OTHER.

Instances of the ideological thematics would include the following:

HUMANISM AS ATHEISM OR ANTITHEOLOGY: rejection of the idea of the existence of a divinity or supreme being in accordance with whose will the world has been brought into being, and who continues omnisciently to oversee its course. Clearly not all self-styled humanists are atheists (we encounter numerous religious humanisms), but this is perhaps the most common or lay sense of humanism, at least in Anglo-American culture, and the central strand of the philosophy of the British and American humanist associations.

THE “ANTHROPOCENTRIC” OR PROMETHEAN THEMATIC: freedom from superstitious fears of nature and expression of confidence; instead, a belief in human powers to control and master the course of history, to assert the superiority and self-sufficiency of *Homo sapiens*, or at least of its supposedly more “civilized” representatives.

THE PROGRESSIVE THEMATIC: faith in human amelioration, progress, and the essential benevolence and improvability of humankind; as well as a rejection of all forms of antiprogressivism and nihilism.

As for the more theoretical conceptions of humanism, one might distinguish between the following:

FIRSTLY, “ESSENTIALIST” HUMANISM: defense of the idea of “human nature,” even if only in the minimal sense in which there are certain “basic” needs—particular biological and psychological attributes—that are universal and inherent in humankind.

SECONDLY, “TELEOLOGICAL” HUMANISM: humanism conceived as a discourse about the telos or end of humanity; i.e., a philosophical

Kate Soper is a professor in the School of Arts and Humanities at the University of North London. She is the author of *Humanism and Anti-Humanism* (La Salle: Open Court, 1986) and *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995).

anthropology that refers to the essential *humanitas* of the species and speculates on human destiny in such terms. This theory presumes a way of being that is “natural” or “proper” to being human, which may be distorted or alienated under specific conditions of existence, or brought to its full realization under others. Martin Heidegger understands humanism in this sense; he argues in his Letter on Humanism that “every humanism is either grounded in metaphysics or itself the ground of one”—by which he means that all forms of humanism seek to realize an essential *humanitas* of the species, and are metaphysical to the extent that they presuppose a knowledge of this essential nature. There may be differing conceptions of “nature” or “essence” in this regard (e.g., according to Aristotle, Karl Marx, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, et cetera), but, says Heidegger, what is common to all—and, in his eyes, damns them all as “metaphysical”—is that they “presuppose an interpretation of being without asking about the truth of Being.” (This seems to be the construction of humanism according to which most self-styled antihumanists conceive themselves—and it’s the sense that Hayden White has, understandably, taken to be central to this discourse.)

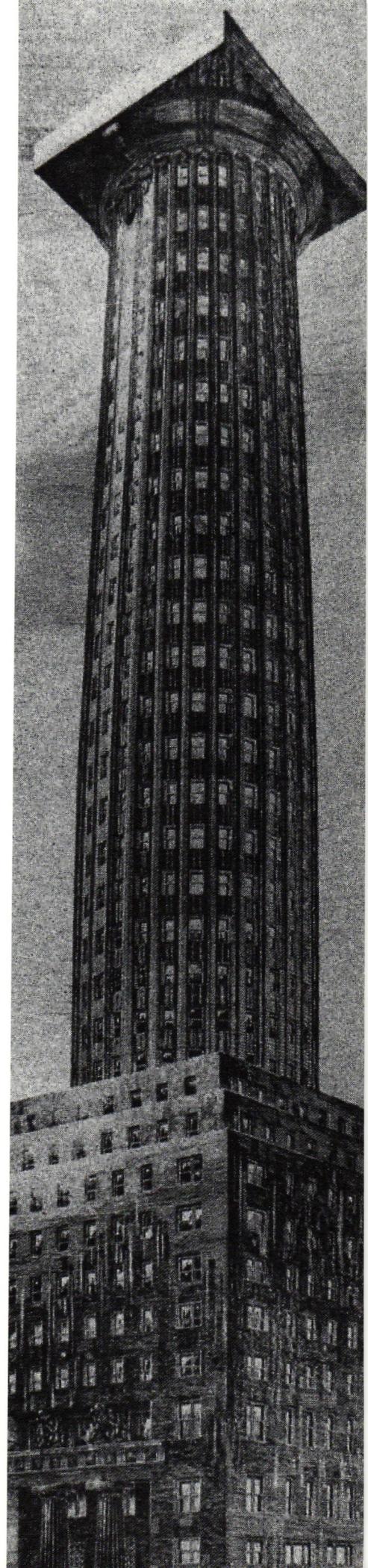
THIRDLY, WHAT MIGHT BE TERMED AN “EXISTENTIALIST” OR “SELF-CREATIVE” HUMANIST ARGUMENT: here the emphasis falls on the irreducibility of the element of human self-making or self-creativity—or the capacity (as Jean-Paul Sartre has defined it) for humans to make more of ourselves than that of which we are made. To be humanist in this sense is to defend the notion of free human agency against structuralist and constructivist approaches to the understanding of the subject, and to insist that there can be no adequate understanding, either of the individual or of historical process, that denies this active element. Sartrean existentialism, Marxist philosophy of praxis (and “socialist humanism”), E. P. Thompson’s historiography, and Raymond Williams’s cultural materialism might all be described as “humanist” in this conception.

opposite

**The ancient spear
bearer Doryphoros.**
(from Joseph Rykwert,
The Dancing Column)

this page

**Adolf Loos modeled
his 1922 entry for
the Chicago Tribune
Building competition
after the form of
the Doric column.**
(from Joseph Rykwert,
The Dancing Column)

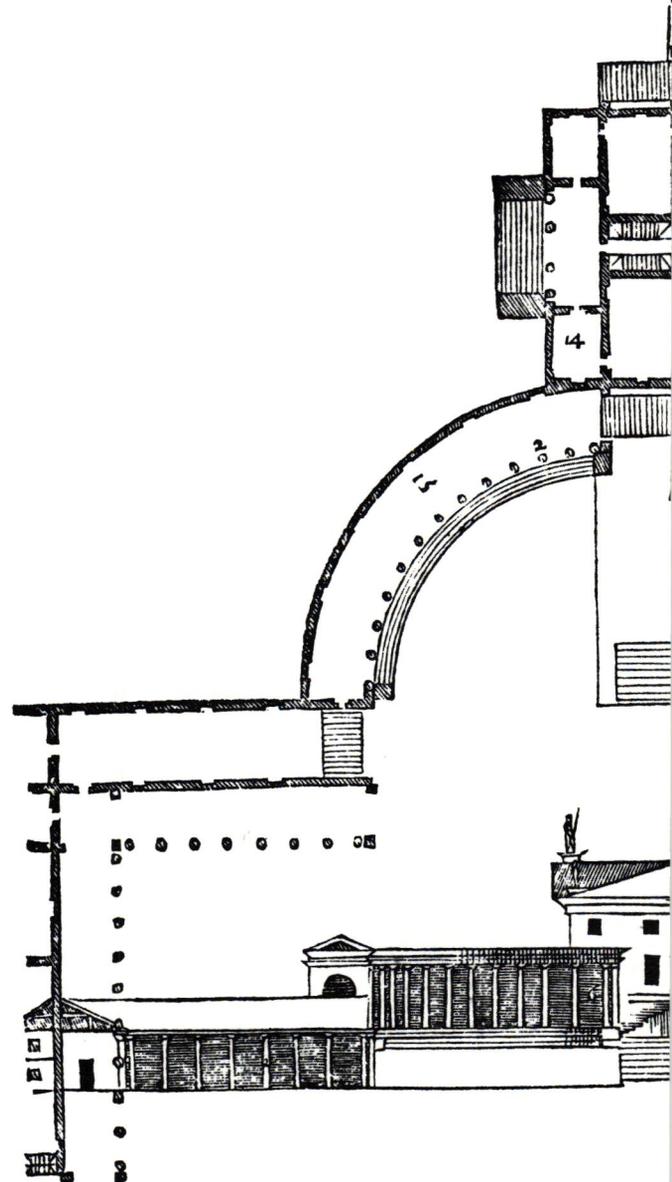


It doesn't seem at all obvious that adherence to any of the theoretical humanisms I've noted here requires commitment to any or all of the ideological thematics; in fact, there may be clashes or paradoxes among them. One might cite, for example, the fact that antifoundationalism employs an ideological kind of humanist rhetoric to defend theoretical antihumanism: it recommends that we give up "metaphysical" or "humanist" modes of philosophizing on the grounds that these represent a kind of "theology." It is in the name of realizing the "death of God" that Friedrich Nietzsche seeks to undermine the philosophical humanistic tradition. It is with a view to exposing the "metaphysical" or "ontotheological" commitments of all forms of humanism that Heidegger writes his *Letter on Humanism*. And, similarly, it is with reference to the necessity of avoiding "ontotheology" that Jacques Derrida seeks to deconstruct the metaphysics of presence and its associated humanist or "logocentric" commitments.

So, what is dismissed by the antifoundationalists as humanist modes of thinking is damned by their association with religiosity and deification—and this is somewhat at odds with the lay sense of humanism as more or less synonymous with atheism.

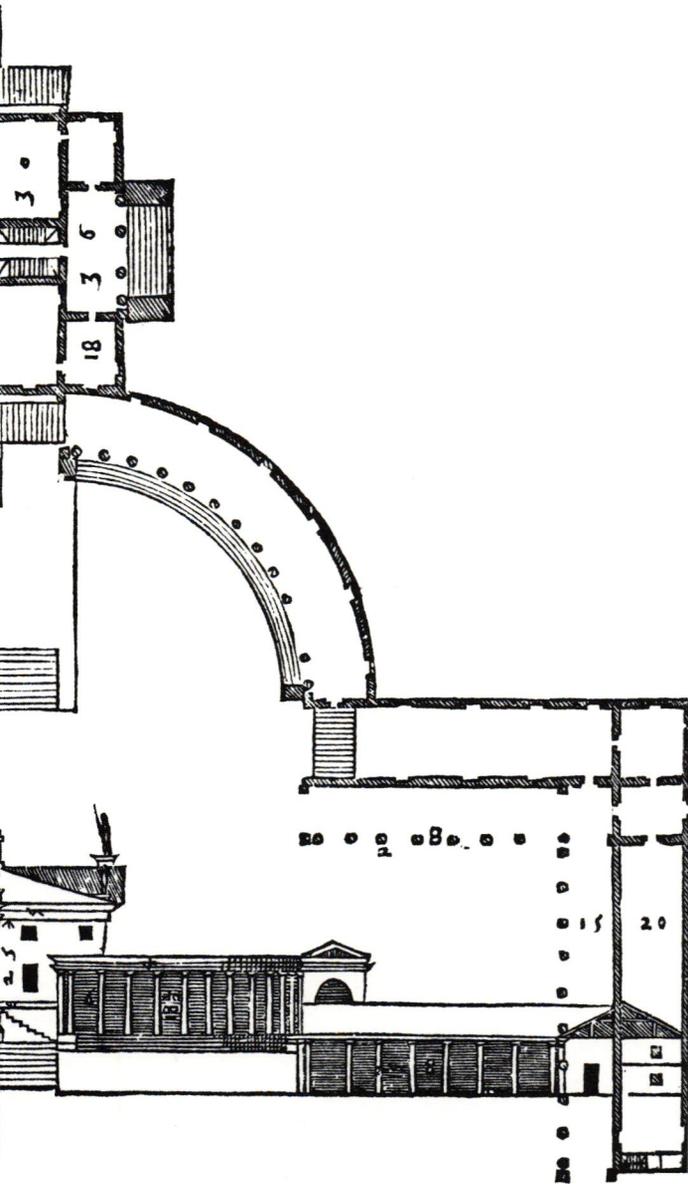
It seems to me that you could well be an essentialist (in a minimal sense) on human nature, or what I've termed a "teleological humanist," without adhering to any strongly Promethean view of human powers, technical or scientific prowess, et cetera.

It is perhaps worth noting, too, the tendency for anti-humanist positions to secrete humanism in the sense that they are defended in the name of promoting intellectual clarity and the elimination of limits on human capacities, needs, pleasures. What White, for example, promotes as the anti- or (as he prefers it) posthumanist position represented



in the work of Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Michel Foucault is surely motivated by a humanistic concern with human well-being in that this position aspires to "unbind" human beings from all forms of previous moral restraint and conditions of self-servitude—in other words, to "free" them for existential creativity along the lines of my third theoretical humanist argument.

It is true, I suppose, that what distinguishes the Foucaultian position from an antifoundationalist one, such as that represented by Richard Rorty (whose emphasis on avoiding cruelty and humiliation seems to commit him to acknowledging some minimally universalist conception of



This villa, according to Andrea Palladio, offers wonderful views from a stunning hillside site near a river.
 (from Andrea Palladio, *The Four Books on Architecture*)

human nature), is that the latter draws attention to the always partial, contextualized, relative, and inherently revisable quality of Western conceptions of the divisions between humiliation and self-esteem, pain and pleasure—even life and death. Yet one might still argue that there is a kind of lurking humanist program in the aspiration to get us to live in this ever fluid and radically “unbound” order. But, in any case, can we aspire to live unbound by any morality? (And Freud, incidentally, would never have argued for “unbinding” to this extent.) Why is it progressive for us to be entirely free of moral bindings? And even if such freedom were possible, how would the resulting

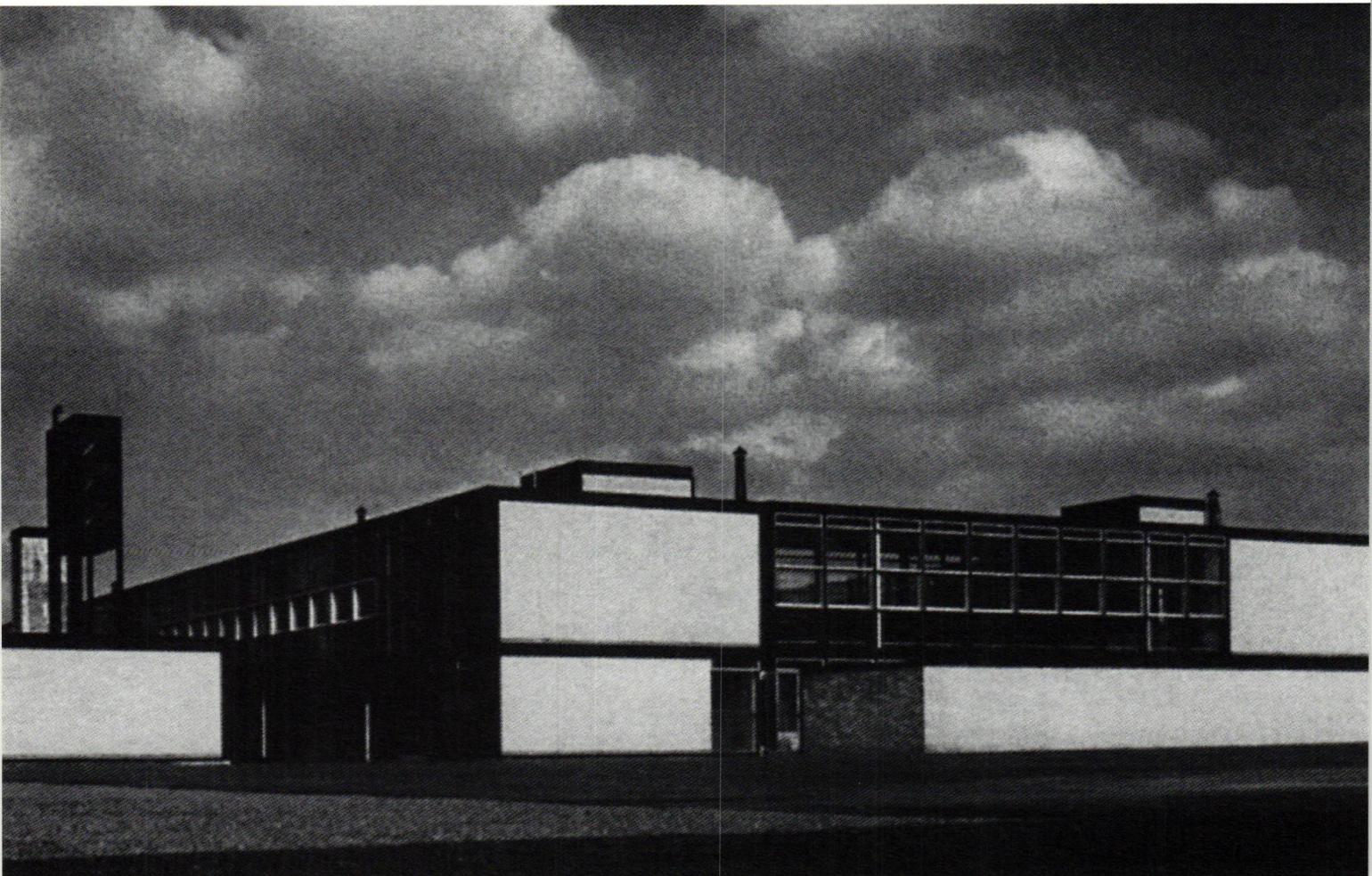
community of humans remain a “human community?” Or is that the point—that it would no longer be one?

How this all bears on the question of architecture, I am not sure, for I have no specialized knowledge in this area. I’m not clear as to what it means to apply humanist or antihumanist labels to architecture. Is a humanist architecture supposedly a more human-friendly or humane design and use of space? If so, such a view simply raises further questions of what may be considered friendly or humane; what, after all, is “proper” to human beings? And, in any case, conceptions of the humanist and antihumanist qualities of architecture are presumably continually changing in light of revised conceptions of what is or is not humanly conducive or expressive. Add to this the idea that human-friendly buildings and spaces sound as if they ought in some way to be scaled to human dimensions—to be approachable, unintimidating, and so on. But monumental, overwhelming, “sublime” architecture might also count as humanist precisely because of its sublimity—at least if we follow Immanuel Kant’s analysis of sublime experience as exceeding human reason and reminding us of exalted transcendence over nature.

I would like to make one last related point: perhaps ecological issues need to enter into the debate at some point. Humanists are often regarded by ecocentric critics as hostile to the “green” cause because of their antinaturalism—their resistance to collapsing the distinctions between human and nonhuman animals, and their supposed arrogantly “anthropocentric” attitudes toward nature. This all seems to me to be muddled and contestable, but perhaps it should be taken into account, if only because architecture’s ecological dimension might increasingly come to bear on how one assesses its humanist or antihumanist status. ■

NEW
EMPIRICISM AND THE
NEW
HUMANISM

by JOAN OCKMAN



Alison and Peter Smithson, Hunstanton Secondary Modern School in Norfolk, England, 1950–54. (from Helena Webster, ed., *Modernism without Rhetoric: Essays on the Work of Alison and Peter Smithson* [London: Academy Editions, 1997].)

I would like to extend the discussion of humanism by drawing attention to an important, if vexed, historical context for humanism-antihumanism debates, namely, post-World War II Britain, where Rudolf Wittkower's 1949 book, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, had, in Reyner Banham's words, a "galvanic" reception.¹ I address this context also to clarify some confusion that may surround one of the introductory articles in my book, *Architecture Culture 1943-1968: A Documentary Anthology*, in which, in explaining the British enthusiasm for townscape picturesque, I conflate two of the "isms" that the *Architectural Review* coined in the postwar years: the "New Empiricism" and the "New Humanism."²

Indeed, precisely because of the ambiguity of the term "humanism," this ideology is associated, on the one hand, with a more "humane" or "humanized" form of architecture (in the context to which I refer, of modern architecture) and, on the other, with a (modern) architecture that adverts to principles of classicism. In the context of Britain in the late 1940s and early 1950s, these two meanings were both operative and mutually antagonistic.

The appellation "New Empiricism" was coined specifically in reference to the architecture that was built in Sweden and elsewhere in Scandinavia during and after the war years.³

Admired as an undogmatic, psychologically expressive, naturalistic, and commonsensical interpretation of modern architecture, the New Empiricism was celebrated by Nikolaus Pevsner and the other editors at the *Architectural Review* as a "progressive humanization of the Modern Movement" and a conscious reaction against the "too rigid formalism" being purveyed on the rest of the European continent.

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At the same time, an entirely different "new humanism" was being defined in more avant-garde British architectural circles. This was in polemical opposition to a contemporaneous tendency closely related to the New Empiricism, namely, the revival of English picturesque theory. From the side of the battle joined by Banham, Colin Rowe, Peter and Alison Smithson, James Stirling, Alan Colquhoun, and other young turks of the day, the revival of the late-eighteenth-century picturesque exemplified "the most debased English habits of compromise and sentimentality" and a romantic and transparently compensatory chauvinism. Proselytized in the *Review's* ongoing series of pictorial essays on the virtues of English "townscape," compiled by Gordon Cullen, it culminated in Pevsner's 1955 radio lectures titled "The Englishness of English Art," in which the author extolled Britain as "the most compromising, the most adaptable, the most practical of all nations."⁴

Rowe's 1947 essay, "The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa," linking the geometries of Le Corbusier's houses to those of Andrea Palladio's, must be read as an implicit critique of the townscape aesthetic and of the ingrained British aversion to a more rigorous aesthetic culture.⁵ The rigorist conception of New Humanism also coincided with another "ism" of these years, the so-called New Palladianism, strongly inspired, as already suggested, by Wittkower's *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*. The New Palladianism was emblemized above all by the Smithsons' Hunstanton School, a Miesian exercise in classical composition and restraint. (Later, the Smithsons themselves would impute a rather different set of characteristics to Hunstanton, including Eamesian and Japanese influences, but let's not cloud the issue further here.)



Banham—by no means a disinterested party within the postwar debates—attempted to sort out these convolutions in an article titled "Revenge of the Picturesque: English Architectural Polemics, 1945–1965."⁶ His article reveals how blurred the line between humanism and its antithesis had become, especially in light of the new direction taken in the 1950s by Le Corbusier (and the futility of trying to apply Modulor dimensions to Ronchamp). As Stirling acknowledged by 1957 in an essay titled "Regionalism and Modern Architecture," "Today Stonehenge is more significant than the architecture of Sir Christopher Wren."⁷ Meanwhile, the Smithsons had moved from the mathematical rigor of the New Palladianism to the "realist" rigor of the "New Brutalism." Arguably, the only thing that remained constant was the desire to be rigorous.

As Banham wrote of the British architectural avant-garde of the mid-1950s:

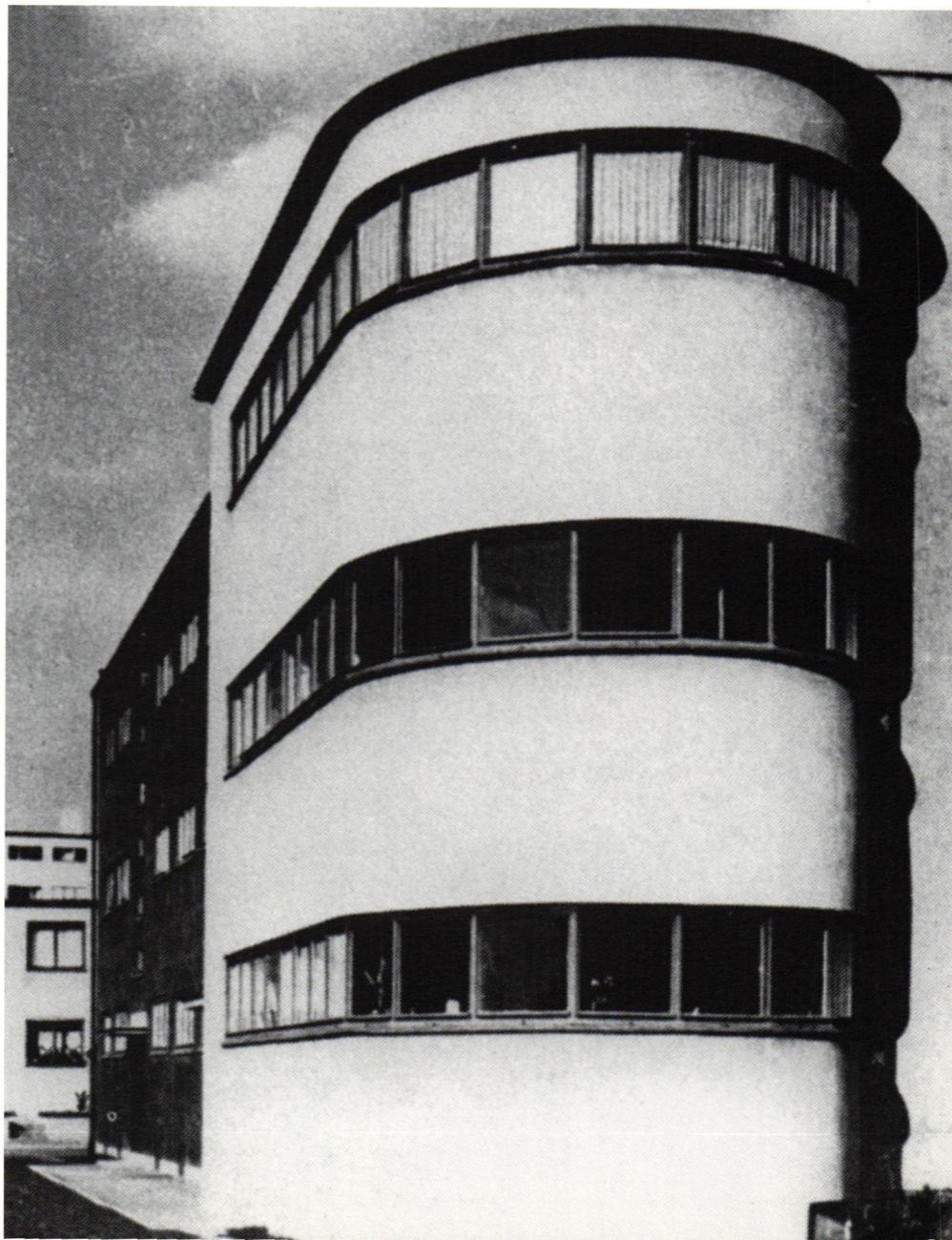
[M]uch had happened to destroy the congruities of geometrical beauty and science since Sir Christopher [Wren]'s day, and members of the anti-Picturesque connection who were interested in such topics were already making free with concepts such as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, were growing suspicious of "one to one" relationships and the concept of "uniqueness," were beginning to talk of topology rather than geometry, and if they did not yet dispose of the concept "open-ended," were certainly reading Professor Karl Popper's *The Open Society* as implying the downfall of all closed and determinate systems such as Plato's politics—or classical architecture based on elementary geometry.

Thus the worm turned. This not-too-distant history might bear some relevance in relation to the recent reappearance of theories of organicism and indeterminacy and architectural debates over "boxes" versus "blobs." ■

Two housing settlements built near Frankfurt after World War I. The Riedhof settlement, begun in 1927, is to the left, while the Römerstadt settlement, also from 1927, is below. Joan Ockman writes that the New Empiricism movement reacted against the rigid formalism of many modern European projects, characterized by the design of the Riedhof settlement. (from Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity*)

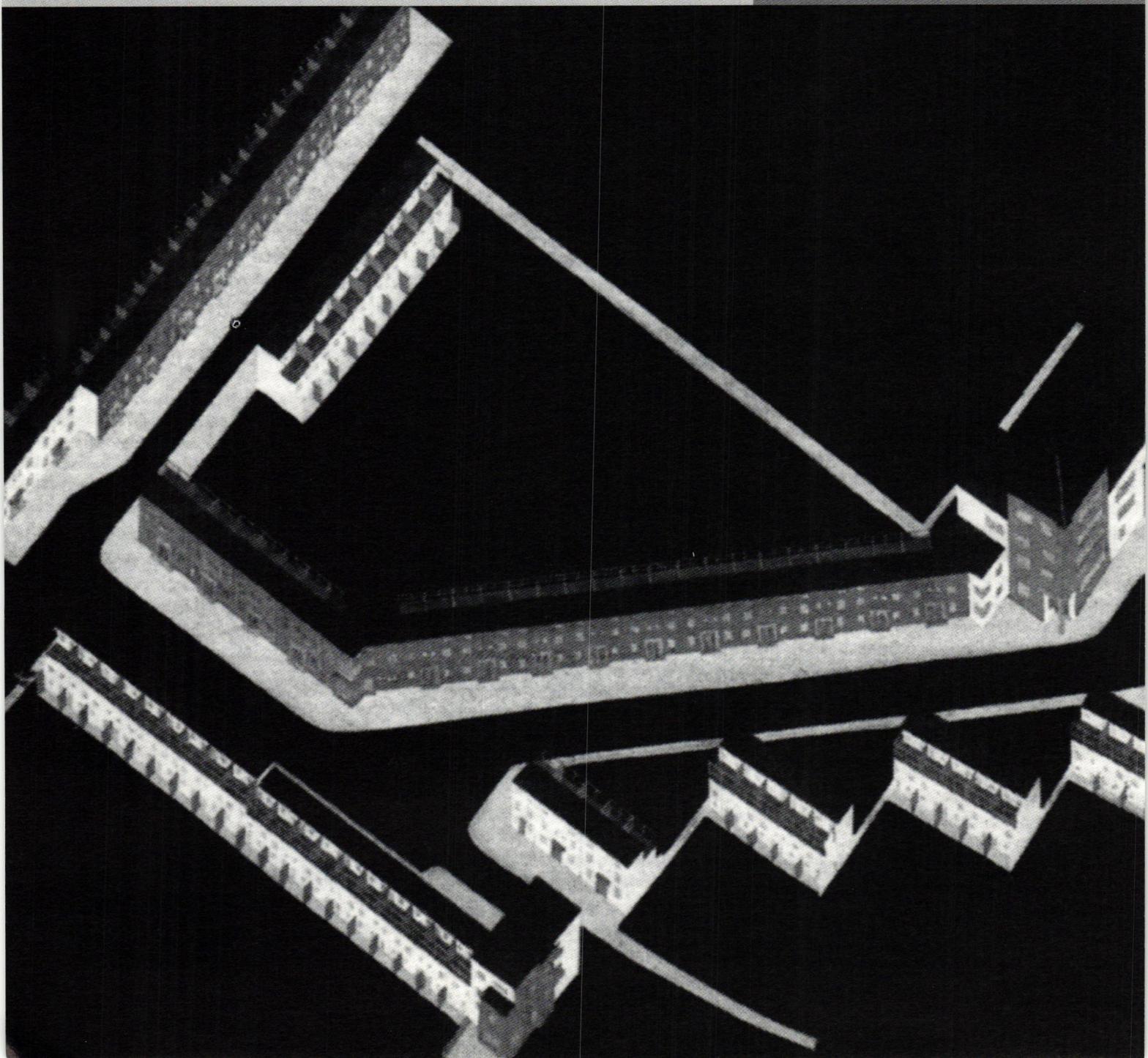
Notes

- 1 Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (London: Warburg Institute, 1949).
- 2 Joan Ockman, *Architecture Culture 1943–1968: A Documentary Anthology* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993).
- 3 See "The New Empiricism: Sweden's Latest Style," *Architectural Review* 101 (June 1947): 199–204; Eric de Maré, "The New Empiricism: The Antecedents and Origins of Sweden's Latest Style," in *Architectural Review* 103 (January 1948): 9–22.
- 4 Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1955).
- 5 This essay can be found in Colin Rowe, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa, and Other Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976), 1–27.
- 6 Reyner Banham, "Revenge of the Picturesque: English Architectural Polemics, 1945–1965," in *Concerning Architecture: Essays on Architectural Writers and Writing Presented to Nikolaus Pevsner*, ed. John Summerson (New York: Penguin, 1968), 270.
- 7 James Stirling's article was republished in Ockman, *Architecture Culture*, 243.



The Venice School, or the Diagnosis of Negative Thought

by HILDE HEYNEN



In his 1969 *Progetto e Utopia*, Manfredo Tafuri (1935–94) proposed a “rereading [of] the history of modern architecture in the light of methods offered by a critique of ideology, understood in the strictest Marxist acceptance of the term.” Tafuri’s central thesis is that the course of modern architecture must be understood as occurring within the economic infrastructure of capitalism. The book, translated as *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, aims to demonstrate that this ideological subservience is present, even in situations that appear to be explicit rejections of the model of bourgeois and capitalist civilization.¹

Tafuri views the process of modernization as a social development characterized by ever expanding rationalization and increasingly far-reaching planning. Within this process, he argues, the avant-garde movements perform a number of tasks that in fact further this modernization. For instance, the “program” of the avant-garde includes trivializing the shock experience inherent to new, quick-paced urban life. The technique of montage was well suited to the avant-garde project, for it involves the combination of elements—theoretically of equal value—drawn from different contexts and related to each other in a nonhierarchical way. According to Tafuri, the process is analogous to the workings of the money economy, which he describes in *Architecture and Utopia* with a quote from Georg Simmel: “All things float with equal specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money. All things lie on the same level and differ from one another only in the size of the area which they cover.” Tafuri goes on to ask, “Does it not seem that we are reading here a literary comment on a [Kurt] Schwitter[s] *Merzbild*? (It should not be forgotten that the very word *Merz* is but a part of the word *Commerz*.)”

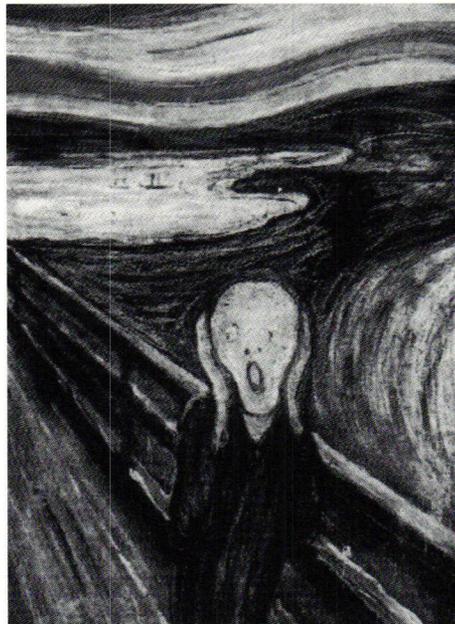
In reproducing the “indifference to values” of the money economy, the avant-garde use of montage replicates the mentality of permanent innovation that is typical of the process of social modernization. “All the historical avant-garde movements arose and succeeded each other according to the typical law of industrial production, the essence of which is the continual technical revolution,” writes Tafuri. Avant-garde

This is a slightly abridged excerpt from Hilde Heynen’s book, *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique*, which was published by the MIT Press in 1999. This excerpt is devoted to the authors of the school of Venice (Manfredo Tafuri, Massimo Cacciari, and Francesco Dal Co), who, Heynen writes, “are well-known for their radicalization of earlier critical theories, which they integrate in a comprehensive analysis of the relation between capitalist civilization and the culture of architecture. The Venetians have an outlook on modernity that is rather pessimistic, not to say cynical. Their analyses of modern architecture and its discourse hold that every attempt at synthesis, every attempt to create a unified culture, is ideological and therefore false. They thus disclaim that architecture would be capable in one way or another of actually contributing to a project of emancipation and social progress.” The author is a professor of architectural theory at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

opposite
Hans Leistikow’s drawing of the Siedlung Fraunheim, a modernist housing settlement outside of Frankfurt, Germany, commissioned by Ernst May in 1926. According to Hilde Heynen, Manfredo Tafuri believed that “the intervention model of the Siedlungen formed part of a broad antiurban ideology that was rooted in a hostility toward the big city.”
 (from *Architecture and Modernity*)

montage thus reflects the process of assimilation to which every individual is subjected: anxiety, provoked by life in the metropolis and the loss of values, is transformed into a new principle of dynamic evolution. Tafuri writes, "It was necessary to pass from [Edvard] Munch's *Scream* to El Lissitzky's *Story of Two Squares*: from the anguished discovery of the nullification of values to the use of a language of pure signs, perceptible by a mass that had completely absorbed the universe without the quality of the money economy."

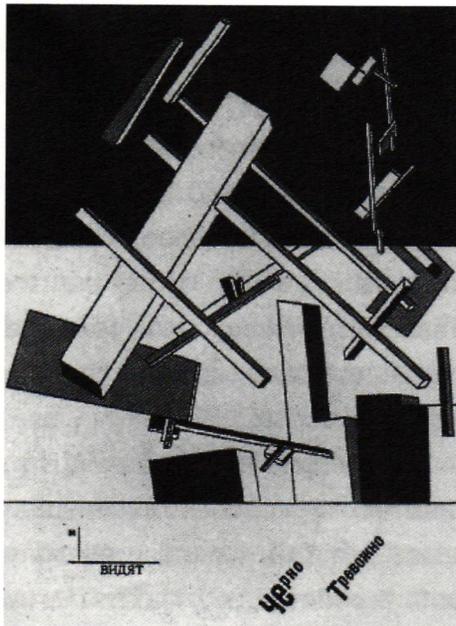
Having located the essence of the dialectics of the avant-garde, Tafuri goes on to state, "Doing nothing other than interpreting something necessary and universal, the avant-garde could accept temporary unpopularity, well knowing that their break with the past was the fundamental condition for their value as models of action." This



break, materialized in the destruction of values, is elevated by the avant-garde to the status of the *only* new value. This profanation is essential to the further development of the capitalist system. "The destruction and the rendering ridiculous of the entire historic heritage of the Western bourgeoisie were conditions for the liberation of the potential, but inhibited, energies of that bourgeoisie itself," he writes.

According to Tafuri, the avant-garde sees "destruction" and "negativity" as vital moments in capitalist evolution, and gives form to them: "For the avant-garde movements, the destruction of values offered a wholly new type of rationality, which was capable of coming face to face with the negative, in order to make the negative

itself the release valve of an unlimited potential for development.” Although the specific role of negativity was never explicitly discussed within the avant-garde, the movement did address the question of whether artistic-intellectual labor has a political character. Tafuri states that there were two different but complementary views within the avant-garde movement on this subject, the reverberations of which continue to be felt. On the one hand, there were those who considered intellectual work as autonomous and independent of any social issues. Such was the position of formalism, of those like Viktor Shklovsky who saw artistic work as mainly a laboring on forms and the development of a language of art. On the other, others advocated the idea of a “committed” art, or art as political intervention. As an example of this type of art, Tafuri cites André Breton and the surrealist movement, whose intention was to establish a direct link between artistic innovations and social transformations.



opposite
Edvard Munch,
The Scream, 1893.
(from *Architecture
and Modernity*)

left
El Lissitzky,
*The Story of Two
Squares, 1922.*
(from *Architecture
and Modernity*)

According to Tafuri, reconciling these two attitudes was a pressing issue for constructivism as well as for the urban development projects of the Social Democrat municipal authorities in the Weimar Republic. In both cases, the formal innovations of the avant-garde had to be connected with political activism. This issue was also pivotal in the work of Walter Benjamin in the 1930s. Tafuri argues that the “decay of the aura,” a thesis Benjamin develops in his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” was a comment on both the universal adoption of new methods of creative production and the rejection of the sacred character of artistic work—in other words, the acceptance of its destruction.

Attempts to preserve the autonomy of intellectual work respond to a quite specific need within capitalist development; that is, the need to recover the notion of "Subjectivity" (Tafuri's capital S), which had become alienated by the growing division of labor. This is strictly a rearguard action, however, for the "disappearance of the subject" was historically inevitable due to capitalist rationalization. Any attempt to halt this development was therefore doomed to failure, according to Tafuri. Still, impulses toward restoring a sense of subjectivity have a specific purpose in terms of capitalist evolution: they provide a kind of comfort, in which respect, Tafuri argues, they serve to prop up the system.

Tafuri suggests that the constructive and destructive movements within the entire avant-garde movement are only seemingly opposed. Both are responses to the everyday reality of the capitalist way of life. The former rejects it with a view toward creating a new order, while the latter exalts its chaotic character. The constructive tendencies "opposed Chaos, the empirical and the commonplace, with the principle of Form," he writes. This "Form" originated in the inner laws of industrial production and was thus compatible with the underlying logic that gave this apparent chaos its structure. It is here that the significance of a movement like de Stijl is to be found. Tafuri explains, "The '[d]e Stijl' technique of decomposition of complex into elementary forms corresponded to the discovery that the 'new richness' of spirit could not be sought outside the 'new poverty' assumed by mechanical civilization."

Destructive tendencies, meanwhile, had the opposite aim: to exalt chaos. But one feature of this movement—a tendency toward irony—meant that it, too, felt a need for order. Tafuri argues, "Dada instead plunged into chaos. By representing chaos, it confirmed its reality; by treating it with irony, it exposed a necessity that had been lacking." Given the overlapping nature of constructive and destructive movements within the avant-garde, Tafuri is not surprised that dadaism and constructivism merged after 1922.²

According to Tafuri, then, the whole concern of the avant-garde movements was to recognize and assimilate the dialectic of chaos and order that is fundamental to modern mechanized civilization, with the apparent chaos of the constantly changing image of the city, on the one hand, and the underlying order of the *de facto* rationality of the system of production, on the other. The artistic labor of the avant-garde movements involved an assimilation of the new conditions of life in the modern city. In Tafuri's scheme of things, he assigns the avant-garde the task of paving the way for further proliferation and evolution of mechanistic civilization.

But this task was limited. Even if the avant-garde movements could pave the way for capitalist evolution, they were incapable of genuinely influencing its course, or of giving concrete form to its inherent rationalization. This, Tafuri argues, was the work of architecture: "The Bauhaus, as the decantation chamber of the avant-garde, fulfilled the historic task of selecting from all the contributions of the avant-garde by testing them in terms of the needs of productive reality." In other words, architecture should be the mediator between the "progressive" demands in the work of avant-garde movements (including the demand for the planned control of the means of production) and the concrete reality of this production. According to Tafuri's diagnosis, however, architecture gets bogged down in this contradiction because it is not prepared to accept its logical implication—that the contradiction can only be solved by a form of planning instituted outside of architecture, one that would involve "a restructuring of production and consumption in general; in other words, the planned coordination of production."

The fully planned control of production can only be implemented when there is a general socioeconomic form of planning that embraces all the sectors of social life and is not confined to architecture. Tafuri believed that, for architects to accept the consequences of this, however, would mean disqualifying themselves: architecture would no longer be the subject of the plan, but its object—and that is something that architects could not possibly accept, for "what was clear about [architecture between 1920 and 1930] was its 'political' role. Architecture (read: programming and planned reorganization of building production and of the city as productive organism) rather than revolution. Le Corbusier clearly enunciated this alternative."

According to Tafuri, architecture attempts to take on the impossible task of answering for the technical organization of the restructuring of production and consumption. Instead of accepting the role of a participant in an overall plan, it presents itself as the author of this plan. This, at least, is how Tafuri understands the program of the New Objectivity, *die Neue Sachlichkeit*, which accepts "all the conclusions on the 'death of the aura' with lucid objectivity" while failing to acknowledge the contradictory character of this assumption. If architecture undertakes to reorganize the whole field of social reality, it is, by Tafuri's definition, doomed to failure.

Implicit in the New Objectivity is a new attitude toward aesthetic experience: architecture no longer has the task of producing objects to be viewed and admired in a static fashion; rather, it must give form to a process. In other words, it must offer a dynamic experience. It is in these terms that Tafuri discusses Ludwig Hilberseimer's book, *Groszstadtarchitektur*, which treats the modern city as an enormous "social machine."³ Hilberseimer starts with the individual building as the first element in an uninterrupted chain of production that ends with the city itself; the latter consists of

a sequence of elements that no longer take the form of separate, individual “objects” but are endlessly reproduced in an abstract, elementary montage. Tafuri emphasizes this approach to illustrate that “in the face of the new techniques of production and the expansion and rationalization of the market, the architect as producer of objects had indeed become an inadequate figure.”

While the architects of the New Objectivity movement accepted the destruction of the object and its replacement with process, their opponents (Tafuri mentions Bruno Taut and Adolf Loos, as well as Hans Poelzig and Erich Mendelsohn, in this context) tried to counter this development by overemphasizing the object. But all they were really doing was reacting to the secondary needs of the European bourgeoisie, knowing that they could not offer any comprehensive alternatives to the New Objectivity.

According to Tafuri, the architects who subscribed to the credo of the New Objectivity committed themselves to a concrete “politicizing” of architecture: Ernst May and Otto Wagner, for instance, deployed their technical knowledge within a context of clear political and social-democratic options. In practice, however, politicizing architecture was a limited endeavor, for architects did not manage to control developments throughout the city, nor could they restructure the system of production. Furthermore, as Tafuri points out, the intervention model of the *Siedlungen* formed part of a broad antiurban ideology that was rooted in a hostility toward the big city: “[T]he settlement itself openly set the model of ‘town’ against that of the large city. This was [Ferdinand] Tönnies against Simmel and Weber.”

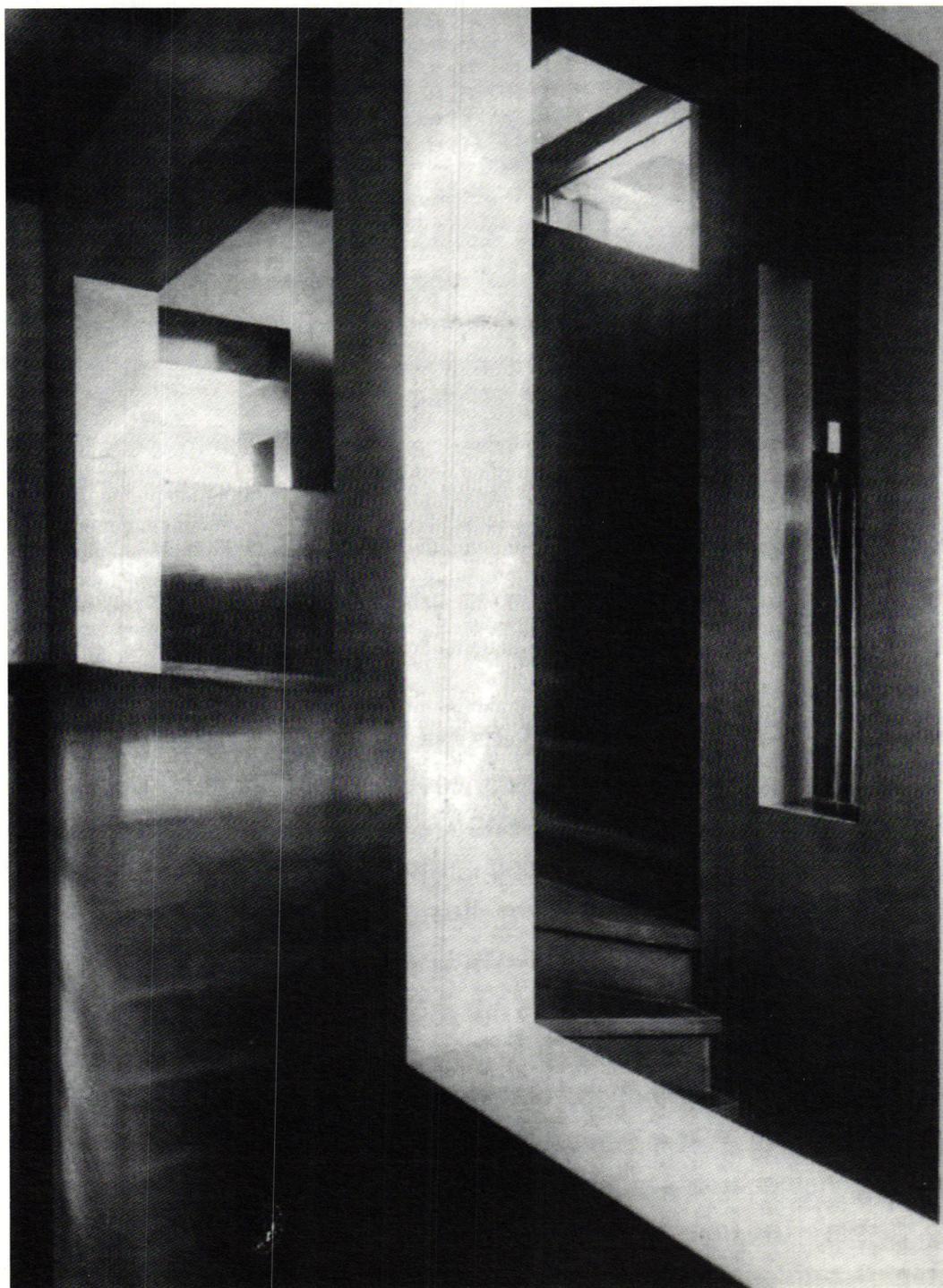
In choosing this approach, Tafuri argues, *Siedlungen* architects were opting for a fragmented and static organization of the city. This was the immediate reason for the strategy’s failure: the modern city, as the product of capitalism, does not permit any permanent balance; its internal dynamic undermines every attempt to impose balance of any sort. The longing for a *Gemeinschaft* (community), as German sociologist Tönnies had formulated it, was forced to make way for the ever encroaching reality of the *Gesellschaft* (society), and so the attempts of the New Objectivity to create a rational organization were doomed to failure. Tafuri writes, “Improbability, multifunctionality, multiplicity, and lack of organic structure—in short, all the contradictory aspects assumed by the modern metropolis—are thus seen to have remained outside the attempts at a rationalization pursued by Central European architecture.”

Tafuri's set of hypotheses betrays the unmistakable imprint of Benjamin—at least of the Benjamin who wrote “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and “The Author as Producer.” While Benjamin analyzes the work of the poet Charles Baudelaire as the product of an interiorizing of the shock experience that is typical of modernity, Tafuri applies the same notion to the whole of the avant-garde and to different currents in modern architecture.⁴ The pivotal notion here is the idea that the principles that prevailed in the avant-garde movements—the destruction of values, the pursuit of the new, the quest for form, the extolling of chaos—are the same as those that underlie capitalist civilization. Others who share this idea include Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Theodor Adorno, who were also influenced by Marxism. They all arrive at different conclusions, however. Benjamin, for instance, cherished the hope that an action of radicalizing capitalist rationalization might at a certain point bring about a transformation that would inaugurate a new form of society. For Bloch, on the other hand, the inner relationship he perceived between the New Objectivity and capitalism was proof that modern architecture was incapable of designing a new society (though he did not include the whole avant-garde movement in this diagnosis). And Adorno sees this inner relationship as indispensable for developing an artistic practice that contains a genuine critique of the social system while at the same time rendering this very critique marginal and inefficacious. The striking feature of Tafuri's analysis is that, unlike these other authors, he does not allow any margin for critical possibilities or alternatives. Tafuri's critique of ideologies reveals every artistic and theoretical development—apparently without exception—as operating within the logic of the capitalist system and as being “historically necessary” to it. Tafuri designates the capitalistic system a monolithic, ineluctable character.

As for the philosophical infrastructure of this diagnosis, Tafuri refers his readers to the work of Massimo Cacciari, whose stance on “negative thought” is indeed vital to his own hypotheses. Cacciari's discourse on negative thought can best be understood by looking at his analysis of two texts: Simmel's “The Metropolis and Mental Life” of 1903 and Benjamin's study of Baudelaire that dates from the 1930s.⁵ In Cacciari's view, negative thought represents a philosophical approach that stresses the irreducible nature of contradictions and the central position that the phenomenon of crisis occupies in capitalist development. He thus contrasts negative thought with dialectics: whereas the latter continually aims to achieve an ultimate synthesis of conflicting positions, “negative thought registers the leaps, the ruptures, the innovations that occur in history, never the transition, the flow, the historical continuum,” he writes in *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*.

Interior of Loos's Moller House, Vienna, 1928. Cacciari, according to Heynen, believed that Loos belonged to a set of architects who responded to the nihilism inherent in modern culture by creating work that asks radical questions of society. "Loos's projects," Heynen writes, "are based on the idea of composition that involves listening to differences. Meaning cannot be postulated as something that is universal and given in advance. What one can do is to create a suggestion of meaning by exposing the differences. In this approach, Cacciari discerns the possibility of reacting to the condition of modernity in an authentic and critical fashion."

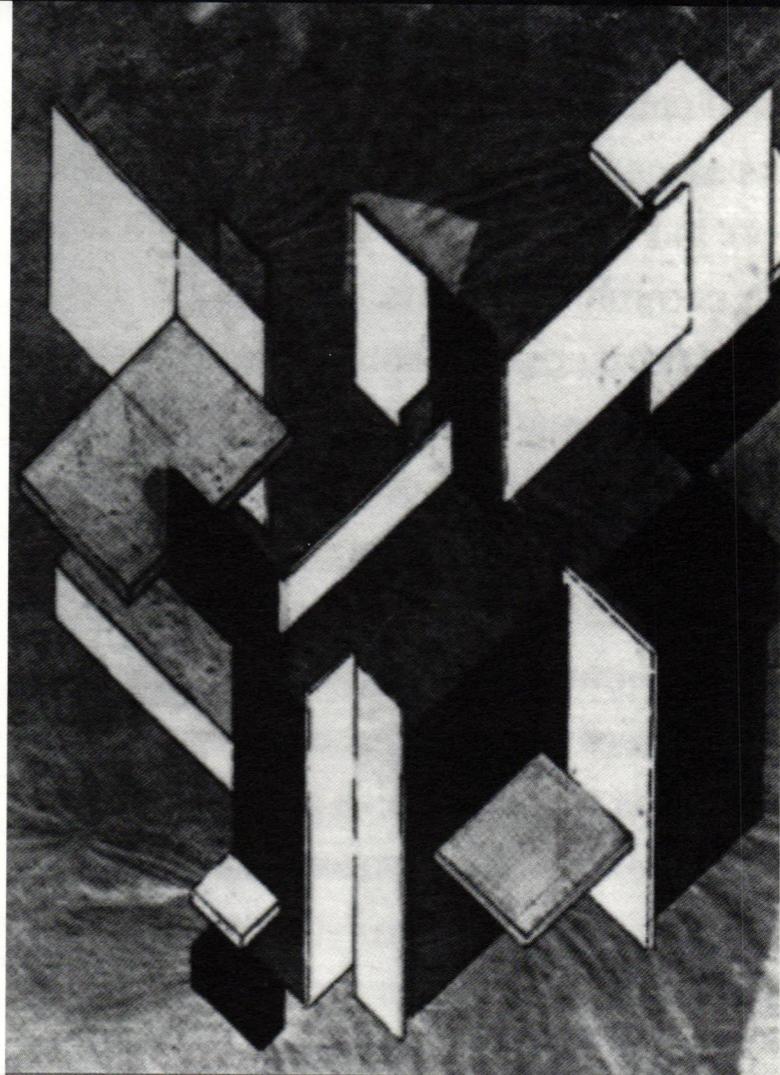
(from *Architecture and Modernity*)



Theo van Doesburg,
Space-Time Construction III,
1923. Heynen writes
that van Doesburg
was one figure who
"merged" dadaism
and constructivism
after 1922.

(from *Architecture
and Modernity*)

Hermann Hesse...constructs a notion of "home" on the basis of a reflection on the nomadic nature of existence in the Metropolis. The *Heimat*, the homeland, belongs irrevocably to the past, and its image is cherished in memory: modern man is called to an adventurous existence of journeying and migrations. This journey has a goal, but this goal does not have the fullness and sweetness of the *Heimat*.



Negative thought is operative within the process of capitalist development—in fact, it constitutes the most advanced moment in capitalist ideology. According to Cacciari, negative thought represents a crisis period within capitalism; at the same time, he argues, this moment of crisis does not form any real threat to the system and is, in fact, favorable to its continued expansion. After all, the capitalist principle of development, by definition, involves a depreciation of existing values: capitalism is effectively synonymous with a situation wherein crisis follows crisis.

Simmel's achievement, according to Cacciari, was to reveal rationalization—both in terms of human relations and of the money economy—as forming the basic structure of the Metropolis. Cacciari understands the Metropolis in an allegorical sense: it is a symbol for the modern condition and for capitalist civilization—hence the capital *M*. Following Simmel, he states that the Metropolis is the seat of the *Geist* (spirit); its hallmark is the process of *Vergeistigung* (spiritualization), understood as the process by which the personal and the emotional—both forms of subjectivity—are abstracted to the benefit of a calculating and calculable functional rationality.

Cacciari extrapolates Simmel's discourse by pointing to an explicit relationship between this process of *Vergeistigung* and the increasing prevalence of the commodity system. In small towns, he argues, use values and exchange values still coexist, and not necessarily in dialectical relation to each other. It is perfectly conceivable that an object will be "used" without being produced for the market. The Metropolis, on the contrary, is distinguished by an unrelenting cycle in which use values and exchange values are converted into each other in order to ensure the continuity of production. In the Metropolis, people's behavioral patterns correspond to this continual transformation and are therefore eventually also subject to the laws of production.

Simmel paves the way for an analysis of the Metropolis as a (necessary) instrument of domination in capitalist development, but its implementation is feasible only if the social domain is integrated in the logic of commodities. In Cacciari's view, an analysis like this belongs to negative thought, even if in Simmel's writings the logic of negativity is not brought to its conclusions. Simmel argues that the Metropolis, despite being governed by the money economy and the idea that everything is calculable and quantifiable, remains the place *par excellence* for the development of individual freedom. The

Metropolis offers freedom of movement, freedom of action, a liberation from prejudice and traditional ties. All this creates an opportunity for individuals to develop their unique personalities to the fullest. With this thesis, according to Cacciari, Simmel postulates a synthesis between "Metropolis and mental life" and refuses to accept the full consequences of his own analysis. Cacciari writes in *Architecture and Nihilism*:

It is a synthesis that recuperates the value of community, of the *Gemeinschaft*, in order to reaffirm it in society, in the *Gesellschaft*; it recuperates the individualized freedom and equality of that *Gemeinschaft* and makes them the mainstay of the ideology of this *Gesellschaft*. But this synthesis is precisely what the theory of the negative would deny.

Cacciari finds that Simmel pursues the logic of negativity only to the point at which it breaks decisively with every possibility of synthesis and control. At this point Simmel abandons his quest and instead undertakes an attempt to rescue nostalgic and superseded bourgeois values such as individuality and personal freedom. With this maneuver, Simmel incorporates the negative in a system of thought that ultimately serves the (ideological) function of achieving the transition from city to Metropolis, without him being in any way aware of the ideological purport of his discourse. Cacciari considers Simmel's "synthesis" symptomatic of the historical impossibility of capitalist development to achieve any understanding of its own character, whose basic features are rationality, abstraction, and the rejection of the old values.

Cacciari invokes Benjamin, who goes further than Simmel, with his thesis that Baudelaire's lyric poetry is a record of an experience of shock. The poet regarded it as his task to parry these shocks, no matter what their origins. The hidden presence of the Metropolitan masses makes itself felt constantly, finding expression in the imagery and rhythm of his verse. The Metropolis affects individuals at their core. Both the shock experiences and the superficial encounters in Baudelaire's poetry are typical of the changing structure of experience. The form his work takes is therefore also suffused with the process of rationalization, and with the feelings of hope and fear that accompany this process. To Benjamin, therefore, Baudelaire's poetry is the epitome of the internalization of the basic features of the Metropolis.

Benjamin uses negativity as a theoretical instrument for achieving an adequate understanding of the reality of the Metropolis. He emphasizes Baudelaire's way of dealing with the new structure of experience; this new structure is entirely bound up

with the total *Entwertung* of values that occurs in the Metropolis. This process of the destruction of values no longer leaves any room for a synthesis or for the values of humanism. Cacciari writes:

The negation of these very values is presupposed by negative thought in its hopeless understanding of the early forms of modern capitalist society. This negation is rationalization, is *Vergeistigung*, and it moves in the same direction as this society, directly and knowingly sharing its destiny. But at the same time, it lays bare the logic of this society, negates its possibility of "transcendence," and radicalizes its aims and needs; in other words, the negative reaches the point where it exposes this society's internal conflicts and contradictions, its fundamental problematics or negativity.

The latter interpretation is something that Benjamin recognized in the work of Franz Kafka. The most important point Benjamin makes, according to Cacciari, is that there is a connection between the form that the experience of the Metropolitan condition takes in Kafka's work and the discoveries of contemporary physics. Benjamin paraphrases a passage that describes all the forces and counterforces of physics involved in the simple action of an individual entering a room: not only must he overcome the atmospheric pressure, he must also succeed in putting his foot down on a spot that is moving at a speed of thirty kilometers per second around the sun. The feeling of alienation one gets from the extreme rationality of this description distinctly reminds one of the way in which Kafka traces the logical consequences of a fundamentally incomprehensible system, such as the law. In both instances, extreme rationality leads to alienation; analysis turns into tautology, and there is no way out of the maze to achieve meaning. At the same time, one cannot help suspecting that there is a meaning; one can get a glimpse of it, but it never becomes completely palpable. This is what emerges in Kafka's work—not a logic of signs or an ultimate signification, but the fact that a difference exists, a difference between sign and thing, between language and reality.

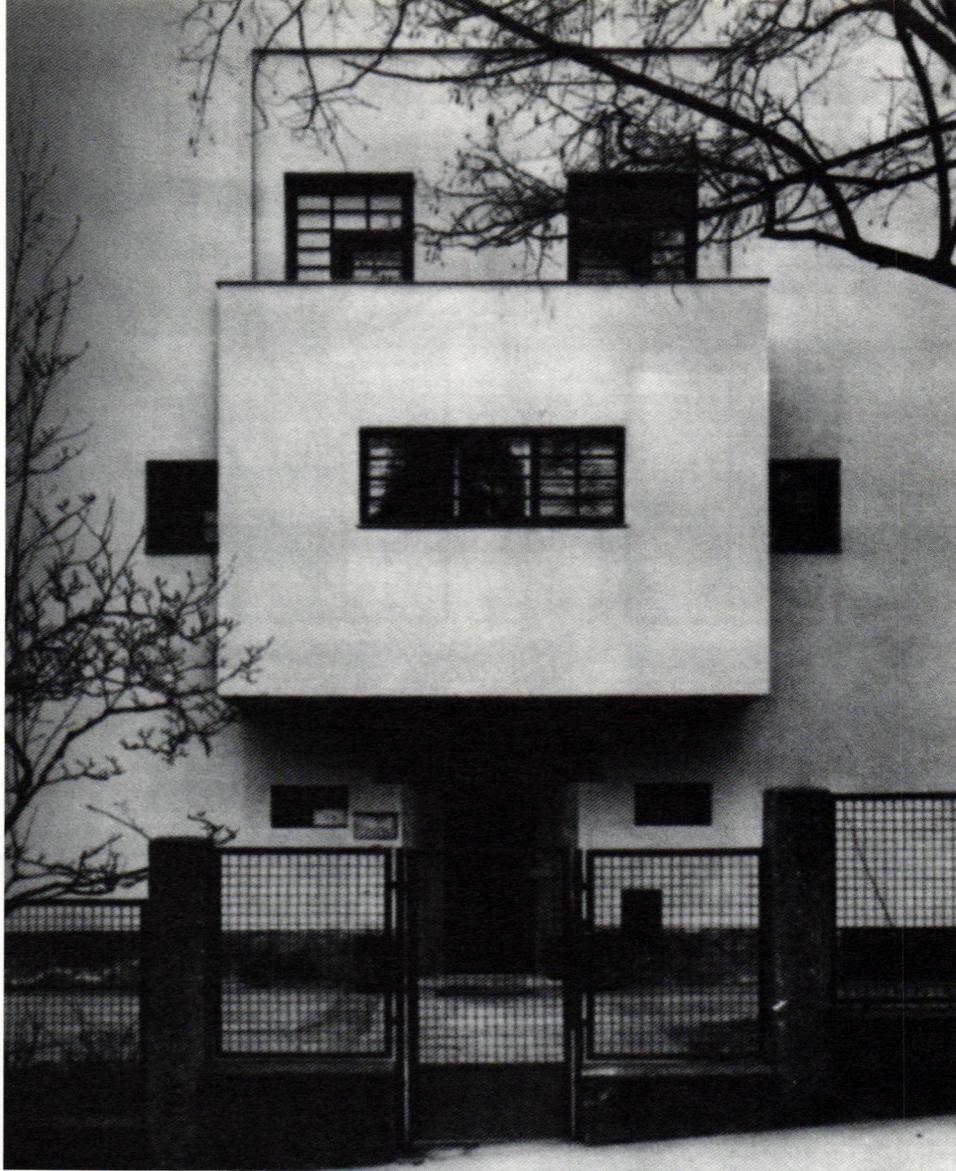
Benjamin shows how Kafka's work is impregnated with the negative logic of the devaluation of all values. But although he exposes the essence of the Metropolis as a complex constellation or system regulated by functions, interpretations, and machinations, he fails to grasp the function of the negative. In Cacciari's opinion, Benjamin, like Simmel, does not understand that the Metropolis is founded on negation.

Admittedly, Cacciari is carrying out a somewhat curious operation with his postulate of negative thought. As Tomas Llorens observed in *Architectural Design* in 1981, "Cacciari seems to have set out to analyze the concept of [M]etropolis as ideology—i.e., 'as false consciousness'—and then, having found at its core the schema of 'negative thought,' he concludes that there is no true alternative, and therefore places his own search for truth under the aegis of the same schema. There is an element of self-contradiction here which cannot but affect the conclusion drawn from the analysis."⁶

It would indeed seem as though Cacciari is using his analysis of negative thought to argue for a monolithic vision of modernity. Modernity—inseparably linked with capitalist civilization—is described in his work as a phenomenon whose course is not in any way meaningfully affected by individual contributions in the form of theoretical

or artistic currents. Cacciari seems to treat every intellectual interpretation, no matter how progressive, as ultimately serving the evolution of a society whose less acceptable aspects it had set out to criticize. Less progressive theories are dismissed by him as “nostalgic” or “beside the point.” Apparently, he excludes the possibility that any form of critical thought could emerge that would do anything other than confirm the system it claims to condemn.

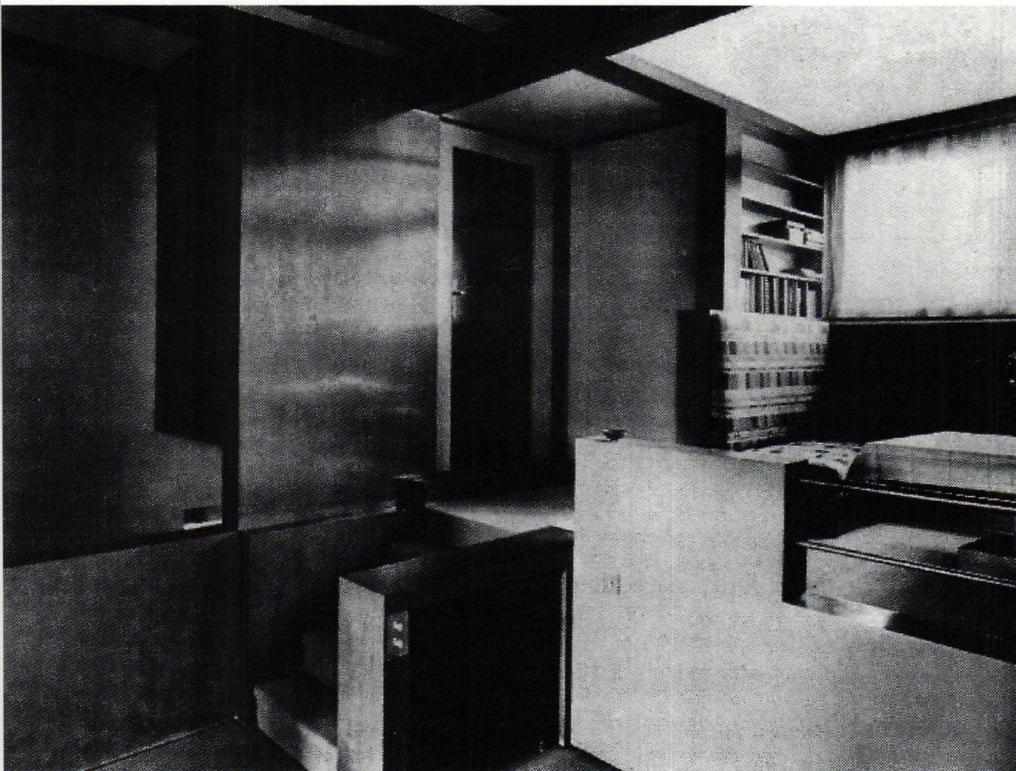
And yet this is not an adequate picture of Cacciari’s work. In his concrete analyses he detects positions and strategies that do not entirely fit into such a monolithic scheme. In the epilogue to *Architecture and Nihilism*, for instance, he distinguishes three possible ways of dealing with the condition of “nihilism fulfilled,” which is his definition of modernity, for modernity, in his opinion, completes the nihilistic quest for the destruction of all values. First of all, there is the absurd position of those who still aim at distilling a “culture” out of this nihilism—a position he discerns in the nostalgic pathos of the Werkbund, which remained determined to dress up the products of



The exterior of Loos's Moller House. In *Architecture and Modernity*, Heynen states that Loos's domestic projects combine the experience of domesticity and bourgeois comfort with disruptive effects, including mirrors set in unexpected places, that disorient and unsettle the visitor.

*(from *Architecture and Modernity*)*

generalized rootlessness with quality and value. And second, there are those who aim to express the universal mobilization of the epoch in a symbol: while the specific character of the different places of the world disappears as a result of the leveling influence of modernity, they treat the whole world as a single specific place. This is typical, for instance, of the work of Paul Scheerbart, or Taut in his expressionist phase. Finally, there are people like Loos who belong to a "school of resistance." Unlike the members of the first group, their resistance is not rooted in a nostalgic longing for coherence and harmony; on the contrary, it is based on a lucid and disillusioned grasp of the reality of nihilism. It is a resistance that materializes in design projects and gives form to a critique and to a radical questioning. What is questioned and criticized is the oversimplification and one-dimensionality implicit in the attitude of "nihilism fulfilled."



"For the avant-garde movements, the destruction of values offered a wholly new type of rationality, which was capable of coming face to face with the negative, in order to make the negative itself the release valve of an unlimited potential for development."

—Manfredo Tafuri

The ladies' lounge of the Moller House.
(from *Architecture and Modernity*)

Loos's projects are based on the idea of composition that involves listening to differences. Meaning cannot be postulated as something that is universal and given in advance. What one can do is to create a suggestion of meaning by exposing the differences. In this approach, Cacciari discerns the possibility of reacting to the condition of modernity in an authentic and critical fashion.

Francesco Dal Co comes to similar conclusions, if by a different route. In the first chapter of *Figures of Architecture and Thought: German Architecture Culture 1880–1920*, a book he dedicates to Cacciari, Dal Co investigates contrasting notions about dwelling and the “places” of modernity.⁷ His point of departure is Hermann Bahr and the ideal of reconciliation the latter proposes in his 1890 essay, “The Modern.” According to Dal Co, this pastoral ideal of an integration between the self and the world, of an unbroken, harmonious transition between inner and outer worlds, is also the dominant tendency in modern architecture. Dal Co contrasts this ideal of unity and reconciliation with Friedrich Nietzsche’s diagnosis of modernity. Nietzsche talks of an irreparable rupture: with modern man there is no longer any correspondence between inner and outer, and this situation cannot be remedied.

A number of authors have gone along with this idea, using it as a starting point for their interpretations of modernity. Hermann Hesse, for instance, constructs a notion of “home” on the basis of a reflection on the nomadic nature of existence in the Metropolis. The *Heimat*, the homeland, belongs irrevocably to the past, and its image is cherished in memory: modern man is called to an adventurous existence of journeying and migrations. This journey has a goal, but this goal does not have the fullness and sweetness of the *Heimat*. Nevertheless, the journey is guided by a longing for a home, as distinguished from the homeland, a “shelter within myself where my ego alone resides,” writes Dal Co in *Figures of Architecture and Thought*. The longed-for home is based on a rejection of the rest of the world, on renunciation. The gap between world and home is unbridgeable; inner and outer are divorced from each other. Dwelling in Hesse’s view is therefore seen not as an integration with the world, but as a separation from it.

Hesse’s intuition that there is a distinction between home and homeland has not been taken up in architecture, however. Modern architecture, according to Dal Co, attempts to create a space for dwelling that would reconcile tensions and where the original meaning of homeland—the sense of unity with one’s country, with the soil, with the history of the nation and the spirit of the people—would be recaptured in dwelling. Architectural culture has adopted this ideal from the work of Tönnies and Oswald Spengler, among others. In the work of these authors, a rupture is discerned between the old social form of the *Gemeinschaft* and the new reality of the *Gesellschaft*. The *Gemeinschaft* is based on an organic link between people and their environment, on continuity and cohesion. The *Gemeinschaft* is the natural environment for *Kultur* and

Bildung (or education, especially those aspects that instill moral and social values), both of which rely on a harmonious relationship between different domains of life. Dwelling has everything to do with taking root and with a feeling of oneness. The *Gesellschaft* is the social form that prevails in the Metropolis, and it is based on difference and on rootlessness. Technological civilization can develop in the Metropolis, but it is cut off from any possibility of cultural cohesion. The separating out of the different areas of life is the hallmark of the Metropolis. Dwelling, therefore, also assumes another form there. No longer is the sense of oneness with a place or a social group the decisive factor. Dwelling in the Metropolis has more to do with finding one's own place and with the negation of every organic connection with a community.

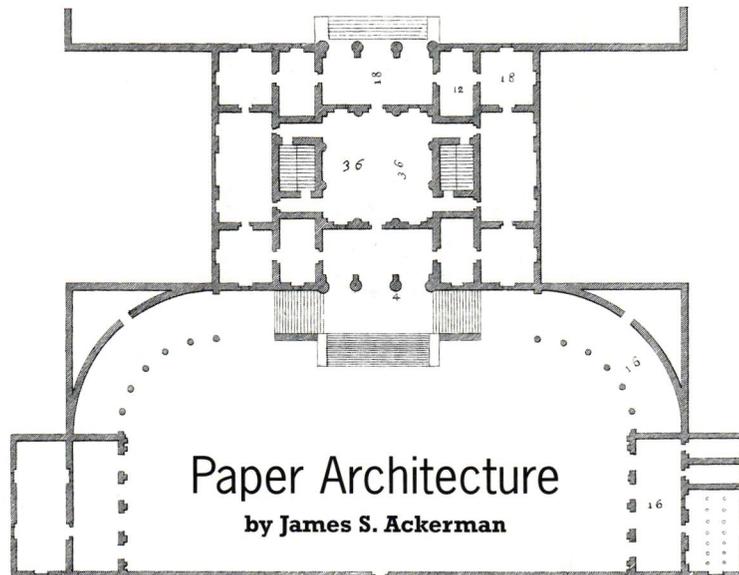
Dal Co considers that the concept of dwelling that most fully corresponds with life in the Metropolis is to be found in the work of Emmanuel Levinas.⁸ In Levinas's work, the idea of dwelling is demystified, for it is based on a notion of extraterritoriality: a person chooses a house; dwelling means taking up residence somewhere; it does not originate in a preexisting link with a place or a community, but consists of an act of choosing. In this concept, house and place are radically different. The house is the base from which the discovery and conquest of one's surroundings can take place. The house does not form any part of a harmonious relationship, nor is it part of a pacification process that brings about a reconciliation between people and their environment. On the contrary, the house is a border that delineates a linguistic disharmony. Dwelling is the activity that produces this difference.

Dal Co sees a similar concept of dwelling in Martin Heidegger's 1954 essay "Building Dwelling Thinking," which also takes the notion of an overthrow of the connection between place and dwelling as its point of departure.⁹ In the case of Heidegger, dwelling is not a harmonious expression of a relationship to a place that can be assumed in advance; instead, it is that which makes a place, a place. Dwelling is therefore a process of establishing meaning. Dal Co refers explicitly to Cacciari's interpretation of dwelling in a 1980 article in *Oppositions*, in which the latter states that there is an analogy between dwelling and *poiesis*—dwelling is an act of "waiting listening." Dwelling confronts one with the destiny of "unconcealment," and emphasizes how far humanity has come from a time when unity and harmony were still possible. In dwelling, the poverty of human beings is made manifest.

Nonetheless, says Dal Co, modern architecture has failed to grasp this fact; indeed, it specifically adopts a stance of refusing to acknowledge this distance, this poverty. At the core of this opposition is a utopian longing that desperately tries to bridge this distance, to conquer the poverty and restore the lost harmony. In short, the experience of dwelling as exposure to unconcealment leads to the recognition of the condition of homelessness that is typical of the Metropolis. Under these circumstances, “dwelling” can only be defined as loss, as an exposure to the irrevocable consequences of the disappearance of the harmony and oneness that were typical of the *Gemeinschaft*. Modernity has severed the organic bonds between inner and outer realms, between dweller and place, between individuals and the group, and no new wholeness has taken their place. This is the reality that modern architecture has failed to see. It is the historian’s task to clear up this misunderstanding and to show precisely how the illusory and utopian character of modern architecture attempts to justify itself. By adopting this stance, Dal Co supports the aim—stated explicitly by Tafuri—of treating history as a critique of ideology. ■

Notes

- 1 Quotes of Manfredo Tafuri in this excerpt, unless otherwise indicated, are from *Progetto e Utopia* (Bari, Italy: Laterza, 1973), published in English as *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976). His other books include *Teorie e storia dell'architettura* (Bari, Italy: Laterza, 1968), published in English as *Theories and History of Architecture*, trans. Giorgio Verrecchia (London: Granada, 1980); *Architettura Contemporanea* (Milan: Electa, 1976), coauthored with Francesco Dal Co, and published in English as *Modern Architecture*, trans. Robert Erich Wolf (London: Academy Editions, 1980); *La sfera e il labirinto* (Turin, Italy: G. Einaudi, 1980), published in English as *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. Pellegrino d'Acerno and Robert Connolly (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).
- 2 Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, 95. Tafuri is referring to the congress of constructivists and dadaists held in Weimar, Germany, in 1922. Attendants included Hans Arp, Max and Lotte Burchartz, Werner Graeff, Hannah Höch, Alfred Kemény, El Lissitzky, Karel Maes, László and Lucia Moholy-Nagy, Hans Richter, Alexa and Peter Röhl, Kurt Schwitters, Tristan Tzara, Theo and Nelly van Doesburg, and Cornelis van Eesteren.
- 3 Ludwig Hilberseimer, *Groszstadtarchitektur* (Stuttgart: J. Hoffmann, 1927).
- 4 On this topic, see “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 155–201.
- 5 Massimo Cacciari, “The Dialectics of the Negative and the Metropolis,” in the collection of his writings, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 1–96. See also Cacciari, “Notes sur la dialectique du négatif à l'époque de la métropole (essai sur Georg Simmel),” in *VH 101*, no. 9 (autumn 1972): 58–72.
- 6 Tomas Llorens, “Manfredo Tafuri: Neo-Avant-Garde and History,” in *Architectural Design* 51, no. 6/7 (1981): 83–94. Of additional interest is *Architectural Design Profile* 59, ed. Luciano Semerani, a supplement in *Architectural Design* 55, no. 5/6 (1985), which is entirely devoted to the Venice School of Architecture.
- 7 Francesco Dal Co, *Figures of Architecture and Thought: German Architecture Culture 1880–1920* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990).
- 8 Emmanuel Levinas, “Heidegger, Gagarin and Us,” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (London: Athlone, 1990), 231–41. Levinas wrote the essay in 1961. Dal Co refers to Levinas's major book, *Totalité et infini: Un essai sur l'extériorité* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff Publishers, 1979).
- 9 Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (London: Harper & Row, 1971).



<p>The Four Books on Architecture by Andrea Palladio translation by Robert Tavernor and Richard Schofield MIT Press, 1997 430 pp., \$59.95</p>
<p>Sebastiano Serlio on Architecture: Books I-V of Tutte l'opere d'architettura et prospetiva translation, introduction, and commentary by Vaughan Hart and Peter Hicks Yale University Press, 1996 484 pp., \$70.00</p>
<p>Serlio on Domestic Architecture text by Myra Nan Rosenfeld foreword by Adolf K. Placzek introduction by James S. Ackerman reprint of the MIT Press/Architectural History Foundation edition, 1978, and Dover Publications, 1996 88 pp., \$16.95</p>

An illustration of a villa on an estate. Palladio writes that the four square rooms around the central hall rise up to form four towers at the corners of the building.
(from *The Four Books on Architecture*)

Until now, anyone interested in reading Andrea Palladio's 1570 *The Four Books on Architecture* in English had no option but to consult the 1738 translation by Leoni and Isaac Ware, which was reproduced in 1965 in an inexpensive, and now out of print, edition by Dover Publications. The Ware edition and its Dover facsimile substitute Palladio's original woodcuts with engraved plates of meticulous aridity and many fanciful variations. Three cheers for the new English translation, by Robert Tavernor and Richard Schofield, which fulfills a great need in its provision of quality reproductions of the original woodcuts in combination with text that is complete, accurate, and respectful of the tone and style of the original, that is, yet, still of our time. (Palladio, like Galileo Galilei, was remarkably "modern" in expression.) As I would expect, this edition contains passages that I would have translated differently, but my disagreements concern mainly tone.

James S. Ackerman, Porter Professor of Fine Arts Emeritus at Harvard University, is the author of *Palladio* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1966), *The Architecture of Michelangelo* (London: Zwemmer, 1961), *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), and several other books. He is currently editing a book on the conventions of architectural drawing to be published by the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

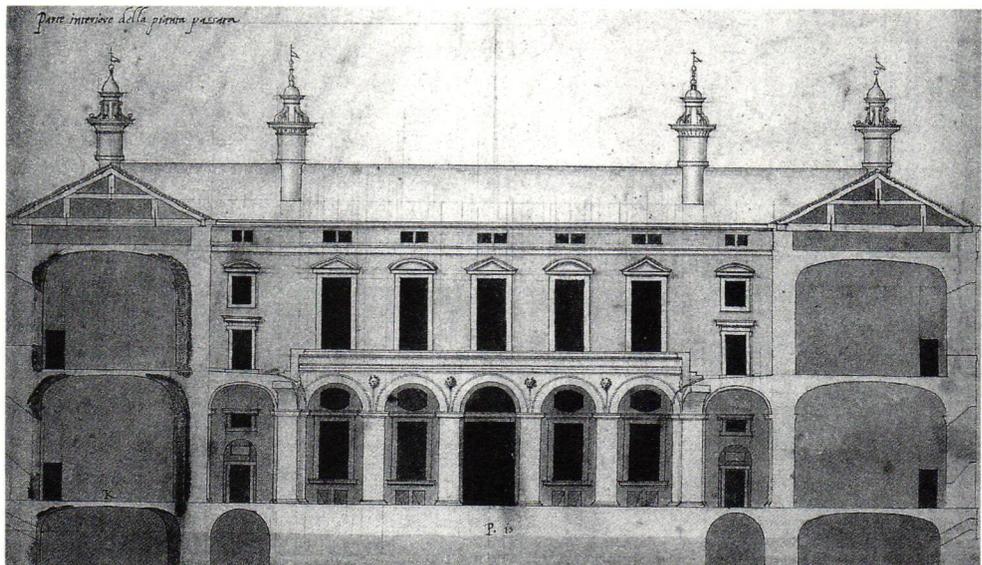
One of the most valuable aspects of the new edition is the inclusion of a glossary of Palladio's architectural vocabulary, which will be helpful to readers of the translation and of the original Italian version alike. Words listed in the glossary appear in the text alongside their Italian equivalents, in parentheses. (Terms appearing in the plural form in the text appear in singular form in the glossary, as they should.)

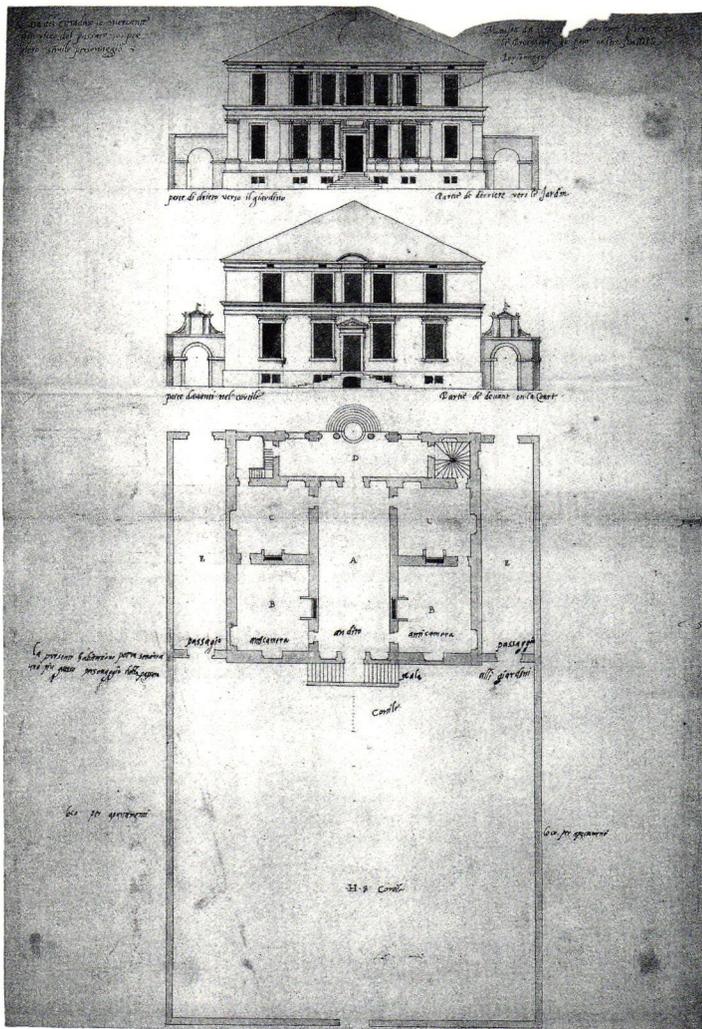
The pedestrian introduction by Tavernor outlines what is known about the life of Palladio: his contacts with patrons and contemporary architects, his visits to Rome, and his other publications. But it offers no insight into what makes *The Four Books* unique in the history of the publication of illustrated books. Tavernor describes the work as "largely inspired by Vitruvius" and incomplete. He does not elaborate on the theoretical positions the publication takes, nor on how the texts on villas and palaces put unprecedented emphasis on the buildings' patrons. Tavernor does not address Palladio's unacknowledged borrowings from Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola; nor does he discuss Rudolf Wittkower's challenging theory about Palladio's harmonic proportions. Further, the introduction

deals superficially with Palladio's curious decision to represent in some of the woodcuts those designs that are different from what was built. Tavernor describes the woodcuts as "best represent[ing] his original intention," but this opinion is not borne out by cases in which preparatory drawings for the building survive. In numerous instances, Palladio's woodcuts represent new designs that evidently seemed to him, upon later reflection, to improve on the ones from which the buildings were constructed. In other cases, as with the Basilica (1549) and the Palazzo Valmarana (1565) in Vicenza, for example, Palladio regularized plans that had actually been constructed askew due to site conditions and existing structures. In some instances, as with the Palazzo Chiericati (1551), also in Vicenza, the illustrations do not even conform with one another.

Tavernor cites early evidence suggesting that Palladio may have intended to publish more books; he even raises the possibility that Palladio had been planning to write as many as ten volumes, in emulation of Vitruvius and Leon Battista Alberti. Better documentation is required to support this proposition. I prefer to believe that if Palladio contemplated additional publications, such works

House for a noble gentleman.
(from Serlio on Domestic Architecture)





House for a rich citizen or merchant.
(from Serlio on Domestic Architecture)

The bibliography at the end of Tavernor and Schofield's text is accompanied by a disclaimer that it is selective by necessity; still, it is extensive enough to make the absence of some studies inexplicable—Lionello Puppi's 1989 *Palladio: Corpus dei disegni al Museo Civico di Vicenza*; a book based on a 1980 symposium held in Zürich, *Palladio: Ein Symposium*, edited by Kurt W. Forster and Martin Kubelik; Michelangelo Muraro's "La villa palladiana dei Repeta a Campiglia dei Berici" in the 1980 *Campiglia dei Berici: Storia di un paese veneto*, which reveals the influence of the feudal system on agricultural property; Muraro's *Venetian Villas: The History and the Culture*, published by Rizzoli in 1986; discussions of Palladio's classicism by Giulio Carlo Argan, Vittore Branca, and myself; the revised monograph by Camillo Semenzato on the Villa Rotonda in the 1988 *Corpus novum palladianum*; and Antonio M. Dalla Pozza's pioneering text, *Palladio*, published by Edizioni del Pellicano in 1943. Readers, however, are not going to use this volume for its bibliography, but for Palladio's text, which Tavernor and Schofield have made accessible with style and understanding.

An equally welcome and handsome translation is that of Sebastiano Serlio's first five books (Books I–V of *Tutte l'opere d'architettura et prospetiva*), undertaken by Vaughan Hart and Peter Hicks and published by Yale University Press. The preceding English translation of 1611, reproduced by Blom Press in 1970 and Dover in 1982, had been translated from a corrupt, pirated Dutch version. Hart and Hicks, who also provide the introduction and commentary in this publication, give no explanation as to why the last two books of Serlio's treatise—Book VI on domestic building types (surviving only in manuscripts; see below); the unnumbered *Estraordinario Libro* on portals; and Book VII, also on domestic architecture—were excluded from this new volume. (According to the Yale University Press, a second volume is in the works.) The latter two books were included in the 1584 publication of *Tutte le opere dell'architettura*, the first occasion when all the printed books (published separately from 1537 to 1575) were brought together in one volume.

would have taken the form of separate, more specialized volumes on antiquities. Many finished drawings of Roman monuments are preserved (the ones for the Roman baths were complete enough to prompt Lord Burlington to publish them separately in the eighteenth century), and had they been added to Palladio's 1570 publication, they would have upset its balance of ancient and modern.

The Four Books does not include any mention of churches, even though Palladio designed several of them later in his career. The exclusion of his ecclesiastical architecture may have been due to the fact that he designed his first church, San Giorgio Maggiore, from the ground up in 1565 while his book was in its final stages of preparation, and it would have been unusual to devote an entire fifth book to a single design.

Hart and Hicks's translation is lively and trustworthy, and the reproductions of the woodcuts are clear for the most part, though in some instances poorly inked or smudged. In selectively comparing the translation to the original Italian text, I found only one case with which I would take exception: in Serlio's second book, *On Perspective*, the word *orizzonte* (horizon), which appears frequently, is translated as "vanishing point." Aside from the difference in meaning, the latter term is modern; it was not used in the Renaissance, probably because it blurs the boundary between geometry and perception. Similarly, the glossary offered in the Hart and Hicks book is less than satisfactory. It explains only twelve critical terms found in the text, and pales in comparison to Tavernor and Schofield's glossary for the Palladio translation.

The twenty-six-page introduction to the Hart and Hicks volume, aimed at the general reader, is more helpful and informative than Tavernor's introduction to *The Four Books*, but it is also not original or critically penetrating. The publication's appendices, however, are useful in their inclusion of such things as translations of Serlio's Venetian copyright and his prefatory letter to the second and third editions, as well as a checklist of previous editions of both the combined books and those published separately. This checklist is reasonably thorough, considering the bibliographical complexity and profusion of editions up until the mid-seventeenth century (at which point interest in Serlio declined precipitously). The volume's bibliography contains a number of irrelevant items but remains much better and more concise than that of the Palladio volume. It will likely be extended in the promised second volume.

For Serlio's manuscript version of the sixth book, which Hart and Hicks's volume does not include, readers may consult *Serlio on Domestic Architecture*, a partial reprint by Dover of the 1978 facsimile by the MIT Press and the Architectural History Foundation (based on the original manuscript archived at Columbia University's Avery Architectural Library; the only other surviving original manuscript is at the Munich Bayerische Staatsbibliothek). Prior to Marco Rosci's 1966 full-size facsimile of the Munich manuscript,

Book VI had never been reproduced. Dover's 1996 paperback reprint of the 1978 MIT edition is welcome, partly because the latter was expensive and is now out of print, and partly because it appeared at the same time as the Yale translation of the first five books. Serlio's original text has been eliminated in this new paperback edition to permit the considerably reduced price. For scholars, this is a regrettable change. But half a loaf is better than none, and surely there will be many people who are interested primarily in the splendidly reproduced plates.

The book's comprehensive essay by the editor, Myra Nan Rosenfeld; the foreword by Adolf K. Placzek; and my own introduction are retained from the 1978 MIT edition. A new preface by Rosenfeld reviews the last two decades of scholarly contributions to our knowledge of Serlio. It is a valuable addition, as it fills some of the voids left by the introduction to the Yale translation. Notably, it includes new information, such as Richard Tuttle's discovery of documents on Serlio's sojourn in his native Bologna from 1525 to 1527 prior to his appearance in Venice in 1528 (previously, he was thought to have been one of the refugees from the sack of Rome in 1527 who went directly to Venice); and François-Charles James's unpublished discovery of two letters by Serlio, one of which (dated 1552) reveals that he was cutting his own woodblocks for a new publication. James's discovery revises our understanding of Benvenuto Cellini's designation of Serlio as a *maestro di legname*, which had always been interpreted to mean that he was a model-maker rather than a "master of wood," which is the literal translation.

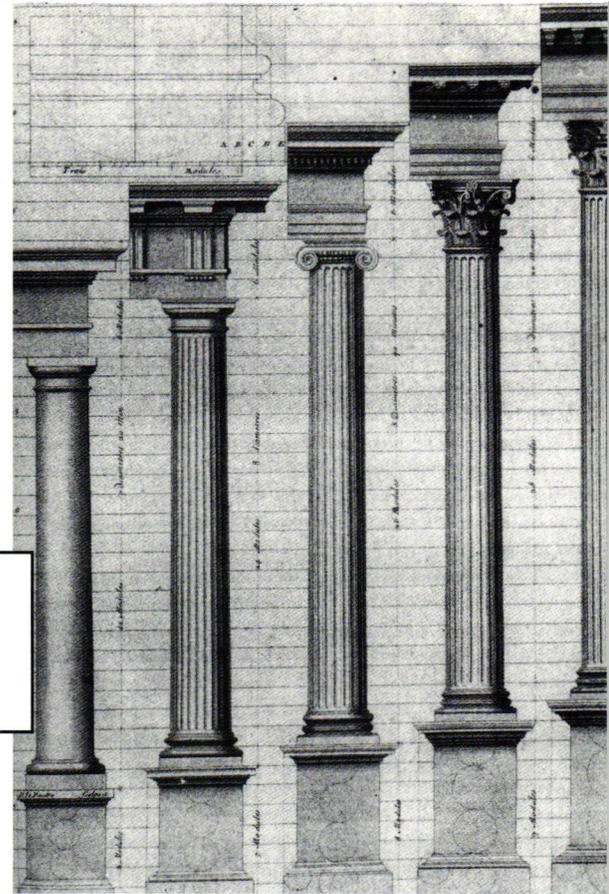
Congratulations to the three publishers for their commendable contributions to architectural education. Let us hope that their enterprise—revisiting, reprinting, and retranslating canonical works—proves successful enough to encourage further efforts of this kind. ■

Tracing the Orders

by Caroline van Eck

**The Dancing Column:
On Order in Architecture**

by Joseph Rykwert
MIT Press, 1996
598 pp., \$42.95



Examples of the classic orders.
They are, from left, Tuscan, Roman Doric,
Ionic, Corinthian, and Composite.
(from *The Dancing Column*)

It has been more than a decade since the publication of John Onians’s *Bearers of Meaning: The Classical Orders in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance*, a detailed account of the meanings of the orders from classical antiquity to the end of the Renaissance.* Joseph Rykwert’s *The Dancing Column: On Order in Architecture* is an even more ambitious study of the archaeology and history of the classical orders, addressing their meaning and their relevance for architectural practice today.

Rykwert writes in his preface that his interest in the orders began when he decided to learn how to draw them as part of his training to be a “modern” architect; by submitting to this rigorous discipline, he hoped they would impart to him some understanding of their “timeless rightness.” He thus followed the same routine of countless Beaux-Arts students before him. Only much later did he realize that this essentially nineteenth-century conception of the orders had very little to do with the orders as the architects of antiquity and the

Renaissance saw them, and that the way in which the canon of the orders was constituted has largely evaded critical study. The conception and construction of columns and beams was surely a matter of great importance to ancient builders, yet little had been written about these issues apart from Vitruvius’s tract of the first century B.C., *De architectura libri dece*, or the *Ten Books on Architecture*.

Beyond a critical commentary on Vitruvius, however, Rykwert’s project grew more ambitious: he wanted to provide an anthropological context for the formation of the orders, showing how and why they differ and what accounts for their “timeless validity.” He aspired also to reconstruct their historical context, tracing the genealogy of their development. He hoped to “look through [Vitruvius’s text] and use it as a retort in which all we desire and that we rightly expect from our environment might be distilled, if only in a historical form.”

In a letter to Pope Leo X attributed to Raphael and Baldassare Castiglione, the use of the term *ordine* prepared the way for the first codification of the five orders in Sebastiano Serlio’s fourth book, *On the Five Styles of Buildings*, written in 1537. Many architectural theorists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries followed Serlio’s example, preparing their own order books. Among them, Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola and Roland Fréart Sieur de Chambray had the largest followings.

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Order books continued to be printed in large quantities for the use of architects, builders, and students until the end of the nineteenth century. In Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand's teachings at the École Polytechnique around 1800, the orders were presented as the axiomatic model of historical precedent, not as the bearers of metaphorical meaning or ancient lore. At the École des Beaux-Arts, copying the orders was considered a useful exercise for training the adolescent mind, comparable to the benefits of studying Latin grammar. When Charles Chipiez published his *Histoire critique des origines et de la formation des ordres Grecs* in 1876, the first critical history of the way in which the canon of the orders was constituted, the book was largely ignored by architects. Throughout the nineteenth century, architects were more interested in practical manuals showing them how to draw and design the orders quickly, easily, and correctly, than in how or why the orders had acquired such enormous prestige. Thus, Joseph Gwilt introduced his study of the orders in his 1859 *An Encyclopaedia of Architecture* with an essay on beauty in architecture, in which aesthetics are dismissed as "a silly pedantic term... one of the metaphysical and useless additions to nomenclature in the arts, in which the German writers abound." For Gwilt, beauty in architecture is the result of fitness for purpose, which applies equally well to machines and buildings.

On the other hand, philosophers and art critics such as G. W. F. Hegel, Friedrich Schelling, Arthur Schopenhauer, Jacob Burckhardt, and John Ruskin merely restated in different ways that the three orders—the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian—were the most famous and beautiful, unsurpassed in fitness for purpose. These authors shared a preference for the Doric, which they considered "one of the most exalted creations of Man's feeling for form," in Burckhardt's words. In the twentieth century, various architects turned to the Doric order because it seemed older or more primitive, and more expressive of some perennial and primordial values about architecture. Antonio Gaudi used the Doric in Parc Guëll at the turn of the century, while Adolf Loos's entry in the competition for the Chicago Tribune Building in 1922 took the form of a gigantic Doric column because he considered its form to be the most concentrated, most noble formal expression of the need for shelter and the instinct to build.

These architects tried to recall some of the original, centuries-old meanings of the orders, which the teachings of the École Polytechnique and the École des Beaux-Arts, ignored. The first part of *The Dancing Column* is devoted to a reconstruction of these meanings. For Rykwert, all architectural meaning is based on an experience of one's body; every building recalls one's own human form, and all architectural meaning is grounded in bodily experience. Thus, he ascribes the meanings attributed to the classical orders to the literal and figurative analogy between the body and the column. Rykwert groups these concerns under three headings, which serve as the focus of chapters two, three, and four, respectively: "Order in the Body," on the analogy of the body as a column, as formulated, for example, by John Wood the Elder in order to make the heathen (classical; that is, pagan) orders acceptable to a Christian audience; "The Body and the World," on the links among the column, the body, and the world, and the speculations on the canons of proportion they encouraged; and "Gender and Column," which considers the familiar association of the masculine body with the Doric order, and the female with the Ionic. Rykwert cites Gian Lorenzo Bernini, as recorded by Paul Fréart de Chantelou in 1665, to convey the column-body-world analogy:

[T]he beauty of everything in the world (and therefore of architecture also) consisted of proportion; which might almost be called the divine part in anything, since it derived from Adam's body; that it had not only been made by God's Own hand but also in His image and likeness; the variety of orders arose from the difference between man's body and woman's—because of the differing proportions of each—and added several other things about this which are familiar enough to us.

In this context, Rykwert also mentions the analogy between column capitals and human faces drawn by Jacques-François Blondel in his *Cours d'architecture* (1771–77) to illustrate his idea that the character of a building can be changed by modifying the moldings in accordance with the desired human profile. This leads to a long description of the origins of physiognomy and architecture in the work of Charles Le Brun, René Descartes, Jean de La Bruyère, Germain Boffrand, and their

predecessors, Diego de Sagredo and Francesco di Giorgio Martini. Rykwert presents physiognomy, which concentrates on natural facial expressions, as a clear break with the rhetorical tradition, which concentrates on the manipulation of passions (through the use of facial expressions and gestures) by the orator.

Chapter five, "The Literary Commonplace," serves as a sort of conclusion to the first part of the book (though the chapter title is somewhat baffling, demonstrating Rykwert's talent for evocative, intriguing phrases, if also his disinterest in providing a systematic, explicitly outlined argument). In this chapter, the author formulates a theory of architectural meaning based on his conviction that "language, which is the condition and the cage for thinking, issues out of the body, which is the cage and the condition of my being." This assertion leads to an explanation of the classical theories of mimesis and anthropomorphy in architecture, and its most evident cases: caryatids (sculpted, draped female figures used as columns), atlantes (male caryatids), and Persians (bas-reliefs of male sculptures, initially of Persian slaves).

The second and more substantial part of the book (chapters six through eleven) is devoted to a reconstruction of the origins and the development of the Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and Etruscan orders. The chapters devoted to the Doric order, for instance, provide a systematic description of all its parts, the etymology of its name, the legends connected with it, and its function and meaning. The author also traces the transition from building in wood to building in stone, and the development of the Doric order from its origins in the Lion Gate in Mycenae and in Egyptian precursors, such as the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir-el-Bahari.

In the last chapter, Rykwert returns to the body metaphor, with a plea for a shift from aesthetic appreciation to design, from *aisthesis* to *poiesis*, as the focus of architectural theory. He calls for the return of meaning in architecture, which, according to him, has been virtually eliminated by modernism as a legitimate consideration for designers and patrons because of modernism's dismissal of ornament as confounding to function. In this context, he has some refreshing things to say about the role of Martin Heidegger's and Gottfried Benn's readings of Greek architecture as a mute Doric temple that draws its strength from the rock of and on which it is built. This view is very close to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's ideal, which is summed up by Rykwert as the "isolation of the stylized, crystalline building from its surroundings, raised on a podium and on its tall columns, [which] emulates the stark temple of the Dorian myth on its rocky socle." As Rykwert suggests, this German interpretation of Greek architecture may well have contributed to the

removal of all considerations of aesthetics and meaning from architecture in the twentieth century. But, paradoxically, he argues for a return not of the aesthetic in architecture, but of attention to the process of making. Hence, Rykwert's primary aim is not to formulate a new theory of *aisthesis*, or even to present a history of the orders, but to show "how the mimetic artifice was organized during a specific period in the past." For Rykwert, the relevance of Greek architecture for our age lies in its capacity to show us how buildings should be conceived, how "physical forms relate to the fabric of human groups—to societies and communities. Building is after all, the group activity *par excellence*."

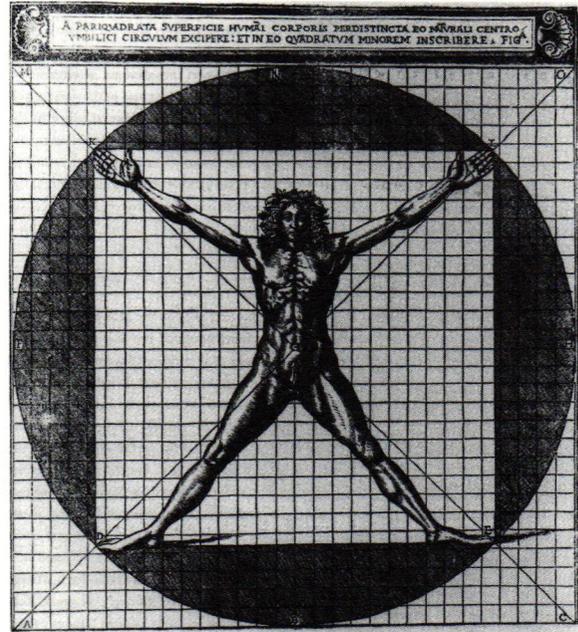
The Dancing Column is an extraordinary book, in the breadth of its themes, the audacity of its aims, and the enormous amount of historical and archaeological research it makes accessible. It is one of those rare studies in architectural history that challenges readers to think about the ways in which the study of past architecture can be significant for understanding the present. Given its ambition, however, *The Dancing Column* is sure to have some flaws, which, unfortunately, will reduce the impact it should have. Most significant, perhaps, is the discrepancy between Rykwert's stated objective and his actual accomplishment. Although he promises to examine his subject within an anthropological context as well as a historical one, the opposition between the two is never clearly established. And he never addresses the question of what accounts for the "timeless validity" of the orders; instead, the orders' ageless importance is the main presupposition of his enterprise.

A similar problem stems from Rykwert's presumption that the relation between "order" and "the orders" is self-evident, while, in fact, there is no sustained clarification of the relation between the two. The book's subtitle suggests that it is about "order in architecture," but the orders occupy the bulk of Rykwert's attention. For the author, the correlation is probably obvious: parts of the orders could be used to guide the dimensions of the entire building, a precept Vitruvius discusses in chapter four of his Book II. This identification of order and the orders, however, cannot be supported entirely by Vitruvius, since he used the term *genus* to refer to what is now called the orders, after Raphael's introduction of the term *ordine* in his letter to Pope Leo X. The term *genus* has varying associations, referring in biology to species, as a way of ordering the organic world (one might recall Aristotle's theory of the genera).

In fact, Vitruvius connects order in design not with the orders, but with the mental process of *ordinatio*, or planning, thereby arguing that order in architecture is the result not of the orders, but of planning and foresight, such as the use of a module to determine all proportions. In a book that aims to be a “hermeneutic vision of Vitruvius[s] text,” one would expect a more precise account of Vitruvius’s own conceptualization of the orders. By conflating “order” and “the orders,” Rykwert avoids having to explicate the phenomenon of order in architecture, despite the expectations raised by his subtitle.

Another major problem is Rykwert’s neglect of the constructional or tectonic aspects of the orders. One of the most conspicuous absences in the book is any mention of Karl Boetticher’s 1852 *Tektonik der Hellenen*, which also tackled the question of why the orders have enjoyed such authority and validity over the centuries. Boetticher, too, attempted an archaeological inquiry into the development of the orders. The great difference, however, is that Boetticher’s conclusions are based on the structural role of the orders. For him, their forms must be understood as material expressions of the forces (load bearing, pressure, thrust) at work in a building. Thus, Boetticher demonstrates that the meaning of the orders is not simply based on metaphorical or analogical notions about the resemblance between a column and a human body. Beyond speculations about proportions, the body-architecture analogy is fueled by the idea that the bodily experience and architecture are governed by the same static forces. Rykwert, for his part, makes no mention of Boetticher or the tectonic aspect of the orders. Focusing on proportions, he ends up treating the orders more as works of art than as functional objects, thus limiting their relevance to larger architectural practices.

Rykwert’s failure to connect his findings and conclusions to larger contexts of research and thought is problematic in other respects. For example, his treatment of imitation and rhetoric only takes into consideration anthropomorphy, and his explanation of the classical theories of mimesis never approaches the mainstream discourse on how architecture imitates nature’s laws and methods as opposed to her forms. He doesn’t question the application of Plato’s and Aristotle’s theories of mimesis to architecture, despite the fact that neither philosopher considered architecture an imitative art, like painting and sculpture. Rather, both saw architecture as one of the productive arts, or *technai*, a view echoed by Vitruvius, who makes no mention at all of imitation in his definition of architecture.



This sixteenth-century illustration for a translation of Vitruvius’s writings on architecture places the human figure at the center of a square and a circle.
(from *The Dancing Column*)

Rykwert seems unaware, further, of the role of rhetoric in the formulation of notions about architectural imitation and order in architecture. For example, he never cites the teacher of rhetoric from the first century A.D., Quintilian, who most succinctly observed that architecture, like eloquence and sculpture, benefits from following the methods of nature. These methods are reflected in the rhetorical division of the process of composition in invention and disposition, as Quintilian wrote in *Institutio oratio Book VII, Prooemium* (translated by H. F. Butler):

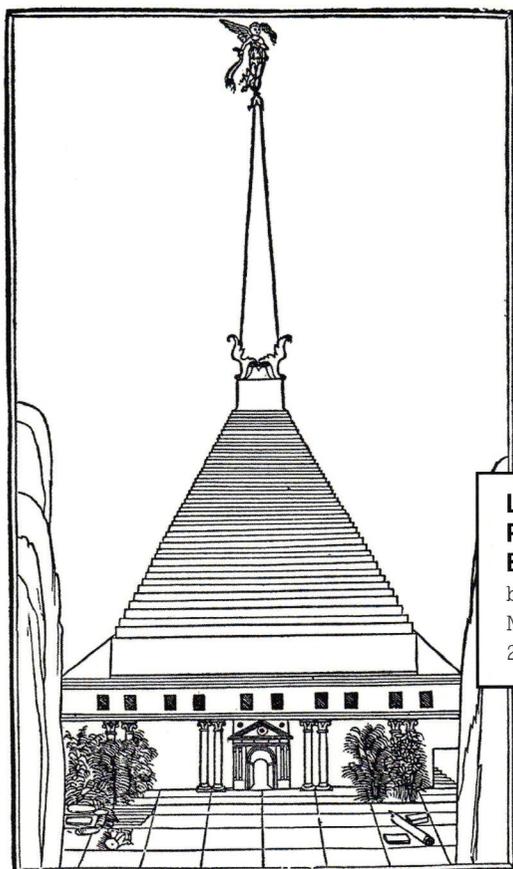
But just as it is not sufficient for those who are erecting a building merely to collect stone and timber and other building materials, but skilled masons are required to arrange and place them, so in speaking, however abundant the matter may be, it will merely form a confused heap unless arrangement [*dispositio*] be employed to reduce it to order and to give it connection and firmness of structure.... Nor can I regard as an error the assertion that order is essential to the existence of nature itself, for without order everything would go to wreck and ruin.

Here again, qualitative manifestations of order in terms of fitness for purpose and purposive unity are discussed, which Rykwert, in his unwarranted concentration on proportion, completely ignores.

Although welcome, Rykwert’s account leaves open to question whether historical inquiry offers the best explanation for the continuing appeal of the orders. Ultimately, *The Dancing Column* is a monument to the remarkable scale and depth of humanist learning, rather than a demonstration of the ongoing relevance of the orders for present-day architecture. ■

Note

* John Onians, *Bearers of Meaning: The Classical Orders in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).



Poliphilo's Dream, or Alberti's?

by Joscelyn Godwin

Leon Battista Alberti's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*: Re-Cognizing the Architectural Body in the Early Italian Renaissance

by Liane Lefaivre
MIT Press, 1997
299 pp., \$54.00

The first composite building, as illustrated in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. This structure contains architectural elements from temple, pyramid, and obelisk building types.

(from Leon Battista Alberti's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*)

Liane Lefaivre's *Leon Battista Alberti's Hypnerotomachia Poliphili: Re-Cognizing the Architectural Body in the Early Italian Renaissance* appears in the distinguished company of many other works on architectural history and theory published by the MIT Press. Bibliophiles, typographers, and Renaissance scholars alike are well familiar with the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a volume of 234 folios (468 pages) published in Venice in 1499. Taking the framework of a romantic novel, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is filled with innumerable descriptions of classical buildings, formal gardens, fountains, art objects, tombs, costumes, processions, music, and feasting. These constitute a virtual manual of courtly aesthetics for the mannerist era.

The finesse with which its 172 woodcuts are integrated with the text make it the cynosure of all illustrated books, and the crowning glory of any collection of incunabula. The best of its anonymous illustrations, such as the triumphal chariots, the Temple of Venus, and the sacrifice to ithyphallic Priapus, often surface in art-historical studies. Most academic libraries contain one of the facsimile editions of it.¹ Lefaivre's book, with its splendid, oversized format and lavish illustrations, imitates the typographical features of its fifteenth-century subject, and is a design statement in itself. It is engagingly written, and should serve well to introduce its fascinating subject to a nonspecialist audience.

But how many people have actually read the book, whose tongue-twisting title translates roughly to "The Sleep-Love-Battle of Poliphilo?" Few have the inclination or tenacity to tackle the original language, which is a uniquely macaronic blend of Latin vocabulary with Italian syntax, peppered with Greek derivatives. They may read the pathetic Elizabethan translation of 1592, which quits two-fifths of the way through the book; the elegant but abridged French version of 1546; the literal French translation of 1883; or the recent Spanish translation.²

However it is approached, the reading of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is an unusual experience. Book I, which comprises over three-quarters of the work, is an epic novel relating Poliphilo's dream of a journey through a landscape populated by the beings and buildings of classical antiquity. Foremost among the beings is the maiden Polia, the object of Poliphilo's love. After hundreds of pages of uncertainty and sexual tension, he marries her in a pagan ceremony at the Temple of Venus, voyages to Cythera in Cupid's boat, and symbolically consummates their union in the presence of the goddess of love and beauty herself. Book II tells Polia's side of the story—how she initially loathed Poliphilo's attentions but fell in love with him after his soul petitioned Venus in heaven. (Critics tend to agree that the much shorter second book is inferior to the first, except in psychological interest.)

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Poliphilo's eroticism is polymorphous, stimulated not only by Polia and her companion nymphs, but by the objects and buildings he encounters. This is a central theme of Lefavre's book: the eroticization of the object, especially architecture. Poliphilo gazes at buildings with the same voyeuristic eye and describes them with the same fetishistic detail that he applies to human bodies and clothes. He experiences the same voluptuous palpitations in their presence as he does in Polia's. He feels the same way about the innumerable gardens, fountains, tombs and epitaphs, and interior decorations that fill his dreamworld with enhanced images of a superior, if faded, civilization. The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is a magnificently self-indulgent fantasy of someone in love with a lost world where gods and goddesses preside and everything is rich, sensual, innocent, and harmonious. It belongs to the nostalgic paganism of the early Renaissance, celebrated in certain paintings of Francesco Cossa, Andrea Mantegna, Sandro Botticelli, and Piero di Cosimo, and in the sculptures of the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini. Lefavre's book will delight those who enjoy tales of a rarefied imaginary universe, which make believe that Judeo-Christian civilization never happened.

The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* was published anonymously in 1499, but it was soon noticed that the initial letters of the chapters spelled out the name "Frater Franciscus Columna." The scholarly consensus, therefore, fastened on Francesco Colonna (1433–1527), a monk of the Dominican convent of SS. Giovanni e Paolo in Venice, who might have had reason to conceal his authorship of such a story, since his biography records little other than disciplinary actions for misbehavior. The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is found in most library catalogues under "Colonna, Francesco," an attribution firmly asserted by Giovanni Pozzi and Lucia A. Ciapponi, the editors of the modern annotated edition of the text.³

There the matter might have rested, but for the discovery of a Prince Francesco Colonna (1453–1538), whose claims to authorship were advanced by the eminent scholar Maurizio Calvesi in publications from 1965 onward.⁴ This Colonna belonged to a noble Roman family that owned the ruined Temple of Fortune at Palestrina, which Calvesi sees as the model for the great pyramidal structure described early in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. Prince Francesco and his uncle, Prospero Colonna, were intimates of the Roman humanists, including Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72), upon whose architectural treatise, *De re aedificatoria*, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* heavily relies.⁵ To Calvesi, circumstances favored a Roman, academic origin over that of a dissolute Venetian friar.

The next act in the game of attribution opened when Emanuela Kretzulesco-Quaranta published her remarkable 1976 study on the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* and its influences, titled *Les jardins du songe: "Poliphile" et la mystique de la Renaissance*. While concurring with Calvesi's attribution of the work to Prince Francesco and his Roman circle, she broadened the field in the most creative way, showing how the ideas and images of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* had survived vigorously in, of all places, the art of garden design. The great formal gardens of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from Tivoli to Versailles, seemed deliberately to replicate stages in Poliphilo's journey and, by implication, to embody what Kretzulesco-Quaranta saw as the central message of the book: the essential goodness of Nature and of the body, and their value in the quest for Divine Wisdom. This theme contradicted the theologians' condemnation of Nature as fallen and of sex as sinful; hence the need for discretion and, eventually, for hiding the heretical Poliphilic doctrines under the cover of symbolic gardens, where they could be read by the learned, the esoteric, and the independently minded. Judged controversial for whatever reasons, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is in any case a landmark in the evaluation of garden design.

It was only later, with the second edition of *Les jardins du songe*, published in 1986, that Kretzulesco-Quaranta argued forcibly that the author of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* could be none other than the humanist and architect Alberti. Prince Francesco Colonna's role was reduced to that of the protector who had saved Alberti's manuscript from destruction after the author's death.⁶ I mention this for the record, because Lefavre does not reference Kretzulesco-Quaranta's work and conveys the impression of being the first to propose Alberti as the author.⁷ Lefavre's belief in Alberti's authorship stems "from what she sees as a remarkable fit of his talents with those needed to produce such a complex work." Lefavre cites Alberti's love of literature and his defense of vernacular Italian language, combined with a fondness for inventing new words and his great erudition in Latin and Greek; his use of Greek titles for his books; his many writings on the theme of love; the common group of twenty-four classical authorities cited in both the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* and Alberti's treatise on architecture; his knowledge of engineering and mechanical devices; and his expertise in geometry,

An illustration from a French edition of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* shows Poliphilo encountering a dragon on his way to meet his beloved Polia.
(from Leon Battista Alberti's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*)



perspective, and surveying. In addition, Lefaivre offers a lengthy analysis of less obvious clues, such as the similarity between how Alberti and the author of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* conceived of space and movement; and the way this produces not only a unique series of illustrations to the story but a “visual” text. Lefaivre writes, the author of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* “is writing in a verbal medium but thinking in a purely visual one.” She also investigates Alberti’s biography for clues that might verify his authorship, and addresses the fact that the manuscript was lost, and only published after his death.

Irrespective of whether Alberti wrote the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* or not, the chapters in which Lefaivre advances this argument contain a mass of information and insight that casts light on both Alberti and the enigmatic book. Her presentation of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is the liveliest and most sympathetic ever written. She reads it as a book with a message: as a re-cognition of the human body and a re-assertion of its beauty and its erotic nature, after centuries in which the latter had been despised and suppressed. And as attitudes toward the body go, so does architecture, which is the creative extension and magnification of the human body.

In the four final chapters Lefaivre outlines the changing attitudes to the physicality of architecture through the Dark Ages (“The Dangerous Body” of Christian asceticism), the early Middle Ages (“The Marvelous Body” of Byzantine decoration and of the Holy Grail myth), the Gothic era (“The Divine Body” of Abbot Suger’s light-metaphysics and of the Virgin), and Alberti’s time (“The Humanist Body” of architecture made voluptuous for its own sake). This, too, is a fascinating interpretation of the evolution of architecture and of architectural perception. Lefaivre’s argument concludes that there was a crucial change from a “cold” separation of architecture from the human body and its sensations and desires to a “hot” thinking that set individuals free for reflection and identification in new buildings and artifacts.

In view of the brilliance and originality of this book, the emphasis Lefaivre places on the Alberti attribution is unfortunate. The boldness with which it is announced in the title sounds like a clarion call to librarians throughout the world to reshelve their copies of *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* and amend their catalogues. The question is, how viable is the assertion of Alberti’s authorship?

Pozzi and Ciapponi, who deserve honors as the most careful Poliphilists, do not think such a claim is very viable. In their 1980 revision of their critical edition, Pozzi demolishes Calvesi's attribution of the work to Prince Francesco, showing that recent discoveries have, if anything, strengthened the case of Brother Francesco. Pozzi's arguments bear especially on the local, Venetian aspects of the language and topography of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. Both Pozzi and Ciapponi take the Albertian influence generously into account: Pozzi's notes show that the author of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* quoted liberally from Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*, which was circulating in manuscript at the time of *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*'s writing. But to Pozzi, this does not in the least suggest Alberti's authorship. On the contrary, it points to the differences between master and follower. "Alberti, seized by didactic necessity, is very much more essential and rapid. But Colonna gives vent rather to the artisan's pedantry: he gives the verbal equivalent of a model, a section, a plan."⁸

Brother Francesco, incidentally, was a part-time goldsmith, and his descriptions of precious objects have the finicky, repetitive quality of his craft. But, more to the point, some descriptions are inaccurate, especially when it comes to the measurements and geometry of buildings. With the best will in the world, his commentators and translators cannot fathom what he means by some of his descriptions; and the illustrations do not help because they do not always correspond to the text. The author of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* may have been in love with classical architecture, but he was muddled and incapable of clear, concise description—if indeed that were possible in his contorted, private language.

One turns from the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*'s architectural descriptions to those of Alberti's treatise with the feeling of emerging into light from a thick fog. Space allows for only two examples here, one mathematical and one verbal. In Book VII of his treatise, *De re aedificatoria*, Alberti gives crystal-clear instructions for drawing the spiral of an Ionic capital inwards with a compass.⁹ In the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, the author gives similar instructions, but "his spiral goes outwards, making it impossible to contain it in a given space, and he omits the vital piece of information on where to place the point of the compass." Pozzi remarks that Colonna here "vaguely imitates" Alberti's rule. But the truth is, the author of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* was not good at mathematics, as can be seen by the mistakes and confusion that beset his efforts.¹⁰

The second example is that the author of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* fails to accurately recall a passage from Alberti at the very climax of the story. In his *De re aedificatoria*, Alberti mentions a *ferrea cortina*, i.e., an iron cauldron or tripod, that the Samians once sent to Delphi.¹¹ But the author of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* compares the curtain of Venus's sanctuary to "the marvelous *cortina* sent by the Samians to Delphi," evidently giving *cortina* its Italian meaning of "curtain" or "veil" rather than its Latin one of "cauldron" or "tripod." At least he did not make it an iron curtain, as by rights he should have.

In view of such disparities—and there are many more—I am unconvinced by Lefavre's "five highly personal and revealing clues that identify the author as Alberti": references in both texts to animals, abundant musical musings, use of Greek names, occurrence of Alberti's emblem (the eye) in some of the hieroglyphs, and Poliphilo's dress of cassock and skullcap. These are vague commonplaces that would do equally well to identify Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino, for example, as the author; whereas there is precise textual evidence against the Alberti attribution.

The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* authorship question is beginning to resemble, in a minor way, that which surround the Shakespeare plays.¹² First, there was the unappealing character who signed the work, the Stratford actor, not to mention the libertine monk. How could such nonentities have created such great works? Wouldn't it be much better to credit a well-connected aristocrat, say, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford? (This proposition parallels that of Prince Francesco Colonna for the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*.) Then came the Baconians, who with quasireligious fervor claimed that only Francis Bacon had the universal learning to write the Shakespeare works, adding that he was the secret son of Queen Elizabeth and the founder of Freemasonry.

Now, to hear that Alberti, universal genius, has written the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*—even if it meant garbling his favorite subject, architecture? Lefavre has given us a delightful and provocative book, and she, like Kretzulesco-Quaranta, has indeed shown how very Albertian the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is. But librarians should not leap to rearrange their shelves. The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, for all its flaws, is a glorious book, and redounds to the eternal fame of Brother Francesco Colonna, the cranky friar of Venice. ■

Notes

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| <p>1 The most recent facsimile appeared as the first volume in the series <i>The Renaissance and the Gods</i> (New York: Garland Publishing, 1976).</p> <p>2 <i>Hypnerotomachia: The Strife of Love in a Dreame</i>, trans. Sir Robert Dallington (London: 1592; reprint, Amsterdam and New York: Da Capo Press, 1969); <i>Le Songe de Poliphile</i>, trans. Jean Martin and Jacques Gohorry (Paris: 1546; reprint, Paris: Payot, 1926 and 1963); <i>Le Songe de Poliphile</i>, trans. Claude Popelin (Paris, 1883; reprint, Geneva: Slatkine, 1982 and 1994); <i>Sue-o de Poliphilo</i>, trans. P. Pedraza (Murcia, Spain: 1981).</p> <p>3 Francesco Colonna, <i>Hypnerotomachia Poliphili</i>, ed. and trans. Giovanni Pozzi and Lucia A. Ciapponi, 2 vols., rev. ed. (Padua: Antenore, 1980). See also the biography by Pozzi and M. T. Casella, <i>Francesco Colonna: Biografia e opere</i>, 2 vols. (Padua: Antenore, 1959).</p> <p>4 Maurizio Calvesi presents his case most completely in <i>Il sogno di Polifilo prenestino</i> (Rome: Officina, 1980).</p> <p>5 Leon Battista Alberti, <i>De re aedificatoria</i>, trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor, in <i>On the Art of Building in Ten Books</i> (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).</p> | <p>6 Emanuela Kretzulesco-Quaranta's arguments for Alberti's authorship were set out in notes and an appendix to the 1986 edition of <i>Les jardins du songe: "Poliphile" et la mystique de la Renaissance</i>, rev. ed. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1986), 90, 139, 216–20, 396–404. She amplifies her ideas in her subsequent study, "L'enigma della sigla 'B' nella <i>Hypnerotomachia Poliphili</i>," in Nicola and Emanuela Kretzulesco, <i>Giardini misterici: Simboli, enigmi, dall'antichità al novecento</i> (Parma: Silva, 1994), 71–107.</p> <p>7 The essentials of Lefavre's argument first appeared in this journal, Liane Lefavre, "Leon Battista Alberti: Some New Facets of the Polyhedron," <i>Design Book Review</i> 34 (1994): 12–17.</p> <p>8 Colonna, <i>Hypnerotomachia Poliphili</i>, 20.</p> <p>9 See the MIT Press edition of <i>On the Art of Building in Ten Books</i>, 207.</p> <p>10 Pozzi's comment is in his editor's note in vol. 2 of Colonna, 165. For other mathematical lapses, see <i>ibid.</i>, 200, 201, 226.</p> <p>11 Alberti, <i>De re aedificatoria</i>, Book 7, 230.</p> <p>12 John Mitchell, <i>Who Wrote Shakespeare?</i> (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996).</p> |
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opposite

A page from a 1499 edition of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* that shows an attentive integration of text and image.
(from Leon Battista Alberti's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*)



Questo nobile & spectatissimo fragmento in uno solido frusto ancora & una portiucula dil suo fastigio, o uero frontispicio se retinea egregia méte liniato. Nella triangulare planitie dilquale dui figmenti io uidi inscalpti, & non integri. Vno uolucere decapitato, arbitrai fusse di Bubone, & una uetusta lucerna, tuto di perfetto alabastryte. Cusi io le interpretai. VITAE LETHIFER NVNTIVS.

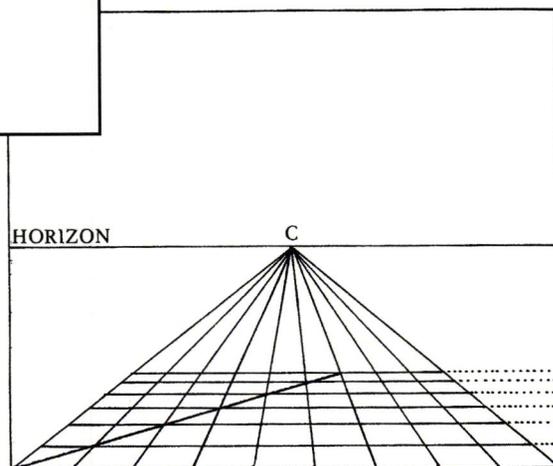
Peruenuto daposcia in la mediana parte dil tempio, alquanto imune & disoccupata di fressidine la trouai. Oue ancora il cõsumabile tempo, ad una opera p̄clara di narrato, tuta di rubicundo porphyrite, solamente hauea perdonato. Laquale era sexangula, cum le base sopra una solida petra ophites dillamedesima figura nel pauimento ipacta, & sei columnelle distate una dalaltra pedi sei, cù lo epistilio. zophoro, & coronice, sencia alcuno liniameto & signo, ma semplicemente terso & puro. Gliquali erano extrinseco la forma imitanti. Ma intersticiu in figura circinata. Oue sopra la piana dilla corona nasceua una cupula di unico & solido saxo, mirabile artificio. Laquale graciliua nel acumine, quale uno peruiò infumibulo strisso & speculare copriua una subterranea uacuitate illuminata p una circolare aptione di egregia cancellatura impedita di metalina fusura. Ilquale spectando ci borio di maxima politura cusi il trouai.

Euclid's Garden

by D. Grahame Shane

The Projective Cast: Architecture and Its Three Geometries

by Robin Evans
MIT Press, 1995
413 pp., \$69.95



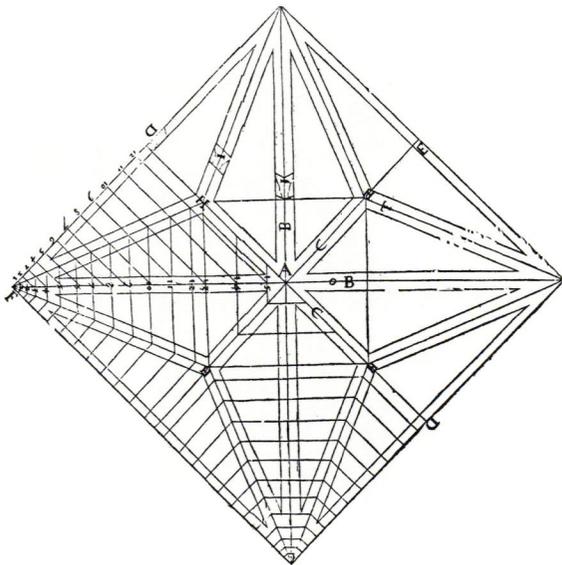
Geometry has always had its attractions for architects seeking a sense of security and certainty in the midst of change. From the ancient Greeks' gridded colonies and optical corrections to the Vitruvian rules of proportion and orientation, the quest for orders of truth and beauty persisted into modernist formulations such as Le Corbusier's Modulors, Buckminster Fuller's geodesics, Rudolf Wittkower's numerical symbolism, and Colin Rowe's mathematics for an ideal villa. The human figure (usually male) occupied the central position in all these explorations, the presumption being that human perfection and beauty were extendable to the culture of buildings and cities.

As humanity has become increasingly encased in machinery, man's central position (as well as the issue of gender) has come more and more into question. The classical formulations of humanism seem dated in a world less dependent on metaphysical explanations and increasingly defined by man-machine relationships. New posthumanist readings have emerged, but are continually challenged by the expanding possibilities of mediated universes, of simulacra, of autonomous and intelligent "space" unfolding independently of human agency.

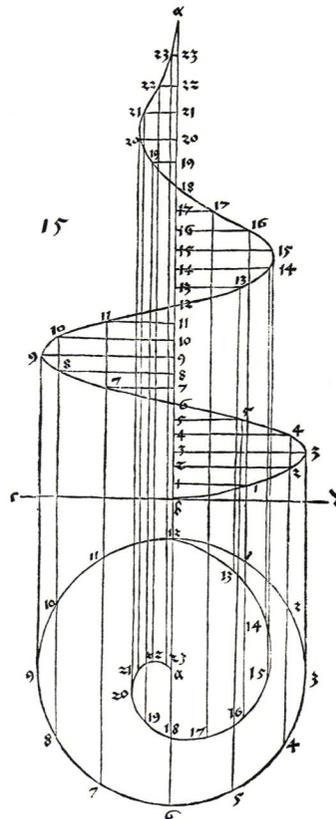
At this crucial juncture, Robin Evans's *The Projective Cast: Architecture and Its Three Geometries* offers a critical reformulation of the humanist position. Citing Sebastiano Serlio's claim of architecture's need of geometry—"the flowers picked from Euclid's garden would endow building with reason"—Evans proceeds to examine three of these flowers, the three geometries of the book's subtitle: the two-dimensional, the three-dimensional, and the translation of drawings to buildings. His meditations on the latter subject, which touch on everything from proportional systems to the imagination, upset the accepted understanding of drawing techniques and canonical buildings.

Evans was a maverick historian who never fit easily into any mold. *The Projective Cast* can only be understood with regard to his larger intellectual and personal development. The book reads as though he is thinking out loud in the company of collaborators and friends, making it both personable and disconcerting, for his professional and social circles were quite large. Evans's discursive style is rich, if sometimes difficult to follow, with multiple levels, convoluted arguments, and abstruse diagrams that are hard to decode. But the book serves nonetheless as a magnificent testament to the meandering, eccentric trajectory of his life.

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Educated at Romford Technical College in London in the early 1960s, he went on to study at the Architectural Association in 1964. There, in his first year, he edited with John Frazer a critical anthology called *Rather More Symbols than Signs*. This student publication evaluated the debate between young semiologists such as George Baird and Charles Jencks, who were then doctoral students in London, and the older humanist scholars who supported Wittkower and the then-prevalent Warburg School interpretations of Erwin Panofsky or Ernst Gombrich. At that time, the Architectural Association was in a period of transition. The distinguished architectural historian, advocate of modernism, and Warburg graduate John Summerson was leaving the school (Jencks would take over the teaching of history). Peter and Alison Smithson also left teaching fifth-year studios and were replaced by Peter Cook, a member of the irreverent, futuristic Archigram Group.



Critical questions about the relationship between architecture and mass production, the media, geometry, history, imagination, and society were then swirling in this crucible of contradiction and uncertainty. Many voices at the Architectural Association were making themselves heard, from the devastating polymath Thomas Stevens, whose radical doubt descended from David Hume, to Warren Chalk and Fred Scott, whose wit and irony were entirely Pop. Alvin Boyarsky lectured on Filippo Brunelleschi, the grid, proportion, and perspective, as well as on Le Corbusier and the *promenade architecturale*; Roy Summers and Martin Caroe were teaching the importance of the structural evolution of Gothic architecture. Paul Oliver, the distinguished historian of American blues music and vernacular architecture, presented brilliant lectures on the aesthetic movement, symbolism, futurism, and cubism, finding sources for modern architecture in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's color theories, Albert Einstein's mathematics, and Pablo Picasso's brushstrokes. Monica Pidgeon, editor of the British journal *Architectural Design* (which first

from left
Leon Battista Alberti's method for making a perspective from a square tiled floor; a layout drawing, or *trait*, for a star vault by Philibert de l'Orme, ca. 1567; Albrecht Dürer's design for a spiral staircase with risers proportioned by perspective, 1527.
(from *The Projective Cast*)

Staircases from the Halle au Blé, a corn market built between 1762 and 1766.

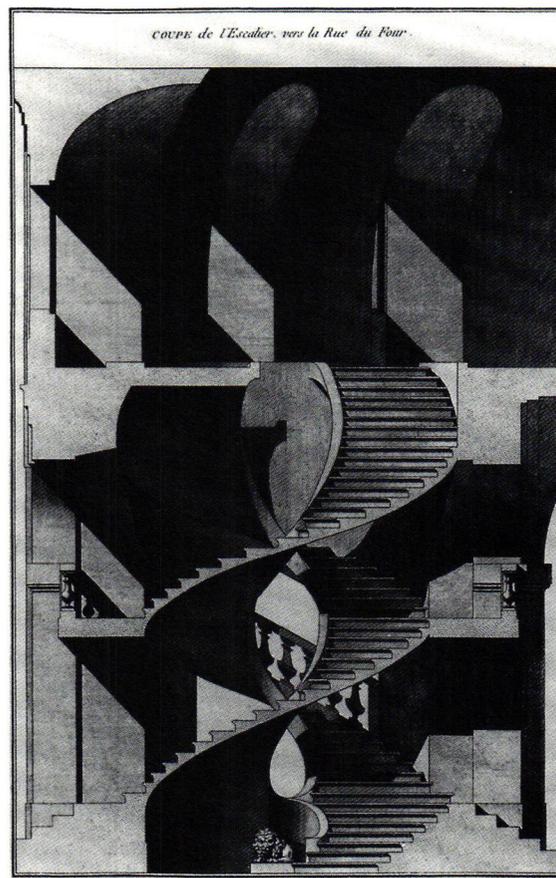
Its double stone staircases were considered a daring architectural experiment.

(from *The Projective Cast*)

published Evans's writings), and her associates Kenneth Frampton and Robin Middleton would appear at the school on an informal basis. The school also hosted Cedric Price, Buckminster Fuller, and his disciple, Keith Critchlow, a passionate advocate of the Romantic poet William Blake who linked geometry to the structure of man's imagination (reflecting a divine force in man as the geometer of fate). Meanwhile, Evans—known as the undisputed "Putti Master" of the Architectural Association students—was producing designs featuring collages of Putti, the chubby-faced agents of Eros, armed with neo-Platonic bows and arrows, much to the chagrin of his modernist tutors.

Emerging from this ferment, Evans sought calm and peace in graduate and postgraduate studies with Joseph Rykwert and Dalibor Vasely at Essex (with fellow student Daniel Libeskind). Evans taught in London and Cambridge, and built transatlantic connections through his work at Bennington College in Vermont and Columbia and Harvard universities, where his colleagues included K. Michael Hays and Norman Bryson. *The Projective Cast* reflects the diverse and contradictory influences in Evans's life, charting a course between his neo-avant-garde interests in art and technology (symbolized by his Architectural Association thesis on Piezo Electric Structures) and his history-oriented studies (indicated by his doctoral thesis at Essex on Jeremy Bentham's panopticon).

The Projective Cast is organized into three parts, each comprised of chapters that are readable as independent essays. The first part looks at modernist and postmodernist aesthetic systems, stressing the mutual interdependence of the concepts of unity and fragmentation. From these two complementary and eternally intertwined poles, Evans examines the process of representing a building and space using orthogonal projections (architecture's "first geometry," including plans, sections, and elevations) and Albertian perspective (one of architecture's several "second geometries") as tools to create "pictures" viewed from a removed station point.



In the second part of the book, Evans attempts to move beyond the conventions of such "pictures." He documents Piero della Francesca's "Other Method" of perspective projection, which generates geometric order from plans and elevations without vanishing points. He then goes on to explain stereotomy, the projective method of stone masons (a variant of Piero's system) that enabled them to precut stone and thus prefabricate buildings.

In the book's last part, Evans concludes with a critical look at the messy underpinnings of Le Corbusier's Modulor system, and then demonstrates the survival of stereotomy in the heart of modernism with a prolonged analysis of the Ronchamp Chapel. He also finds examples of stereotomy's survival in the work of Theo van Doesburg, Antonio Gaudí, and El Lissitzky, as well as in postmodern deconstructivist projects. In uncovering this hidden tradition, Evans deals with the mythical world of holistic musical, proportional, and visual harmonics, observing how they rely on a double code that includes disruptive elements to enforce a sense of harmony. In his final chapter he strives for a system of representational diversity that will weave together the various oppositional scenographic and orthographic traditions in a display of competing information flows.

As befits the work of a student of Rykwert, *The Projective Cast* is deeply phenomenological while also highly critical of the tradition. Evans believes that behind all the fragmentation of modern and postmodern society lies a new hidden structure, but not the hidden unities or harmonies dreamt of by the neo-Platonists and other geometers of the universe. His scheme is far more empirical and pragmatic, concerned with the geometry of the information flows and interchanges in the field of architecture, its representations, its perceptions, and its distortions. The implications of the anti-humanist tradition (after Jacques Derrida) are built into the diagram that Evans presents at the end of the book. The human subject is displaced from the center of this diagram and distributed instead among the various interactive and overlapping representational and observational systems. The magisterial and synthetic conclusions of *The Projective Cast* appear suddenly at the book's end, in a brief chapter in which Evans pulls together all his previous ideas, offering an exciting and sublime moment of fusion and insight that will take a generation of scholars to test and evaluate.

The Pictorial Tradition

Evans begins his book with a portrait of a world of faith and reason. He critically examines the architectural myth of the ideal, circular, Renaissance church, which has been read as a central point of unity and harmony around which all knowledge is calmly organized. Wittkower's *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* receives special attention because of its claim to reveal the hidden hermeneutics behind the idealized spherical form—the neo-Platonic Christian number schemes, the spiritual symbolism, the harmonic ratios that made this architecture meaningful for its creators.¹ Evans protests this mythology and its hermetic sources, pointing out that this sense of truth and calm in fact masked an age of great anxiety and uncertainty. Astronomers, for instance, spent a great deal of time adjusting the trajectories of the planets around the earth to make them spherical, until Copernicus deduced from these adjustments that the sun was at the center of the solar system and the planets moved around it elliptically. In addition, Evans closely studies presumably centralized Renaissance churches to reveal not one but multiple centers. In Raphael's 1509 Saint'Elegio

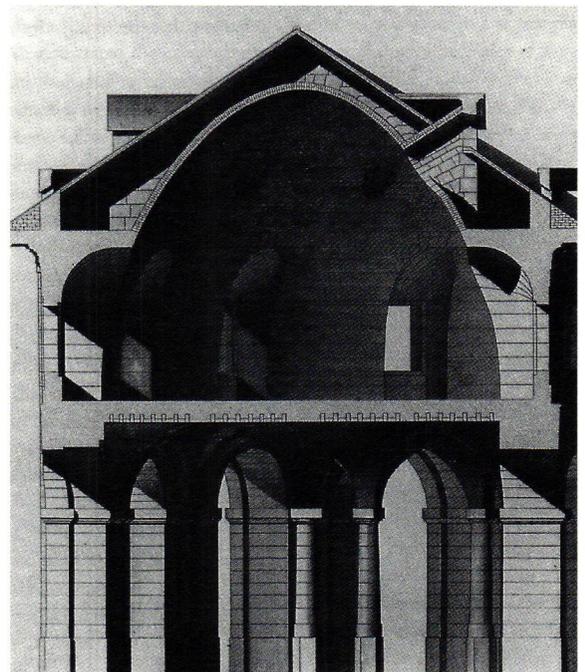
dei Orefici in Rome, he enumerates nine potential reference points unfolding about the central axis, from the dome down to the crypt. He produces similar results in reading Donato Bramante's Tempietto at San Pietro in Montorio, Rome (1502). Evans goes on to offer an interpretation that might place these multiple centers in an ascending hierarchy toward heaven.

In contrast to this hierarchy, Evans points to the radical logic of Leonardo da Vinci's response to this dilemma, his "Place for Preaching," which placed the preacher on a pedestal at the center of the church's spherical interior. Evans notes the similarity between this scheme and Bentham's panopticon. (His ideas were published as an article in the Spring 1971 issue of the *Architectural Association Quarterly* and later as his first book, *The Fabrication of Virtue: English Prison Architecture 1750–1840*.)² Evans builds on da Vinci's schema to stress the importance of the sphere as a symbol of a perfect world, with its unitary center. He remarks on the pattern of power flows, with divine grace flowing both outward from the center and inward from angels on the periphery. One of the prime examples of this spherical perfectionism cited by Evans is the ascending, layered, spherical cosmology of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*—a depiction that influenced many other works, from Francesco Botticini's altarpiece *Assumption of the Virgin* (ca. 1475) to Raphael's *Disputa* (1508–9) in the Vatican Chambers. In these cases, heaven or divine figures are placed above and beyond the sphere, which acts as an intermediary realm that engages the cube, representing earth, the mortal realm below. Evans points out how the rigid, ideal, unitary centrality of this intermediary sphere was projected into church architecture, making inhabitation difficult. His multiple readings of plural centers draws on an earlier Renaissance cosmology in which geometry acted as a flexible underlay, as used by da Vinci in his survey of the town of Imola.

With symbols of unity and calm exposed as masks for uncertainty and multiplicity, Evans goes on to interpret contemporary disruptions and transgressions as a cover for new certainties, unities, and order. In chapter two, he identifies three examples of the persistent desire for breakage and disharmony as a protest against our times: The first is the emergence of cubism around World War I, which contemporary critics analyzed in terms of revealing a new, hidden, nonperspectival unity. The second outbreak was after the Second World War, when fragmentation was seen as a way to “humanize” the vast global structures that emerged as a consequence of war. And the third, recent, outbreak is deconstructivism, a reaction, Evans argues, to an ever more predictable and reliable global order and global systems wherein accidents are the remarkable and newsworthy exceptions that prove the rule. Evans cites David Harvey’s analysis of the global economy in *The Condition of Postmodernity* to buttress his attacks on the theories and polycentric schemes in Fred Koetter and Rowe’s Collage City projects.³ Evans asserts that Koetter and Rowe’s explorations mask the new underlying unity. “[Once] the glue dries,” they are no different behind their aesthetic camouflage of shards and fragments from the conventional, unified, modernist master plans. (He does make a distinction, however, between Koetter and Rowe’s plans and Michel de Certeau’s vision of the *bricoleur* as an agent of situationist uncertainty.) In the same vein, he attacks the deconstructivist movement of the 1980s as a picturesque mask for an increased and unitary power, wielded by postmodern engineers whose complex, computerized spatial systems update stereotomy in their ability to predict the geometry of every part. Evans uses Hans Scharoun’s Philharmonie Concert Hall in Berlin (1956–63) to illustrate the survival of stereotomy concealed in the fragmentation of modernist techniques, still framed within a humanist ideology.

The Projective Tradition

Stereotomy as the hidden, unifying method of architectural projections is the focus of the second part of *The Projective Cast*. Evans follows Piero’s perspective treatise *De prospectiva pingendi* (ca. 1470), which presented a slightly updated version of Leon Battista Alberti’s normative system of constructing a perspective around a vanishing point. Evans takes note of the extensive modern literature, which, after Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault, later Jacques Lacan, and especially Bryson, his colleague at Harvard, negatively allies the eye and perspective as repressive and illusory instruments of power. Bentham’s panopticon, Evans’s old doctoral subject, figures prominently in this discussion of the dominating “gaze” and “scopic regimes.” But, in a surprising turn, Evans sides with Martin Jay, author of *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, portraying arguments about the repressive power of vision as unnecessarily negative.⁴ While he agrees that the Albertian scenographic tradition is alienating and facile, he argues that the posthumanist discourse carelessly conflates many different geometric and visual systems. Calling for more discrimination, Evans identifies Alberti’s vanishing point as the critics’ main scapegoat, but demonstrates that there were many varieties of perspectival systems available to Renaissance artists. In addition, artists seldom applied these systems to the human figure in paintings; rather, they employed a system of foreshortening by approximation, which Giorgio Vasari called the “Third Manner.”



A section of the Halle au Blé that reveals a grain storage vault. (from *The Projective Cast*)

According to Evans, Piero understood the distinction between graphic and optic systems of perspective (the former were geometrically constructed around a point, and the latter based on binocular vision) and incorporated this understanding in his "Other Method." Following this method, an object, whether a geometric figure or human body, was cut into a series of vertically layered sections around an internal axis parallel to a picture plane. This incredibly tedious task made the method unpopular, and Evans thought that it gave Piero's figures their static, somewhat wooden quality, first criticized by Vasari. The Other Method objectified vision, simultaneously robbing the human figures of life and opening them up to an increased empathy from the observer because of their neutrality and blankness. The advantage of the system was that it did not require vanishing points, and could be used to construct highly accurate figures and then rotate them in perspectival space. (The dinosaurs in the blockbuster film *Jurassic Park* were animated according to precisely this method.)

Piero's Other Method could also be used to prefabricate building parts through stereotomy—the art of cutting stones in three dimensions. The composite layout drawing used for this process was called a *trait*, and could be scaled in all dimensions using techniques borrowed from Gothic masons. Evans gives an elaborate explanation of stereotomy and the use of the *trait* with the example of the little private council chamber built for the king across the corner of two façades at the Palace of Anet (1549–51) by Philibert de l'Orme, now demolished, though described in his *Premier tome de l'architecture* (1567). The palace, which belonged to the king's mistress, was a regular classical building, except for this small addition, which appeared like a classical barnacle, clipped to the corner of the façade, with its supports scalloped to let light into a small preexisting staircase window. (De l'Orme linked the piece's name, a *trompe*, to the base's trumpet form.) Evans draws an exquisite set of geometric diagrams to illustrate the construction of this chamber, reconstructing de l'Orme's *trait*, which had thirteen fan-shaped plans layered on top of each other, with their vertical axis placed in the interior, palace corner. Evans discusses the historical debate over who should control this powerful projective and constructional system, the mason or the architect, following stereotomy from its everyday life on the construction site to its academic life via various treatises on stonecutting.

In the third and last part of the book, Evans proposes to link this history of Piero's Other Method, the *trait*, and stonecutting stereotomy to modern "descriptive geometry," thus breaking several architectural and historical conventions. The common connecting thread is the geometric methodology of cutting sections about an independent, internal axis, formalized as a Cartesian mathematical procedure by Gaspard Monge at the École Polytechnique. Whereas Wittkower and Rowe proposed a unifying, neo-Platonic continuity, Evans proposes an internal geometric logic that extends from medieval Gothic masons through the moderns to the deconstructivists. Other interpretations, including Sigfried Giedeon's in *Space, Time and Architecture*, proposed a radical break occurring at the École Polytechnique in the nineteenth century, when engineers declared their independence from the arts and set out on their own course.⁵ Rykwert's *The First Moderns: The Architects of the Eighteenth Century*, Alberto Pérez-Gómez's *Architecture and the Crisis in Modern Science*, and Foucault in the interview "Space, Knowledge and Power" conducted in 1982 by Paul Rabinow, in *Skyline*, found a definitive epistemological break from the humanist tradition at the École, as society shifted toward a new, more scientific, organizational model of the world.⁶ Evans's argument runs counter to this research, positing instead a deep-seated structural continuity and stability within a hidden geometric order.

The Arrested Image

To illustrate this continuity, Evans argues that harmonic systems are always double, bipolar—both revealed and concealed. This doubled quality, in which the fragment interrupts the sense of whole, is an intrinsic part of their beauty. Using a musical analogy, he picks up the strands of the mutual dependence between fragment and whole discussed in part one. Offering examples of Renaissance music and architecture, he illustrates how theories about proportion and beauty were often buried and not displayed, resulting in a seeming plethora of systems and disunity (which later theorists like Claude Perrault tried to rectify). Evans further develops this idea in an elaborate examination of the conception and construction of the curved roof of Le Corbusier's Ronchamp Chapel in relation to his Modulor proportional system. Le Corbusier's intuitive, poetic, and symbolic sketches, filled with curved lines, were transformed by engineers in his office into conical sections, using straight lines derived from descriptive geometry, with little reference to his Modulor system.

The engineer's system of geometry descended, via Monge at the École, from the tradition of the academic *trait* that had produced the curved surfaces at Anet. Evans remarks on the paradox of Le Corbusier trying to escape the tyranny of rationality, latching on to an earlier system of internal, rational stereotomy, which by the 1960s carried the very different symbolic meanings of the irrational and surreal.

Evans proceeds to trace the idea of a hidden tradition of stereotomy backward, through descriptive geometry to airplane wings, ship hulls, bridges, and the nineteenth-century engineering triumphs that Le Corbusier so admired. He continues the historical link back through the *trait* to Piero and then to the medieval stonemasons, finally speculating about the origins of stereotomy in the prefabricated construction of the roof of the Tewkesbury Abbey Chapter House (1375). Noting stereotomy's constructional beginnings, he cites Yves-Alain Bois's observation that van Doesburg and El Lissitzky were the first to use descriptive geometry for purely aesthetic, visual purposes. Their modernist axonometrics were intended to disrupt normal perspectival readings and induce in the observer a sense of floating. Evans extends this argument to the work of Alberto Sartoris, Peter Eisenman, Josef Albers, and Al Held, stressing that architects and artists chose to use axonometric projection on aesthetic and symbolic grounds, as a metaphor for a floating world inspired by Einstein's idea of the four-dimensional hypercube. In emphasizing the idea of individual aesthetic choice, Evans mounts a subtle critique of his Harvard colleague Hays's work, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer*.⁷ Hays emphasizes the dissolution of the individual into the collective system, the decentering of the subject, and the disorienting virtual hyperspace produced by the accelerated repetition resulting from mass production and mass communications. But even Einstein, Evans reminds us, stressed the necessity of Euclidean space as a prerequisite for understanding relativity, writing that the "human faculty of visualization is by no means bound to capitulate to non-Euclidean geometry."

It is at this point that Evans introduces a diagram depicting the relationships among architects and artists, and their means of representation. The general direction of *The Projective Cast* until this point seems to support a posthumanist, decentered reading of space, with an emphasis on the multiple centers and symbolic systems created by the different representational and construction processes. But in his conclusion, Evans turns this direction around and writes about the construction of the perceptual "inner" or subjective eye, also known as the mind's eye or the imagination, as an essential part of this entire process. This "inner eye" of human consciousness, which may be interpreted as a critique of the posthumanist position, constitutes Evans's third geometry, which is based on imagination. Evans describes the imagination as the fourth, integrative term in his geometric diagram of the interactive relationships between his other three terms—the designed object, its orthographic projection, and its representation in perspective.

Evans unfolds five reciprocal relationships between these various systems and parties, giving ten different ways of representing the operative field around and within the designed object and observer. In this construct he makes the distinctions between the orthographic and the perspectival, between the optical and the perceptual, between the built object and the imagination. His matrix contains most of the ways that information about the designed object might be collected and stored for various purposes and at the various stages of the object's creation, existence, decay, and preservation in memory. Information might thus flow from measured drawings of ruins or pictures of lost buildings, as well as from a designer's imagination via orthographic projections, photographs, measured drawings, perspectives, and so on. No one system is more privileged than any other, and a person is no longer required at the center, yet the interplay of the various parts is predicated on the flow of human intelligence, perceptions, and imaginative conceptions through the system.

**Erich Mendelsohn, Einstein Tower,
Potsdam, 1919–21. Mendelsohn
believed he was architecturally
representing the revolutionary
new physics and mathematics
of Albert Einstein.**

(from *The Projective Cast*)

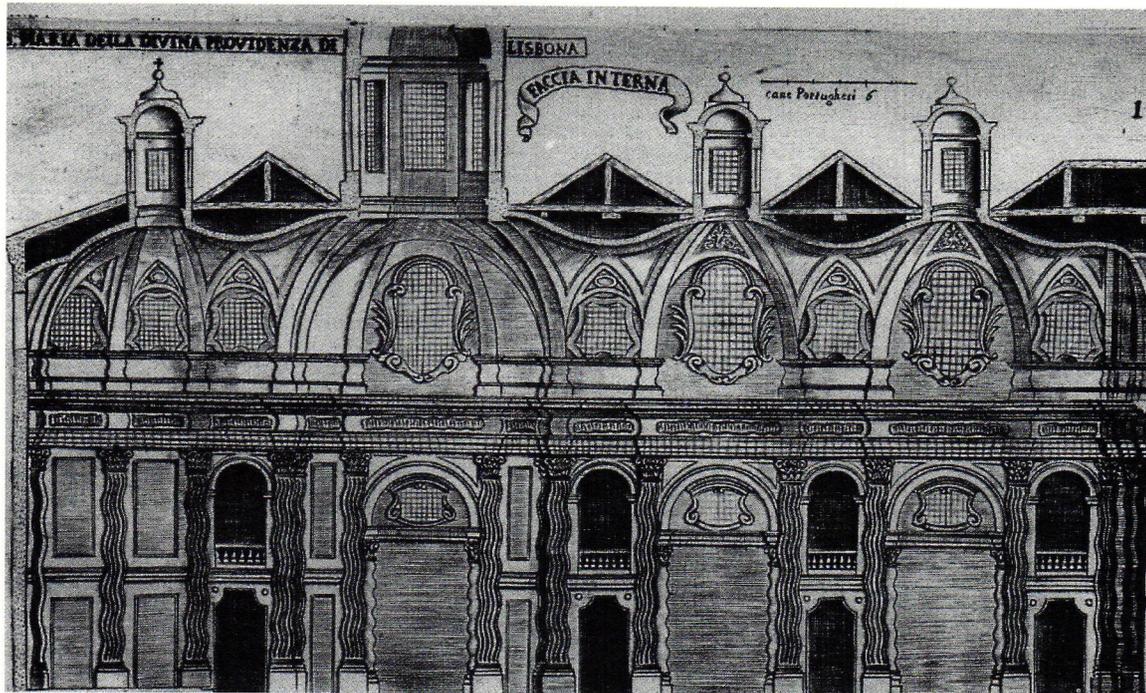
Questions for Evans's Neo-Structuralist Matrix

Evans stands outside the entire process and succeeds in describing the various interactions as a dynamic, systemic whole. In the process, he offers a well-wrought argument for a "New Humanism": his story begins with the dualism of two worldviews—the perspectival and the orthographic—and ends with a pluralistic system that intertwines these two earlier systems with more recent debates about decentered humanism. He manages to chronicle our ways of seeing with a detachment and clarity that presumes both an integration and a displacement in a deeply structuralist tradition. Such an overarching view creates its own problems, including a certain residual structuralist panopticism. It presumes an observer capable of detachment, who wants to explain everything, while also assuming the active engagement of the creative imagination.

This ambiguity is essential to *The Projective Cast* and is the source of its great power. At the same time, it also opens strange blind spots, notably, regarding the scenographic tradition, the theater, modern spectacle, and postmodern media, all of which could have bearing on his complex diagram and our imaginations. The laborious geometric and mathematical calculations necessary for the animation of Piero's figures in perspective or the graphic analysis of de l'Orme's *trait* can now be done in seconds in powerful three-dimensional rendering programs. Children's video games feature moving figures articulated via Piero's Other Method and set within perspectival backgrounds that employ Alberti's simple pictorial method, which shifts with the movement of the figures. This accelerated combination of perspectival systems, rendering machines, computer graphics programs, and a virtual cyberspace represents a viewing platform from which to review past visual regimes, but, unfortunately, Evans does not address these new developments in his otherwise comprehensive review.



Evans's hope throughout *The Projective Cast* is to expose the representational logic of the architectural imagination as it passes through various processes toward construction, a built life, and then memory. His brilliant systematic observations are thus made from the other side of an unstated, hidden, panoptical detachment, which raises many questions about the role of imagination, memory, and the symbolic realm in his system. Evans only marginally touches on the media, television, film, and computer-generated representational systems. Our postmodern imagination absorbs much information from these sources. Evans acknowledges in his conclusion that his treatment of the imagination is "not so dependable." He states, "My purpose here is to show how projection—or rather quasi projection—breaches the boundary between world and self, the objective and subjective."



Guarino Guarini,
Santa Maria della Divina
Providenza, Lisbon,
designed in 1681.
 (from *The Projective Cast*)

In this context, it is curious that Evans does not treat the theater. The stage of the theater is a site for the creation of an imaginary world, and it is a place where many of his interests intersect. There is an enormous amount of literature on the role of Renaissance perspective in the theater, with elaborate stage machinery created for rapid scene changes, sound and light effects, and shifting views of the stage. But Evans's handling—or lack thereof—of this subject is surprising. It is difficult to explain the absence of reference to Manfredo Tafuri's *L'architettura dell'Umanesimo*, in which he assesses the theater and stage as a privileged, bourgeois laboratory for pictorial and urban research, with its combination of two- and three-dimensional props.⁸ Like Samuel Edgerton in *The Heritage of Giotto's Geometry: Art and Science on the Eve of the Scientific Revolution*, Tafuri, with F. P. Fiore, in *Francesco di Giorgio: Architetto*, gives Francesco di Giorgio a prominent place in theater's scenographic developments, noting his invention of cutaway perspectives and transparent sections that provide an x-ray view of objects and spaces.⁹ Such hybrid constructional spaces would seem a natural locus for Evans's research, yet his argument is so structured against Albertian perspectival space that this material escapes his net.

Evans's low estimation of the Albertian pictorial tradition may perhaps also explain the absence of treatment of the representation of power, symbols, and the city in *The Projective Cast*. Renaissance perspective was intimately bound up with urban themes and power, as a glance at Serlio's treatise on perspective readily reveals. An examination of the Albertian theatrical and urban tradition might have revealed how this tradition kept Piero's Other Method of construction buried within it. Evans quotes Bryson on the "sucking sound" of the vanishing point in Albertian constructions of Renaissance space: referring to Raphael's *The Marriage of the Virgin*, Bryson writes, "The lines of the piazza race away towards this drain or black hole of otherness placed at the horizon, in a decentering that destroys the subject's unitary self-possession." A study of some key paintings and buildings following the Albertian manner would show that isolated buildings in the round, temples, baptistries, and *tempiettos* (so loved by Wittkower) were often used as a plug to block or stop the sound of this infinite recession. Indeed, there is one such construction behind the priest in Raphael's painting of *The Marriage* cited by Bryson. In the case of the baptistry blocking the front façade of Brunelleschi's Duomo in Florence, Raphael's centralized chapel in the Vatican, as well as the latter's altar in his painting *Disputa*, among other examples, objects of great symbolic significance were strategically placed to stop the "sucking sound."

In the late 1400s, Piero and di Giorgio set out the rules for this blocking in what Tafuri calls the “perspectival laboratory” of Urbino, with its famous perspectival *trompe l'oeils* and two classical urban scenes that hung in the Ducal Palace, featuring centrally placed temples (studied by Hubert Damisch in *The Origin of Perspective*).¹⁰ Considering that Raphael was from Urbino and studied with di Giorgio, this omission by Evans is surprising, as is the absence of mention of di Giorgio’s role in perpetuating the perspectival *mazzocchi* tradition. *Mazzocchi* was a wire-frame system of representing objects in the round, which depicted the construction lines about an internal axis but did not necessitate reference points on a horizon line (frequently used in cabinetry and inlays); it preserved the Gothic *trait* methodology within the Albertian pictorial tradition.

Although relevant to Evans’s complex matrix, it is not clear how these hybrid elements might fit within it. He chooses to stress orthographic projection leading to descriptive geometry in his treatment of the material. His bias is clear from the way he deals with his predecessors’ endeavors. His portrayal of the Wittkower-Rowe tradition of the Renaissance as a simple matter of unification about a single reference point, like that of many posthumanist historians, is brutal and stereotypical. While both authors did write about centralized churches after the Second World War, both also wrote later about polycentric and complex layering in mannerism as a natural follow-up to their earlier systematization. Evans is perhaps especially harsh with Rowe because of the latter’s previous trajectory (in the 1950s and 1960s) through very similar material with very different results. Evans does not allow that Rowe’s position on cubism and progression to Collage City could be explained as part of a reaction against the idea of single centers and his involvement with a flexible neo-Platonism. Instead, he dismisses Rowe’s Collage City as nostalgic pastiche and his fragmentation as a facile, compensatory mask for powerful universalizing orders. This may well be true, as many scholars have argued. But the role of imagination, image, and memory—so clearly articulated from an Albertian humanist perspective in Rowe’s work—is not so clear in Evans’s neohumanist diagram descended from Piero’s internal geometries. Evans is always afraid that the pictorial will become a mask and a cliché image, concealing more complex realities.

The absence of the theatrical, the urban, and the symbolic dimensions of the architect’s imaginary world gives Evans’s argument a certain hermetic quality, which is disturbing because his life’s work has been anything but hermetic. His studies ranged far beyond and outside his field, extending the scope of discourse by including phenomenal and subjective material, feminist arguments, landscape issues, and a general concern for a wider society. *The Projective Cast* covers a vast scholarly field, but his first book, *The Fabrication of Virtue*, about reformers’ attempts to extricate the British prison system from the messy city, encompassed larger intellectual, practical, and social constellations. The social world has largely disappeared from *The Projective Cast*. Furthermore, the passionate, powerful voice that distinguished Evans’s earlier writings has been largely subsumed by that of a cautious, considerate scholar. Only in his treatment of Piero, the *trait*, the Philharmonie Concert Hall, and Ronchamp does the full passion and complexity of his voice resonate.

Evans died in 1993, two years before this book was published. A team of loyal friends and colleagues saw the book through its final stages as a gesture of respect to a wonderful teacher, a unique scholar, and a very caring, ethical person. In her foreword, his wife, Janet Evans, thanks Kate Heron, Julian Feary, and John Bold. Evans’s death occurred just as he was beginning to receive wider public recognition; and in fact, he died on the day of his appointment to a professorship at the Bartlett School of Architecture at London University (the same chair once occupied by Reyner Banham). I believe that had Evans lived longer, some of the unevenness and imbalances of the book would have been worked out. I also believe he would have provided a clearer explanation for the diagram he drew for the conclusion of his book: in his displacement of the authorial, humanist voice and individual imagination from the center of the diagram, distributed instead in relation to a range of representational and observational systems, Evans’s “new humanist” schema should, in theory, be liberating, freeing many hidden voices from the unconscious. This is clearly what motivated Evans to highlight stereotomy and descriptive geometry as alternative representational systems. It remains sad, however, that this revelation comes at the cost of certain blindness to some of the positive aspects of the previously dominant (Albertian) position.

Evans was nevertheless a pioneer, establishing boundaries and a new approach for future scholarship. His diagram will likely be seen as a marker, opening a new age of architectural criticism. Recording almost all of the previous modes of architectural representation as transitive processes for conveying information within a closed system, it provides a flexible model for processes and human interactions that can replace the more static neo-Platonic model. This flexibility becomes ever more crucial as new representational systems become available to architects and as the process of drawing production has become increasingly automated and computerized. This diagram will prove invaluable as the process of reconstructing the posthumanist individual unfolds around us after deconstructivism. While both the humanist and posthumanist establishments will no doubt take issue with some of Evans's conclusions, *The Projective Cast* remains a magnificent achievement that should be celebrated. ■

Notes

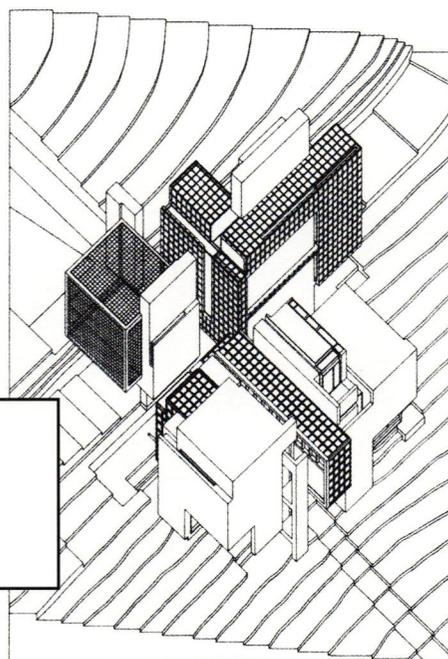
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| <p>1 Rudolf Wittkower, <i>Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism</i> (London: Warburg Institute, 1949).</p> <p>2 Robin Evans, <i>The Fabrication of Virtue: English Prison Architecture 1750–1840</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).</p> <p>3 David Harvey, <i>The Condition of Postmodernity</i> (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).</p> <p>4 Martin Jay, <i>Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought</i> (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).</p> <p>5 Sigfried Giedeon, <i>Space, Time and Architecture</i> (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941).</p> <p>6 Joseph Rykwert, <i>The First Moderns: The Architects of the Eighteenth Century</i> (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1980); Alberto Pérez-Gómez, <i>Architecture and the Crisis in Modern Science</i> (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).</p> | <p>7 K. Michael Hays, <i>Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer</i> (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).</p> <p>8 Manfredo Tafuri, <i>L'architettura dell'Umanesimo</i> (Bari, Italy: Laterza, 1969).</p> <p>9 Samuel Edgerton, <i>The Heritage of Giotto's Geometry: Art and Science on the Eve of the Scientific Revolution</i> (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Tafuri and F. P. Fiore, <i>Francesco di Giorgio: Architetto</i> (Milan: Electa, 1993).</p> <p>10 Hubert Damisch, <i>The Origin of Perspective</i> (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).</p> |
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The Anarchitecture of Robin Evans

by James S. Ackerman

Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays

by Robin Evans
MIT Press, 1997
294 pp., \$26.95

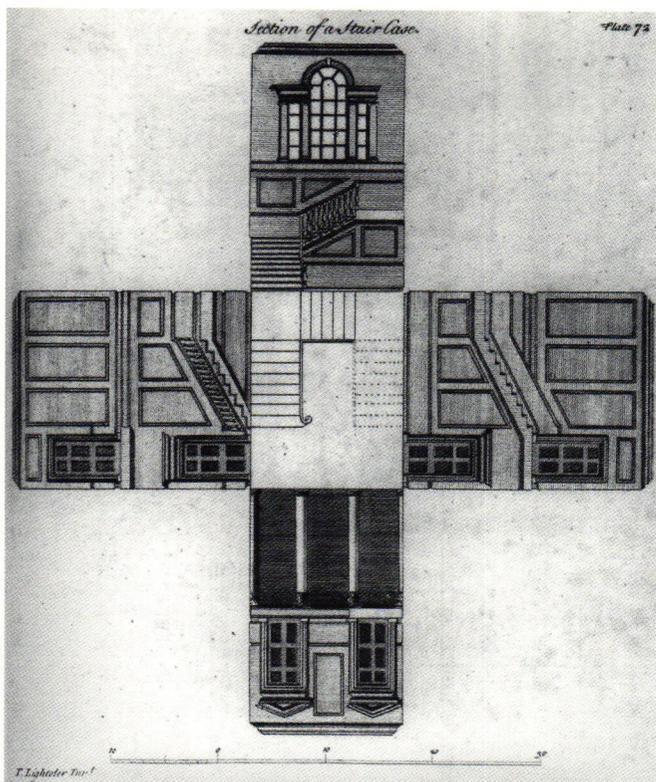


Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays is a selection of writings by Robin Evans (1944–93), published by the London-based Architectural Association as a homage to one of its most adventurous and accomplished alumni and teachers. A man of astonishing originality of thought, Evans had a rare capacity to penetrate profoundly into works of architecture, searching beyond their verbal and graphic representations to reveal secrets that others failed to discover, or that they simply ignored due to the difficulties of integrating them into current dogmas. Evans also had the unique ability to read buildings and drawings as maps of social behavior and ambitions. His sensitivity to the complex relationships among the designer, the drawing (with all the ambiguities of its mediating role), and the executed work was unmatched. His skills were deployed with imposing authority in his last book, *The Projective Cast: Architecture and Its Three Geometries*.*

Translations from Drawing to Building begins, appropriately, with a freewheeling, admirably nonacademic exploration of the role of the man-made physical environment in promoting and, more often, inhibiting individual freedom of action. In the opening piece, “Toward Anarchitecture,” first published in 1970, Evans searches for alternatives to the “idiocy of modernism’s effort to change people by proxy,” challenging the assumption that positive interference is acceptable, and negative is not. Evans suggests that the rules by which we live are restrictive and negative only because of our belief that freedom and order go hand in hand. The idea of anarchitecture—Evans’s term for irreverent and unsettling challenges to conventional architectural thought—recurs in his other writings.

Given that social amelioration was a leitmotif of modernist discourse on public architecture, Evans’s exposé of the pretension of modernism is especially appreciated for revealing what “concern for individuals and society” might really mean. The next three essays, all written in the 1970s—“The Rights of Retreat and the Rites of Exclusion: Notes Toward the Definition of Wall,” “Figures, Doors and Passages,” and “Rookeries and Model Dwellings: English Housing Reform and the Moralities of Private Space”—carry the theme of anarchitecture into the historical evolution of specific architectural features that inhibited freedom and community. “The Rights of Retreat” considers the exclusionary use of walls, for example, to separate the sexes, prevent communication among prisoners, or keep the poor and “insane” from impinging on the rich and comfortable. The Great Wall of China, to Evans, is less a measure against enemy hordes and more a barrier to the infiltration of alien cultures. (Surprisingly, however, he does not mention the Berlin Wall in this context.) The essay concludes with Evans’s observation that there has been no history written of the wall as a means of moral, aesthetic, and social exclusion.

Evans explores three-dimensional representation through examples like this oblique axonometric drawing by Peter Eisenman of a completed design for House X, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, 1975–78.
(from *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays*)



In this 1757 drawing by Thomas Lightoler, five discontinuous planes are represented in one: the four walls of the stairwell are each shown connected to their respective sides of the plan.

(from *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays*)

"Figures, Doors and Passages" traces the history of interior communication in domestic architecture, starting, atypically, with praise for the openness of the Italian Renaissance palace plan. In such palaces, most of the rooms also served as passage-ways with two or more doorways. In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, corridors were segregated according to who used them, and they initially doubled as communication routes to keep the servants from disturbing the proprietors. Evans concludes this essay with an examination of interior communication in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and he shows how architects and builders devised increasingly ingenious ways of keeping people apart in order to reinforce an ethic of individual privacy.

"Rookeries and Model Dwellings" considers the fear on the part of nineteenth-century British planners and lawmakers of the communal and chaotic living conditions of the poor. Determined to impose physical, hygienic, and moral order on the existing residential "rookeries," which were categorically regarded as incubators of disease and sin, professionals created housing policies that conformed to bourgeois Victorian customs and measures of morality. Without dismissing the horrors of the living conditions of the urban poor, Evans draws attention to the utter disregard of the priorities of those on whose behalf reforms were presumably carried out.

Until quite recently, very little had been written on architectural drawing as a study in itself. Although the last decade has seen the bibliography on the subject grow considerably, prior to this recent bloom Evans found it necessary to point out what might seem obvious now—at least after his 1986 exposition "Translations from Drawing to Building"—that architectural drawings are completely unlike what they represent; the disparity exceeds even that between painters' studies and final compositions. Only rarely, and in a limited sense, are architects able to work on their subjects directly. The architectural draftsman must choose between a flat orthogonal, in which depth can be represented only by overlapping and shading; perspectives, which convey depth by means of lines that recede into an arbitrarily chosen distance; or orthographic projections, as in axonometrics, which preserve accurate measurements of receding planes but are distant from visual experience. In any case, the conventions are inhibiting, but it is convention that makes drawing a viable medium, a tool of communication. Drawings have a primacy, and that is an inversion of their familiar role as a preliminary conceptualizing tool.

Evans continues "Translations from Drawing to Building" with a case study on Philibert de l'Orme's Royal Chapel at Anet (1547–52), in which, according to the architect's own claim, the spiraling coffer pattern of the dome (superficially resembling Michelangelo's pavement of the Capitoline Hill in Rome) is projected up from the design of the chapel's pavement. In descriptions of the chapel's pavement, this claim has always been taken at face value, for the two patterns appear to look alike. But Evans, with his genius for seeing what others do not, notices that the pavement has only eight intersections of curving bands, while the dome has twelve—so projection is out of the question. He discovered in the geometrical construction of the curvature of the dome's ribs an astonishingly inventive method based on the projection of a circle onto the curvature of the dome, which de l'Orme was able to accomplish based on his knowledge of stereotomy, the technique of cutting stones with complex curvatures. (Evans discusses this further in *The Projective Cast*.)

Still, Evans's historical evidence requires a couple of minor corrections: the earliest surviving orthogonal drawings in Western architecture were executed during the thirteenth century (at Reims), not the fourteenth; and the elevation of the Campanile of Florence Cathedral representing Giotto di Bondone's design is not, as Evans states, an early example of strict orthogonal drawing in Italy, but—like all Italian presentation drawings before 1500—has perspective details. Northern European elevations of the same period are perfectly orthogonal.

Evans's intimacy with the subject of drawings continues in his 1989 essay "The Developed Surface," a study of a short-lived type of representation of domestic interiors, initiated in the mid-eighteenth century, in which elevations of the four walls of a room are shown on the plane of the plan, akin to a shoe box cut at the corners with its four sides flattened onto a table. The result is the isolation of each wall from its larger context, so that it becomes individualized and not part of an overall scheme or hierarchy. Who else but Evans would have found in these offbeat images—many found in furniture catalogues—an opportunity for penetrating criticism and social commentary? In Evans's words, "Architectural drawing affects what might be called the architect's field of visibility... We have to understand [it] as something that defines the things it transmits. It is not a neutral vehicle transporting conceptions into objects, but a medium that carries and distributes information in a particular mode. It does not necessarily dominate but always interacts with what it represents." The developed-surface drawing, which illustrates the decoration and often color and texture of the wall surface, tends to emphasize flatness; it disrupts continuous space and flattens it like a proscenium. This is seen as an index not just of the decorative delicacy of later eighteenth-century design, but of the interaction of design and social behavior. In these rooms, design moves out onto the periphery, opening a void in the center; imposing central halls become extinct, and rooms are distributed according to specialized functions (tea rooms, powder rooms, et cetera).

Evans further connects design works to cultural currents in two essays, one on Peter Eisenman's *Fin d'Ou T Hou S* exhibition of 1985, the other on Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion of 1929. Evans pits what he sees in the works against the words with which they have been smothered—in Eisenman's case, the words of the architect himself, and in Mies's case, those of nearly every commentator on modern architecture. Evans's review of Eisenman's *Fin d'Ou T Hou S* show at the Architectural Association, titled "Not To Be Used for Wrapping Purposes," attacks the architect's claim that architecture can be equivalent to writing in terms as vigorous as those he has directed against Victorian pretensions. To Evans, Eisenman's pretensions are obviously equally offensive:

What does Eisenman the architect do? He takes note of the way in which language is being studied and attempts to incorporate in his architecture properties derived from the study of language in the era of structuralism, not properties derived from language itself. The difference is considerable. Language, written or spoken, is replete with manifest sense; the structuralist account of language is emptied of it. An architecture modeled on structuralism, empty therefore of manifest sense, would not be like language at all.

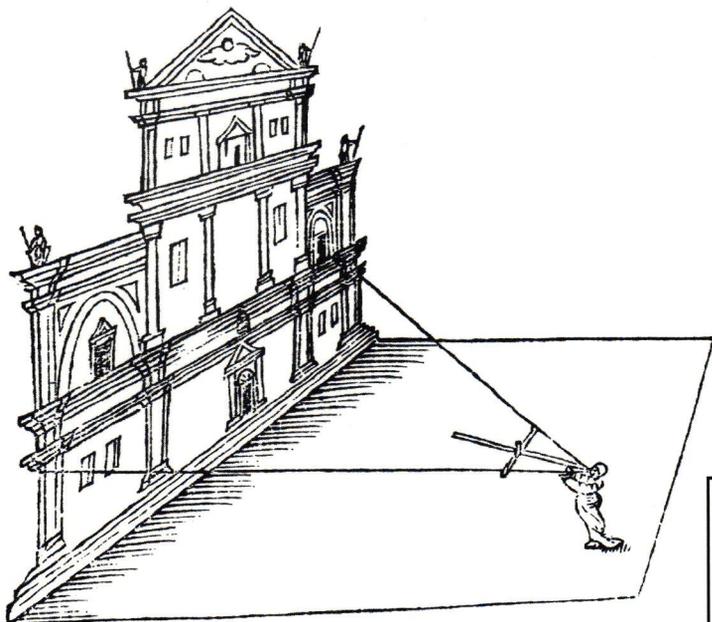
But Evans does go on to say that Eisenman's architecture itself "does something really very interesting; but it does not do what he says it does"; and, "Eisenman is in fact a jealous guardian of the stable and fundamental features of architecture."

Evans's 1990 essay "Mies van der Rohe's Paradoxical Symmetries" is a wondrous assemblage of unexpected and enriching observations. The struggle to arrive at a fresh look at the Barcelona Pavilion—that revered icon of modernism—without a position taken in advance must have seemed to Evans to be like hacking a trail through a jungle. To begin his essay, he points out that the whole critical-historical superstructure built upon this most modestly sized of the "modern wonders of the world" has been generated not by the original structure (which, in any case, wasn't really a pavilion), but by photographs of it—photographs intended as propaganda for the particular vision of the architect. Indeed, the building initially didn't attract much attention; it existed for only six months and was never seen by most of the people who have written about it. (The building was reconstructed on its original site in 1985–86.) I was delighted and surprised by Evans's intuition that these photographs—at least those of the interiors—look almost the same when viewed upside down or right-side up (with allowance only for the fact that the ceiling material looks ill-adapted for floors). The chrome columns were conceived to make their weight-bearing role ambiguous; they don't have capitals or bases, so no one would notice if they were flip-flopped. According to popular myth, these columns hold up the roof with some assistance from the walls. In fact, Evans shows that the support of the roof required rather complicated reinforced-concrete manipulations. This apperception leads to speculation on the particular symmetry of Mies's design, built as it is around a horizontal, rather than the traditional vertical, axis. Evans addresses vertical symmetry by invoking the idea of reflection, given that the high-polished walls act as mirrors, doubling whatever they face.

Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays has a brief and thoughtful introduction by Mohsen Mostafavi, the current director of the Architectural Association. The book concludes with a characteristically insightful piece by Robin Middleton on Evans's writing and his relationship to the profession of architecture and the practice of design. A useful bibliography will point readers to other writings by Evans. This treasure-house of criticism will appeal to anyone who is not afraid of being tempted away from his or her preconceptions about design. ■

Note

- * Robin Evans, *The Projective Cast: Architecture and Its Three Geometries* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995). A review of this book begins on page 54 of this issue of *Design Book Review*.



Drawing Space

by Andrew Cruse

Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge

by Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Louise Pelletier
MIT Press, 1997
505 pp., \$59.95

Architectural drawing today has become nearly synonymous with AutoCAD and its countless add-ons, plug-ins, and rip-offs. Although the speed with which CAD drawings can be generated has greatly changed the nature and pace of architectural production, such drawings are conceptually little different from those made during the nineteenth century. This assessment is part of the argument put forth by Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Louise Pelletier in their book, *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge*, which traces the shifting meanings of architectural representation, particularly perspective, from Vitruvius's day to the present. Until the eighteenth century, the authors argue, architects used a variety of representational techniques that expressed commonly held beliefs about the symbolic order of the universe. Beginning with the revolutionary discoveries of Nicolaus Copernicus and Sir Isaac Newton, however, such techniques were stripped of their symbolic content to serve largely functional roles. Simply, the role of architectural representation had shifted from what Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier call a "poetic translation" of wider religious or philosophical concerns that, prior to the nineteenth century, confirmed the place of a subject in the order of the cosmos, to become an accurate technical tool for the "prosaic transcription" of a building's geometric dimensions, which placed the subject in abstract, mathematical space.

Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge's general historical argument, and some of its principal characters, appeared first in Pérez-Gómez's earlier book, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*.¹ Both books are grounded in a phenomenological understanding of the history of science, following the work of German philosopher Edmund Husserl, who sought to show how the conceptual framework of science was not compatible with the human framework of reality. Pérez-Gómez initiated this approach while a graduate student in the 1970s at the University of Essex (where Robin Evans also studied). In *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge*, Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier summarize some of Husserl's findings: "While increasing specialization and mathematization of all disciplines would result in a greater instrumentality and more effective control of practical tasks, the discourse and its products would be alienated from the expectations of lived experience." This argument is the basis of their examination of the instrumentalization of representational techniques used by architects.

From this historical argument, Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier develop a polemical position that tries to address this "unnameable dimension of representation"—the metaphorical space between an original and a translation—as the basis for an architecture that could "reflect the depth of our human condition, analogous in vision to the interiority communicated by speech and poetry and to the immeasurable harmony conveyed by music." The authors use several terms to describe this metaphorical space and what occurs in it, calling it "the perspective hinge," or *chora*. *Chora* is also the name of the McGill-Queen's University journal,

Andrew Cruse is an architect practicing in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

which Pérez-Gómez coedits with Stephen Parcell (Pérez-Gómez also teaches there). In Pérez-Gómez's opening article in the first volume of *Chora*, "Chora: The Space of Architectural Representation," he traces the word to Plato, who, in his *Timaeus*, used it to describe the "space" between "being" and "becoming."² "Being" describes the unchanging, imperceptible object of thought, and "becoming" the sensible, changing manifestation of "being." *Chora*, as Pérez-Gómez explains, describes the area between them, "nothing less than the space of human creation and participation." He admits that the concept is difficult to grasp (even Plato recognized as much), and proposes that it can be understood "obliquely," through a "kind of 'bastard reasoning.'"

Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge is an example of such an "oblique" approach. The book's structure, based on a musical metaphor, is divided into a "Prelude," followed by three "Variations," and ending with a "Coda." This format allows the authors to address individuals, ideas, and periods at an appropriate depth and pace. Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier's roles, as historians and polemicists, are evident from the profoundly knowledgeable and greatly enthusiastic manner with which they approach their themes. Thoroughly researched and well argued, the book not only pays close attention to many primary sources on perspective, but also critiques important secondary ones, most notably those of Erwin Panofsky, Samuel Edgerton, Hubert Damisch, and Evans.

The authors sketch out their argument in the Prelude, titled "Mapping the Question: The Perspective Hinge": they differentiate between *perspectiva naturalis* and *perspectiva artificialis*. The former, a branch of mathematics that evolved from Euclidean optics, referred to the study of light. In the theocentric medieval universe, *perspectiva naturalis* was believed to reveal a physical and metaphysical understanding of God's presence in the world. The latter, on the other hand, was concerned with three-dimensional illusionistic representation used by painters and sculptors. *Perspectiva artificialis* was founded on the belief of the "primacy of embodied order over vision," and was "the first step toward a rationalized visual image." During the nineteenth century, such a rationalized visual image would replace any of the larger symbolic or metaphysical meanings that *perspectiva naturalis* represented.

This point is developed in the book's first Variation, titled "Architectural Representation and the Distorted Image," in which the authors trace different meanings associated with Vitruvius's term *scenographia*. *Scenographia*, along with *ichnographia* and *orthographia*, were the three means that Vitruvius argued should be used to represent a work of architecture. While *ichnographia* is understood as "plan" and *orthographia* as "elevation," *scenographia* is often mistranslated as "linear perspective." These terms were not to be understood as drawings per se, but as what Vitruvius called *ideae*—mental images "kindred to oracular dreams." Thus, *scenographia* may be better understood as a temporal extension of experiential space that emphasizes its symbolic meaning related to an embodied observer, rather than a homogenous geometric construct. The authors use two architects, the Spaniard Juan Caramuel de Lobkowitz (1606–82) and Frenchman Girard Desargues (1591–1661), to show how during the seventeenth century the mathematical, rational understanding of the Vitruvian *scenographia* began to eclipse its more symbolic, experiential meanings. While Caramuel's idiosyncratic theory of "oblique architecture" sought to geometrically correct what he saw as defects of human vision to build the world as God had intended it, Desargues's perspective theory, anticipating Gaspard Monge's descriptive geometry in the nineteenth century, purged the technique of its metaphysical speculation to become "a methodology whose sole *raison d'être* was to control the practice of applied science."

The book's second Variation, "Cosmological Perspectives," examines the impact of the shift from a stable, symbol-laden, Aristotelian universe to a rational, geometrically constructed, Copernican one. The result of this shift was the growing belief in the homology between lived space and perspectively represented space—that is, between *perspectiva naturalis* and *perspectiva artificialis*. Thus, "geometric perspective lost its privileged status as a 'symbolic form' describing the order of the world" to become a set of geometrical laws that could be deduced from nature. Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier chart this story largely through the work of German mathematician Johann Heinrich Lambert (1728–77), who, in his treatise on perspective, modeled the acquisition of knowledge on the three-dimensional geometric description of the perceived world. The authors

opposite

A 1545 illustration of the use of a *De Radio astronomico*, a surveying device employed to measure the width of a façade. (from *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge*)

explore different instances of this idea in the stage designs of Andrea Pozzo and the Bibiena family; the architectural fantasies of Jean-Laurent Legeay and Giambattista Piranesi; and the development of military architecture, mapping, and isometry.

Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier's polemic comes to the fore in Variation three, "The Image without an Observer in a Scopophilic World," in which they address the instrumentalization of perspective techniques during the nineteenth century, and various reactions to it in the twentieth. This is the book's most revealing—and most confusing—chapter. It is revealing because here the reader finally finds the philosophical groundwork that underlies the book, including Husserl's critique of technology, and further explications of the "perspective hinge" and the *chora*. But this information emerges only after the reader struggles with a series of other complex ideas, including Maurice Merleau-Ponty's idea of "depth," Martin Heidegger's "enframing," and Marcel Duchamp's "index" and "delay"—which, although related, muddle the authors' point and attempt at synthesis. Meanwhile, many of the interesting questions Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier raise in this chapter—such as the role of axonometry in the work of the de Stijl group and the constructivists, or the potential of collage as a technique or an architectural representation—are not developed with the rigor displayed in their treatment of other subjects in earlier chapters.

Further, the pace of the writing slows in the second half of this Variation when the authors focus on two works by Le Corbusier: his illustrated book, *Poème de l'angle droit* (1955), and the monastery of La Tourette near Lyons (1953–55). They consider them separately, but find in both works Le Corbusier's search for the poetic, temporal dimension of the architectural experience that they so value. The authors' explication of the *chora*, which they associate with poetic works like Le Corbusier's, would have been more explicit, and their polemical stance more forceful, however, had they placed this analysis at the beginning rather than at the end of the book.

This interesting treatment and appreciation of a single building not only seems misplaced, but also points to a weakness of the book. Presumably, it is meant to remind the reader of the authors' initial intention; to show how "the making of a physical, formal order [can reflect] the depth of our human condition." Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier develop ideas linking paper architecture to a poetic practice, but what is disturbing is the potential for their position to make an argument for the autonomy of architecture, which emerged simultaneously with, and in opposition to, a prosaic, utilitarian architecture. Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier's interest in the metaphorical space of the "perspective hinge" as a reaction to the instrumentalization of architectural representation seems to follow along similar lines of autonomous architecture. And, indeed, autonomous architecture has been inextricable from techniques of architectural representation, with the drawing as the frequent tool for exploring its limits.³ The consideration of architecture as an autonomous discipline has unleashed the imagination of architects from Piranesi to Etienne-Louis Boullée to John Hejduk and other recent "paper architects." Such an understanding, however, neglects the multitude of factors that affect architectural production, such as patronage, program, or context. One wishes the authors had taken a stance toward this topic, since the book seems to represent a sort of balance between engagement and autonomy in architecture.

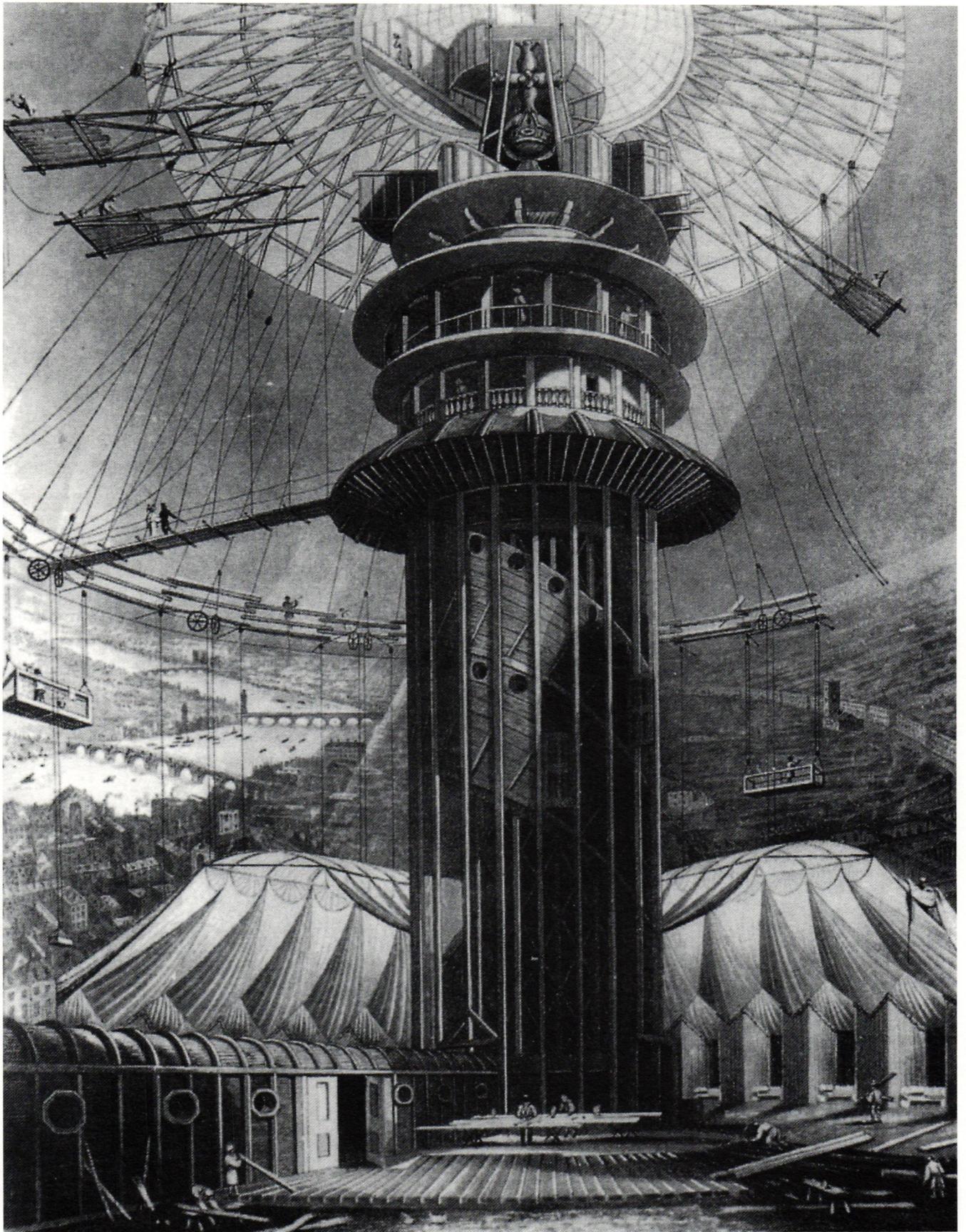
Still, there is much to recommend about *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge*. The book combines a historically informed viewpoint with a concern for the present that is seldom found in architectural histories. The authors admirably combine the roles of historian and critic—a risk that pays off, particularly in the challenging third Variation. At a time when the vast majority of architectural representation is not the realm of a well-rounded architectural *literati* but of a narrowly focused *digerati*, Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier's critique—that the "functionalist motivations of our technological world have promoted the pragmatic capacity of architectural drawing over its potential to construe a symbolic order"—seems all the more relevant. Their belief, that "technology may be cracked open by the imagination," is both optimistic and welcome. ■

opposite

The London Panorama as depicted in an 1829 guide-book. Panoramic views of urban areas were installed in specially constructed buildings in many European and North American cities. They were designed to provide an accurate depiction of the landscape and were created with the use of scientific optics. (from *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge*)

Notes

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| <p>1 Alberto Pérez-Gómez, <i>Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science</i> (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).</p> <p>2 Pérez-Gómez, "Chora: The Space of Architectural Representation," in <i>Chora: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture</i>, ed. Pérez-Gómez and Stephen Parcell, vol. 1 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994).</p> | <p>3 See, for example, Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis, "The Question of Autonomy in Architecture," <i>Harvard Architecture Review</i> 3 (1984): 25–42.</p> |
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Organicism in Architecture

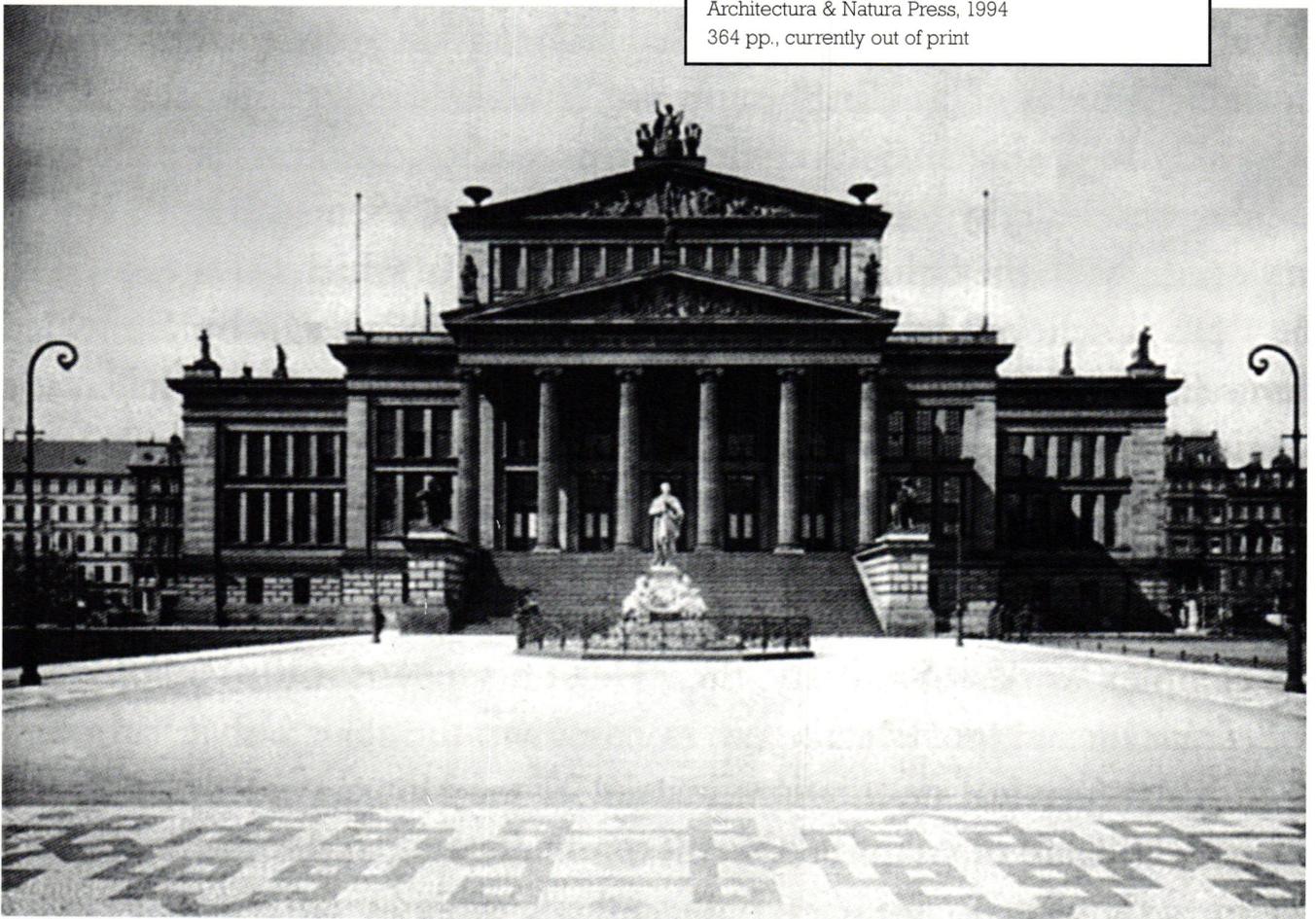
by Mitchell Schwarzer

**Organicism in Nineteenth-Century
Architecture: An Inquiry into Its Theoretical
and Philosophical Background**

by Caroline van Eck

Architectura & Natura Press, 1994

364 pp., currently out of print



Of all the grand concepts of architecture, few have endured as long, or remained as elusive, as organicism. Does organicism refer to biological life, nature in general, or does it extend beyond the idea of living forms to encompass broader notions of worldly order, including rhetoric, mathematics, religion, and philosophy? Moreover, is organicism a debate about form or about method?

Caroline van Eck's *Organicism in Nineteenth-Century Architecture: An Inquiry into Its Theoretical and Philosophical Background* is an ambitious historiography of the concept of organicism. Although she focuses on nineteenth-century architectural theory, she reaches back to early Greek philosophers' writings on organicism, following its unfolding through the Italian Renaissance and the Baroque period and its handling by Enlightenment philosophers. According to van Eck, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, organicism's guiding principle was to approach nature for its methods, not for its forms. She cites writers from Leon Battista Alberti to John Ruskin to support the idea that organicism did not involve literal replication because the object of architecture's imitation was universal nature rather than specific organic shapes.

This thinking changed by the end of the nineteenth century, the author writes, when organicism was transformed to emphasize the observed and utilitarian morphologies of nature. The rejection of historicism and imitation by Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and other modern architects led such individuals to reconceive nature from ideal model to real materiality. The concept of organicism changed from one in which form follows method to one in which form follows function.

In the pre-twentieth-century incarnation of organicism, van Eck tells us, nature's methods were seen as fewer and purer than her forms. The organic approach to architecture was fundamentally conceptual and nonvisual: organicist building was about process, not objects. The visual appearance of a building always referred to a higher, nonvisual ideal of nature. Hence, organicism was metaphysical and noninstrumental, contingent and nonsovereign. In other words, unlike modern instrumentalism and functionalism, pre-twentieth-century organicism was not based on sensual observation and a correlation between object perceived and object re-created. Rather, it reached back to the classical architecture of the ancients, which idealized the "purposive unity" of the natural world. Van Eck describes purposive unity as the totality of all things and creatures created by God, developing according to divine laws and methods that man can only hope to fathom in rough pattern.

Rhetoric was central to this understanding of organicism as the patterning of purposive unity. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. Contrary to modern science or aesthetics, rhetoric assumes that knowledge of universal truth or final form is not possible. Thus, instead of placing value on originality or progress, rhetoric establishes the importance of learning, tradition, and conformity. The methods of composition are the sole criteria for evaluating architectural beauty because their measure against the great works of the past is the only way to pattern purposive unity.

In this regard, the tropes of rhetoric—such as *dispositio*, *inventio*, *elocutio*, and *conlocatio*—were used by architectural theorists from Vitruvius to Sebastiano Serlio to Jacques-François Blondel as a means of ordering, composing, and ornamenting a building with the aim of producing an elegant and satisfying result. Van Eck cites the proportional ratios used by Renaissance architects as an example of rhetorical organicism, for they represent patterns of a higher order, artistic shadows of God's grand plan of purposive unity. Alberti's theory of *concinnitas*, for example, refers to the reconciliation of varied and opposed forms to produce a semblance of unity—an architectural purposiveness that approaches divine, natural purposiveness. Prior to the twentieth century, organicism accepted formal imitation, since it was the rhetorical method of imitation that mattered most, not the form imitated.

Van Eck's chief aim is to demonstrate that the nineteenth century was an age still dominated by the rhetorical arguments of Renaissance classicism and its method-based organicism. Only at the end of the nineteenth century, she contends, was the rhetorical paradigm of purposive unity finally replaced by one of function and scientific instrumentalism. Through this historical revision, van Eck returns to a representation of modern architecture as an exclusive twentieth-century phenomenon. While by no means does she degrade the nineteenth century, as modernist historians like Sigfried Giedion or Nikolaus Pevsner did, van Eck does agree with such historians' assertions that architectural modernism only appeared when architecture cast off the forms of the past.

opposite

Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Schauspielhaus, 1818–21. Caroline van Eck argues in *Organicism in Nineteenth-Century Architecture* that Schinkel believed architecture should follow the laws and methods of nature but not mimic nature's external forms. (from *Organicism in Nineteenth-Century Architecture*)

Mitchell Schwarzer is executive editor of *Design Book Review*. He is the author of *German Architectural Theory and the Search for Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Schwarzer's article "History and Theory in Architectural Periodicals: Assembling Oppositions" appeared in the September 1999 issue of *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*.

Consequently, van Eck challenges the stream of recent architectural historiography that claims that architectural modernism was an aspect of overall modernity. Over the past thirty years, a great many historians have argued that modern architecture is a phenomenon that must be associated with the onset of the industrial revolution, bourgeois individualism, and political democracy, as well as philosophical aesthetics and empirical science. Events like the “quarrel between the ancients and moderns,” the invention of cast-iron technology, the French Revolution, and the theories of Sir Isaac Newton and Immanuel Kant have been regarded as pivotal to the development of modern architecture. Paradoxically, in a book that speaks volumes about architectural method, van Eck supports an argument about modern architecture that reduces it once again to an ahistoricist, functionally determined form.

In order to accomplish this revision, van Eck must reconcile a host of “modern” architectural theorists—including Claude Perrault, Marc Antoine Laugier, and Gottfried Semper—to a rhetorical definition of organicism. Furthermore, she must reconcile the birth of modern science and aesthetics with early modern rhetoric. But was the new sensual empiricism of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries only an aftereffect of the rhetorical organicism of Renaissance and Baroque times? Can movements like the Picturesque, in which nature was rendered artificial and scenographic in the imaginative hands and eyes of architects and artists, be reconciled with purposive unity? And if Perrault’s rejection of positive proportions was argued on the basis of empirical “evidence,” wasn’t such a rejection a move away from rhetoric? Likewise, doesn’t Laugier’s attempt to return to the essentials of architecture, as they existed before ancient classicism, constitute a desire to know first principles that is inconsistent with rhetorical organicism?

While *Organicism in Nineteenth-Century Architecture* deserves praise for its immense scope and scholarly erudition, the author’s attempt to construct a five-centuries-long concept out of organicism is counterproductive. In many cases, van Eck’s nuanced historical research undermines her theoretical argument. For instance, when she describes the nineteenth-century polarization of ornament and structure and the increasing dominance of constructional methods as a basis for design, she inadvertently subverts her own ideas about classical continuity. At one point, she writes of “a shift from the rhetorical and poetical category of the imitation of nature in works of art towards the technical and scientific notion of obeying the laws of physics.” Yet at another, she argues that, from Johann Goethe to Karl Friedrich Schinkel to Semper, theorists followed a consistently classicist dictum, that architecture should follow the laws and methods of nature and not her external forms. The question is, if critical concepts supporting classical mimesis were no longer accepted by the beginning of the nineteenth century, why does van Eck argue for the continuity of a Renaissance idea of organicism beyond that point?

The great difference between the architectural theory of the Renaissance and that of the nineteenth century is the former’s recourse to Vitruvianism and the latter’s emphasis on empirical observation and historical development. First, a rhetorical/mathematical conception of the universe was transformed into an understanding of the universe as based on hypothesis, observation, and evidence. The eurhythmy of a building’s orders was less important than a building’s ability to stand up to specific tests regarding new functions or structural innovations; e.g., its ability to offer an original response to a changing situation. Second, the universal classical nature considered by Alberti or Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola had, by the time of Augustus Pugin and Karl Bötticher, become a nature dispersed within distinct cultures and temporal epochs. Nineteenth-century architectural theorists looked far beyond Rome to ancient Greece, medieval Christianity, and, perhaps most of all, the complex demands of industrializing Europe. Both modern science and history contradict the static point of reference—Vitruvius and the corpus of ancient Roman buildings—that lay at the basis of Renaissance and Baroque architectural theory and its notion of purposive unity.

Indeed, the notions of empirical observation and historical development that pervaded the nineteenth century ventured beyond abstract method into perceived form, attempting to connect all things together across space and time. They demanded a degree of knowledge of nature far in excess of that grasped in the rhetorical and classical ages. The “nineteenth-century moderns” were attempting to understand nature’s deepest laws, in much the same way that architects in the twentieth century would do.

A historiography of organicism would have been better served by the evidence the nineteenth century offers about the concept’s deuniversalization. Within the course of a single century, organicism changed because of its proclivity to seek out universal order in a dizzying multiplicity of imaginative and material terrains—something earlier classicism did not attempt. While there is no question that nineteenth-century historicism differs from the currents of ahistoricism in the twentieth century, it differs even more from the Vitruvianism of the Renaissance and Baroque ages. Organicism as a concept has undergone manifold changes over the course of the past half-millennium. There is no reason to restrict its meanings—and the birth of modern architecture—to the grand divide of the year 1900. ■



**Capital designed by
the O’Shea Brothers for
the Oxford Museum,
Oxford, 1855–61.**

*(from *Organicism
in Nineteenth-Century
Architecture*)*

The Stones of Marseilles

by Richard Cleary

Léon Vaudoyer: Historicism in the Age of Industry

by Barry Bergdoll

Architectural History Foundation and MIT Press, 1994

349 pp., \$70.00



Today, both churches are overshadowed by the pilgrimage chapel of Notre Dame de la Garde (1854–64), designed by Henri Esperandieu, which has become Marseilles's architectural icon due to its dramatic site overlooking the city. Tourists following the itineraries of their Michelin guidebooks will find no mention of the Eglise des Reformées and only a sentence about the Marseilles Cathedral, subordinated to the description of La Vieille Major, the medieval church that was to have been demolished upon its completion.

The parallel histories of these churches offer more than footnotes to our understanding of mid-nineteenth-century architecture. The accounts of their popular reception transcend time and place to invoke more general issues, still unresolved, regarding the communicative power of architecture and the efforts of theoretically minded architects to achieve relevance in consumer-oriented societies.

The saga of the planning of the Marseilles Cathedral is the centerpiece of Barry Bergdoll's remarkable study of its architect, *Léon Vaudoyer: Historicism in the Age of Industry*. Bergdoll is an associate professor in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University. This book furthers the work he presented in his doctoral dissertation at Columbia, which he completed in 1986, and an exhibition he organized, *Les Vaudoyers: Une Dynastie d'Architectes Parisiens*, held at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris in 1991. Léon Vaudoyer (1803–72) was among the prominent French architects active in the middle decades of the nineteenth century whose careers have been reassessed following the pivotal exhibition of drawings from the archives of the Parisian École des Beaux-Arts held at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1975. Vaudoyer's life and major works, the Marseilles Cathedral and the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers in Paris (1838–72), were reintroduced to contemporary audiences by David Van Zanten's book *Designing Paris: The Architecture of Duban, Labrousse, Duc, and Vaudoyer*.¹

In 1855 construction began on two large churches in Marseilles. One, the Marseilles Cathedral (1855–93), had all the marks of success. Conceived by a popular bishop with the support of Napoleon III, it was the first new cathedral to be built in France in over a century. Its design by a first-rank Parisian architect reflected sophisticated theoretical principles intended to assert the spirit of the age through a unique synthesis of Marseilles's building heritage. The other church, the Eglise des Reformées, Saint-Vincent de Paul (1855–88), lacked such a pedigree, but its location, in the central and most affluent part of the city, and its fashionable northern-style, neo-Gothic design spoke more directly to its bourgeois sponsors, who linked it to their vision of the city's imminent role as the economic capital of the Mediterranean.

Richard Cleary teaches architectural history in the School of Architecture at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of *The Place Royale and Urban Design in the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and *Merchant Prince and Master Builder: Edgar J. Kaufmann and Frank Lloyd Wright* (Pittsburgh: Heinz Architectural Center, Carnegie Museum of Art, 1999).

Harried readers of *Design Book Review* may well question whether a monograph on Vaudoyer, who is no more a household name in his native country than elsewhere, can hold any appeal for the nonspecialist. The answer is yes, but the book requires some effort on the part of the reader. Bergdoll has drawn on his access to the rich holdings of the Vaudoyer family archives, documenting nearly two centuries of architectural practice to create an unusually vivid portrait of the architect defining himself within the circles of influence formed by family and friends. Moreover, Bergdoll goes beyond biography to carefully examine how Vaudoyer sought to use history as an analytic tool for creating an architecture of the present. It is this aspect of the book that speaks to architectural issues of our time.

These biographical stories are compelling, but Bergdoll does not tell them briefly. They include a large cast of characters, some of whom are familiar, such as Henri Labrouste and Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, while others, like Vaudoyer's close and highly influential friend Hippolyte Fortoul, a man of letters and government service, lead into areas of French culture and politics rarely examined in histories of architecture. Readers new to this field may find it useful to consult Van Zanten's *Building Paris: Architectural Institutions and the Transformation of the French Capital, 1830–1870* for a general overview of Vaudoyer's professional environment.² A further challenge will be encountered by those unable to read the in-text quotations, which appear in their original French. The in-text format allows Bergdoll to refer directly to the subtleties of the quoted authors' language, but it is awkward for those who must interrupt their reading, locate the English translations in the endnotes, and then re-engage Bergdoll's text. This is a situation in which a compelling case can be made for the use of footnotes, which have recently fallen out of favor with designers and publishers.

Bergdoll organizes his book into eight chapters. The first three examine, respectively, Léon Vaudoyer's father, Antoine-Laurent-Thomas Vaudoyer (1756–1846); Léon's architectural education in Paris; and his experience as a Rome Prize laureate alongside Louis Duc, Felix Duban, and Labrouste. Collectively, these chapters offer an excellent introduction to the many dimensions of French architectural education and practice from the Revolution through the Restoration. Chapter four addresses Vaudoyer's efforts to establish himself in Paris upon his return from Italy in 1832, his ties with those promoting Henri de Saint-Simon's agenda for social and economic reform, and the refinement of his architectural theory in essays written for the popular journal *Le Magasin pittoresque*.

opposite
Léon Vaudoyer,
Marseilles Cathedral,
front elevation, ca.
1857. This drawing
includes flaps that
offer alternative tower
solutions. (from *Léon*
Vaudoyer)

below
Overall view of
the Marseilles
Cathedral, ca. 1900.
 (from *Léon Vaudoyer*)



Bergdoll then proceeds to examine how Vaudoyer applied these ideas in his own work. Chapter five analyzes his rebuilding of the former medieval monastery of St. Martin des Champs in Paris as the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers. Chapter six describes his rise to power in the Ministry of Public Education and Worship (Ministère de l'Instruction Publique et des Cultes) during the Second Republic and Empire. This appointment provided the political base that enabled him to obtain the commission for the Marseilles Cathedral, the particulars of which are addressed in the final two chapters. A brief epilogue summarizes events in Vaudoyer's personal life and offers a brief assessment of his legacy. The book contains ample illustrations, but many are too small to be read clearly, and their layout often makes comparison difficult.

Bergdoll emphasizes two related themes throughout the book. The first situates Vaudoyer as an architect who saw his work as a vehicle for reform, at the level both of national social and political action and of the profession. The second theme traces the development of Vaudoyer's historicism, contrasting it with that of his colleague and frequent opponent Viollet-le-Duc.

With respect to Vaudoyer's political engagement, Bergdoll demonstrates how the young architect deliberately challenged the authority of the Académie des Beaux-Arts through his selection of subjects for study while he was a *pensionnaire* in Rome. For example, by documenting the Trajanic arches at Ancona and Benevento, rather than more familiar examples such as the arches of Titus and Constantine in Rome, Vaudoyer sought to undermine the academy's canon. In a letter written in 1831 to his mentor, Hippolyte Lebas, he stated, "It is obvious that we [students at the École des Beaux-Arts] began to stray into exaggeration and the disadvantages of an architecture created originally for entirely different needs made us lose sight of precious principles of rationality, of solidity, and even of appropriateness. This evil had to come to an end and I think it has been reached and that we have come to understand that our political and social institutions demand an intelligent and rational architecture.... We have plunged ourselves into the study of republican and Greek monuments which have no other ornament than the purity of their forms and their simplicity."

Vaudoyer saw himself as building a new world alongside artists, scholars, writers, administrators, and politicians. Such reform-minded sentiments were exchanged in publications, at the well-attended lectures of luminaries such as Victor Cousin and François Guizot at the Sorbonne and the Collège de France, and in the intimate settings of Left Bank salons. These ideas were then interpreted by each discipline in its own terms.

For Vaudoyer, architecture was the *véritable écriture des peuples* (veritable writing of the people), a phrase that summarized his driving conviction that architecture conveys the essence of the civilizations that create it. His belief in a collective spirit or *Zeitgeist* did not preclude opportunities for individuals to affect its character. Leaders, however, had to understand the principles of change.

The analytic tool Vaudoyer used to discover such principles was history, which had begun to be employed systematically in architectural theory in the 1780s, when his father attended the lectures of Julien-David Leroy in the school of the Académie Royale d'Architecture. The senior Vaudoyer had learned to see architecture as a progressive endeavor informed by the historical study of typical solutions. During the Napoleonic era, Antoine-Chrysostôme Quatremère de Quincy and others defined the notion of "type" in terms of a timeless ideal that history was to explicate through the increasingly refined study of canonical examples.

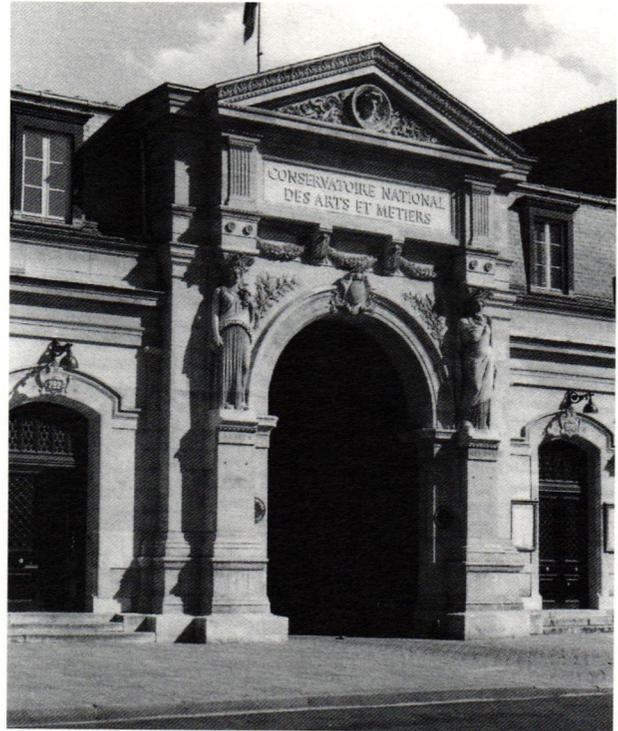
Vaudoyer's understanding of history synthesized aspects of his father's idealism with the Saint-Simonist view of historical development as a progressive alternation of short periods of harmonic congruence—for example, the thirteenth century for France—with much longer periods of transition, in which he situated his own time. To Vaudoyer, type was not a fixed ideal but a malleable link between past and present; architectural form emerged from the ongoing interaction of historic building traditions with the social, political, economic, and technological circumstances of a particular time and place.

Thus, although Vaudoyer admired Gothic architecture, he regarded Viollet-le-Duc's advocacy of the Gothic to be as restrictive as the classical canon endorsed by Quatremère de Quincy. He attacked Viollet-le-Duc's assertion of the supremacy of Gothic structural rationalism by questioning the logic of exposing flying buttresses to the erosive forces of harsh northern weather, and countered Viollet-le-Duc's idealist approach to restoration with the position that buildings should bear witness to their adaptation to changing conditions over time.

As a citizen of a transitional age, Vaudoyer directed his study more to other transitional periods than to times of harmonic congruence. He particularly admired the creativity and rationality of the French Renaissance. In works such as Pierre Lescot's façade in the Cour Carré of the Louvre he recognized movement toward a synthesis of the lessons of antiquity and the middle ages. Turning classical doctrine on its head, however, he maintained that this development was cut short by the codification of classicism as a style subject to fixed rules. In his mind, Claude Perrault's celebrated east façade of the Louvre was a fraud that relied on hidden iron members for its structural integrity, failed to express the interior space, and followed abstract rules of composition rather than a program of use.

Theory, for Vaudoyer, was a means of informing practice rather than an end in itself. Throughout *Léon Vaudoyer*, Bergdoll provides glimpses of how much Vaudoyer wanted to build. Unfortunately, the particular path he took as a state architect meant that he spent far more time reviewing the work of others than initiating his own projects. The two major commissions he did realize, however—the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers and Marseilles Cathedral—were well suited to his interests. The conservatoire allowed him to explore how a modern program (a museum of industry) and modern building technology (structural iron, mechanical heating, and ventilation) could critically engage the constructive and compositional logic of the existing medieval buildings. The cathedral challenged him to adapt an enduring building type to the character of modern Marseilles.

Bergdoll notes how Vaudoyer rejected César Daly's suggestion that he make the cathedral an expression of modern science and technology by allowing the engineers responsible for its complicated substructure to take over the entire design. Among the likely losses of such a transaction was what Vaudoyer considered the necessary link to the past—the representation of the generative type; in this case, the basilican plan with a dome. From this symbolic element, he developed the character of the cathedral in accordance with the national and local agenda of promoting Marseilles as the crossroads of Mediterranean and northern cultures. For his forms he drew on "the veritable writing of the people" to synthesize an expression known as Romano-Byzantine.



Vaudoyer enlarged and restored the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers in Paris. He was appointed architect of the institution in 1838.

(from *Léon Vaudoyer*)

Readers who compare Bergdoll's telling of the design history of the cathedral to Van Zanten's account in *Designing Paris* will encounter quite different perspectives. Van Zanten assigns considerable importance to Viollet-le-Duc's critique of Vaudoyer's first design, crediting it for the scheme's development toward a more unified composition. While Bergdoll acknowledges Viollet-le-Duc's criticisms (made as reports to the commission on Edifices Diocésains, of which both men were members), he downplays their influence on Vaudoyer's revisions. Indeed, Bergdoll emphasizes the degree to which the changes further articulate the historic links Vaudoyer wished to express. Because both scholars embed their analyses of the building within dense contextual discussions, it is difficult to compare their respective positions. Their apparent differences may represent variant perspectives more than disagreement.

Regardless of how its definitive design actually evolved, the Marseilles Cathedral sits on its massive plinth and symbolizes drama rather than comfort. *Cognoscenti* may analyze Vaudoyer's synthesis and identify his allusions, but recognizing a subtext of historical change will require more of a stretch. The Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers in this respect was far more successful: the terms of the dialogue between new and old are evident and effective both within the complex and when viewed as part of a larger urban ensemble. At his best, Vaudoyer offers an instructive example of a critical regionalism *avant la lettre*. ■

Notes

- 1 David Van Zanten, *Designing Paris: The Architecture of Duban, Labrousse, Duc, and Vaudoyer* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).
- 2 Van Zanten, *Building Paris: Architectural Institutions and the Transformation of the French Capital, 1830–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Hitchcock's Humanism: Some Notes on Two Seminal Books

by Paolo Scrivano

Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration

by Henry-Russell Hitchcock
new foreword by Vincent Scully
Da Capo Press, 1993
252 pp., currently out of print

The International Style

by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson
new preface by Philip Johnson
W. W. Norton & Company, 1997
272 pp., \$19.95

The republication of two seminal books by Henry-Russell Hitchcock, 1929's *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration* and 1932's *The International Style* (the former with a new preface by Vincent Scully, and the latter with one by original coauthor Philip Johnson), begs for rereadings, particularly with respect to the so-called New Humanism that emerged around the time of both books' original publications. A response to the skepticism and materialism of the war era, New Humanism defended ethical imperatives and advocated the recuperation of the moral and spiritual content of artistic experience.

Modern Architecture is based on the thesis that a rupture between form and technique in the mid-nineteenth century altered the foundations of modern architecture. For Hitchcock, the mediative potential of painting and literature, which had been more fully realized in the nineteenth century, contributed to this split. Hitchcock thus focuses on the nineteenth century as a period of transition from crisis to an intermediate phase of modernity. Taking note of George Gilbert Scott's 1857 *Remarks on Secular and Domestic Architecture: Present and Future*, Hitchcock identifies the beginning of the repair of this fracture as the transition from an *eclecticism of taste*—the use of various

styles according to a code in which styles refer to the function of the building—to an *eclecticism of style*—the use of different styles combined in the same building. Thus, the word "reintegration" in the subtitle of *Modern Architecture* refers to the outbreak of the crisis favored by romanticism and to the consequent need for a reintegration at the end of a historic process of decadence. The moment was ripe, and the best contemporary architecture offered the possibility of repairing the break with technique.

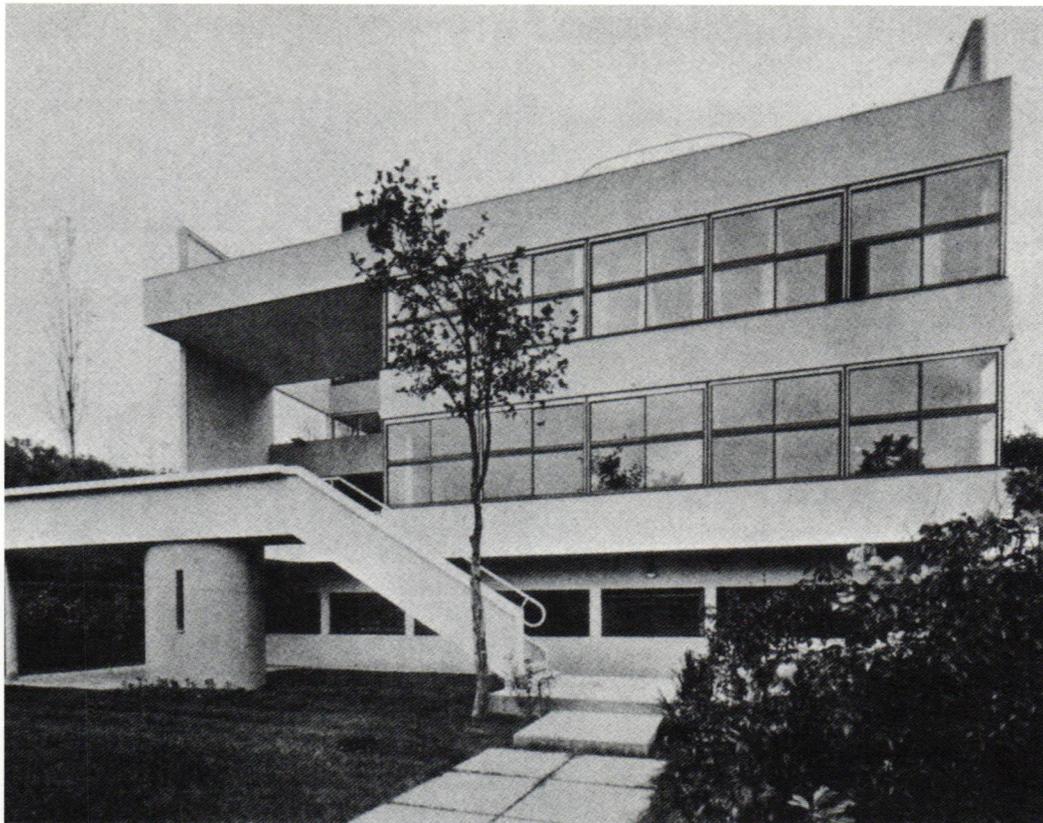
As Hitchcock explicitly declares in his appendix, all his references to humanism are directed to Geoffrey Scott's *The Architecture of Humanism: A Study in the History of Taste*.¹ Scott's 1914 book, generally interpreted as a defense of Renaissance architecture, remains enigmatic in many respects, which may well explain its enduring success. Hitchcock's reference to the English critic Scott was not casual. The significance of Scott's work exceeded its overt objective—to return the history of architecture to the history of taste and of ideas: beyond the four "fallacies" (romantic, mechanical, ethical, biological) that Scott condemned for obscuring the importance of Renaissance architecture, the author posed a larger problem—the perception of forms and images within different cultural contexts. This dilemma necessarily prompted the questions of taste formation and the existence of abstract and objective artistic values.

Paolo Scrivano received his doctorate from the Polytechnic School of Turin and teaches modern architectural history at the Polytechnic School of Milan at Milano-Bovisa. He has written on Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Lewis Mumford, and is currently working on a book about the history of the International Style.

These questions were not limited to the Italian Renaissance. The idea of the relevance of taste had deeper implications, suggesting the need to establish a hierarchy of clear aesthetic values without denying the importance of subjective judgment. For Scott, humanism was “the effort of men to think, to feel, and to act for themselves, and to abide by the logic of results.” The formulation of aesthetic judgment, according to Scott, occurs in the court of one’s experience. It is of little distinction that Scott attributes “humanistic qualities” to Renaissance architecture while Hitchcock credits them to the “New Pioneers” of modernism. What ties *The Architecture of Humanism to Modern Architecture* is the willingness of both authors to confirm the authority of a nonnormative or

With a predilection for ethical and spiritual issues and an aversion to vulgar empiricism and pragmatism, New Humanists such as Babbitt critiqued the nihilistic sentiments of, for instance, Oswald Spengler (though Spengler was nonetheless appreciated for unmasking the crisis of values in Western society). New Humanism was a fundamentally antiromantic position: Babbitt, a professor of comparative literature at Harvard University, assumed a critical position against the excesses of subjectification that occurred during the nineteenth century to the detriment of an ethical and aesthetic system based on absolute values.

Hitchcock’s contribution to this debate is his attempt to reconstruct a geography of possible references for a humanistic approach in art and



subjective ethic within the critical evaluation of architecture. In Hitchcock’s words, the architecture of the pioneers of the 1920s, “if not at all an architecture of humanism,” was “more comprehensible critically to those who are familiar with Geoffrey Scott’s theories.”

The Critique of Humanism, a compendium of essays by Hitchcock, Lewis Mumford, Allen Tate, R. P. Blackmur, and others, offers further points to consider.² The essays respond polemically to the theories of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, the most famous ideologues of New Humanism.

architecture—an obviously different terrain from that proposed by the New Humanists. Hitchcock distances the work of authors like the American art historian Frank Jewett Mather and French philosopher Jacques Maritain from the theories of Babbitt and More, demonstrating the weakness of New Humanists’ explanatory apparatus by explicating their misreadings. For instance, he observes how Maritain’s *primauté du spirituel* (primacy of the spiritual) might have vague analogies to humanist theories that ascribe aesthetic judgment to an abstract and spiritual realm. Acutely enough, Hitchcock emphasizes the gulf between Maritain’s Christian neo-Thomism and Babbitt’s atheist universalism, a position one also finds in *Modern Architecture*.

Le Corbusier, Villa Stein at Garches, near Paris, 1926–27. In *The International Style*, Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson celebrate the architect for using a proportional scheme in the Villa Stein. They write that proportions are not “a relic of the nineteenth century,” but are “still the aesthetic touchstone of the best modern design.” (from *The International Style*)

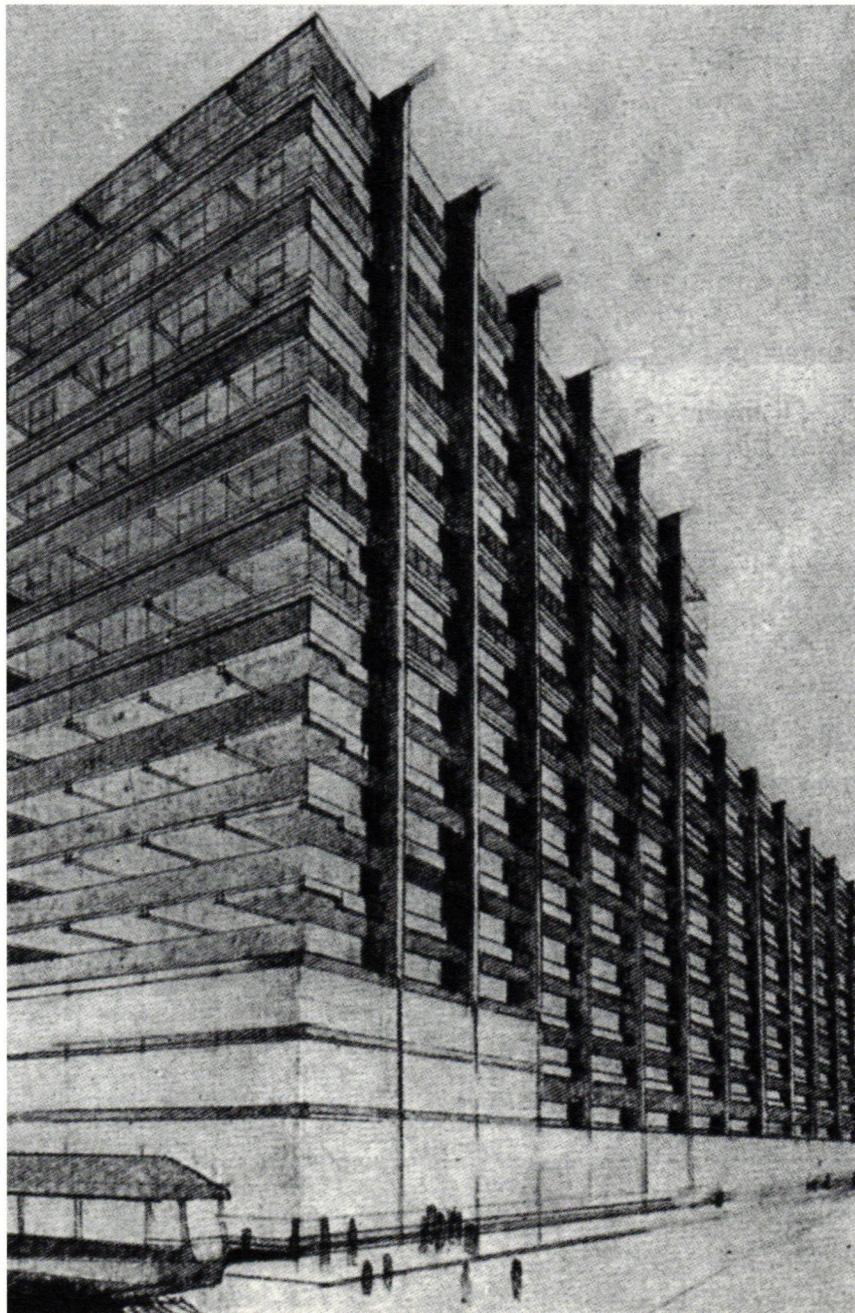
Hitchcock's critique touches the core of Babbitt's philosophies (derived from nineteenth-century neo-Kantism), in which the idea of a dichotomy between reason and imagination recalls the abstraction of aesthetic judgment. But Babbitt also observed a contradiction embedded in these philosophical currents: the acceptance of the abstraction of aesthetic judgment and the irrelevance of experience would continue to confront the universal value of the same aesthetic judgment. Babbitt read Immanuel Kant's extensive influence on romantic thought (and that of his interpreters) in negative terms: from the simplification of the Kantian position, the romantics derived an idea of aesthetic judgment in which the role of intentionality was absent. Babbitt concluded that this process produced the phenomenon of subjectification and the loss of absolute values that were at the core of the crisis at the time.

Hitchcock's disagreement with Babbitt is clear from his negative assessment of romanticism. In *Modern Architecture*, readers will recall that he assigns the nineteenth century a pivotal role—contrary to that given by Babbitt. According to Hitchcock, it was during the age of romanticism when the awareness of the separation of art and technique, or of the object and the will to form, occurred. But he concentrates his critique of Babbitt on the question of artistic individuality. Hitchcock remains unconvinced that the unity of a work of art and an artist's work was a pre-romantic prerogative, as Babbitt claimed, and that the modern conception of artistic individuality remained the same, even in times when artists' work was characterized by impersonality, as during the Middle Ages.

Richard Neutra, Project for a Skyscraper, 1927. Hitchcock states that this design comes close to "accomplishing the feat of making its engineering a new way of architecture."

(from Modern Architecture)

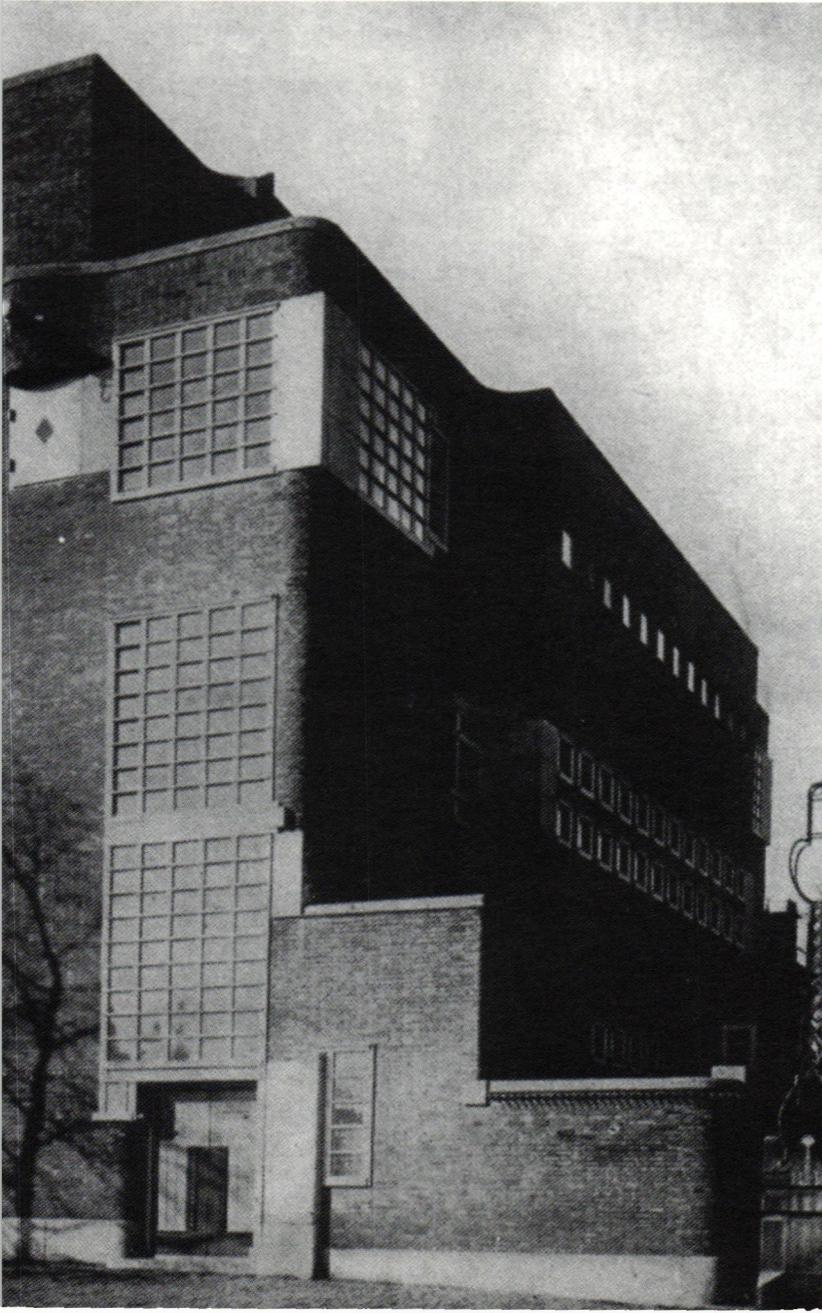
The arguments by Hitchcock are an incentive for rereading not only *Modern Architecture* but also *The International Style*, in which Hitchcock resumes some of the interpretations he advanced in his earlier work. For example, he further explores the effect of industrialization and the changing organization of work on the decline of decoration and the need to establish a new hierarchy of aesthetic values. In addition, some of the cultural ideas that contributed to Hitchcock's formulations may be better understood through a reading of *The International Style*. The debate with Babbitt, for example, confirms the importance of artistic and aesthetic literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to Hitchcock's ideas.



When he discusses the critique of Babbitt in a “mix of genres,” Hitchcock deals with concepts such as the theory of the sublime and the doctrine of the genius derived from an interpretation of Kant. Furthermore, concepts such as the “gentleman artist,” decorum, and beauty and its relation to the congruity of order and harmony were likely mediated through his awareness of Edmund Burke’s thought.

Hitchcock’s consideration of the humanist tradition—as indebted to Geoffrey Scott (polemically) as to Babbitt—is evidence of the complexity of his too-often forgotten writings. Touching on themes such as artistic intentionality, architectural character, and the autonomy of art, Hitchcock’s works are hardly comparable to the recurrent, often facile interpretations (commonly advancing a modernist or functionalist line) found in most of the historical and theoretical literature of the 1920s and 1930s. Hitchcock reinvested worth in Scott’s affirmation that architecture was an “independent art.”

The many cultural references in both *Modern Architecture* and *The International Style* are valuable not only for deepening Hitchcock’s own arguments, but for offering a rich range of thinking: his citations of Maritain, Spengler, and the French philosopher Julien Benda (whom he frequently invokes in his critique of Babbitt) are much more than erudite references. They show the attention that Hitchcock gave to the crisis of rationalism in twentieth-century culture in general before he applied it to architecture. Perhaps more than institutionalizing modern architecture, his books anticipated its decline. This hypothesis alone invites a new reading of his books. ■

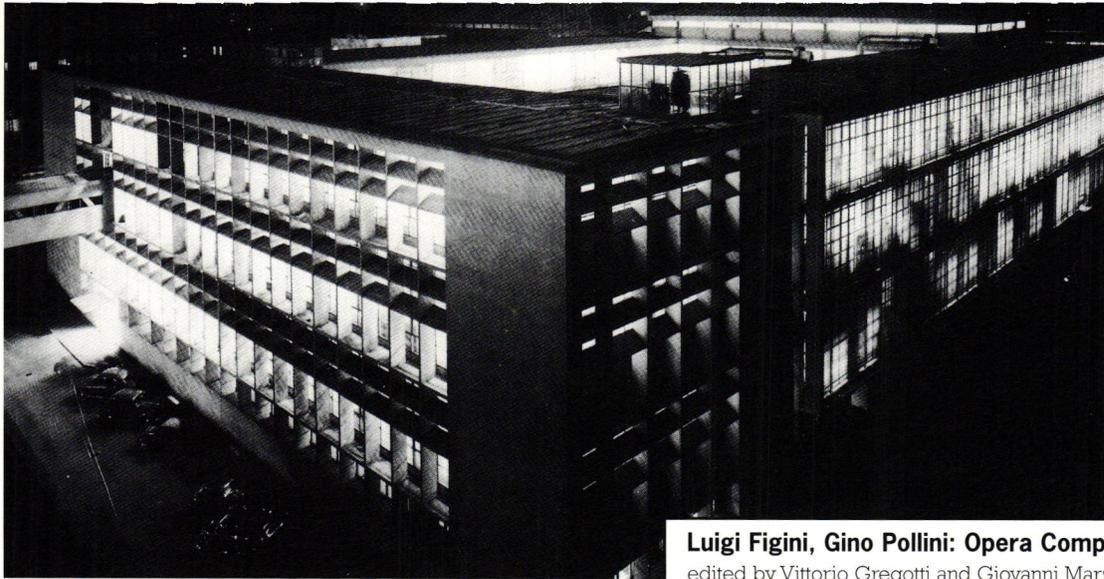


An example of a school built in the 1920s by the Amsterdam Office of Public Works.

(from *Modern Architecture*)

Notes

- 1 Geoffrey Scott, *The Architecture of Humanism: A Study in the History of Taste* (1914; reprint, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999).
- 2 C. Hartley Grattan, ed., *The Critique of Humanism* (New York: Brewer and Warren, 1930).



Luigi Figini, Gino Pollini: Opera Completa

edited by Vittorio Gregotti and Giovanni Marzari

Electa, 1996

548 pp., \$100.00

Figini and Pollini and the Question of Continuity in Modern Italian Architecture

by **Brian McLaren**

In the editorial statement that opened the first postwar issue of the Italian architectural periodical *Casabella*, Ernesto Nathan Rogers explored the question of continuity in modern Italian architecture. In this December 1953/January 1954 issue, he suggested that continuity represented a “historical awareness...expressed in the eternal struggle of the creative spirit against every manifestation of formalism.” Consciously aligning himself with the editorial positions of his predecessors Giuseppe Pagano and Edoardo Persico, Rogers stated that, under their direction during the 1930s, *Casabella* espoused a modernism that was both “rooted in tradition” and the product of “free and unbiased research”—a modernism, he felt, that was prepared for the necessary confrontation with reality in postwar Italy. It should be noted, however, that Italy in 1953 was considerably more positive and promising than the Italy Rogers confronted some eight years earlier, at the beginning of his short-lived tenure as editor of *Domus*. Indeed, in this prior context, he questioned the value of art when, during the aftermath of World War II, even the most basic amenities were not available to a large segment of the population. He editorialized in the January 1946 issue of *Domus*, “Poetry, music, painting, proportions threaten to become empty ambitions of the selfishness of us, the intellectuals.”

Despite the threat such questioning might pose to the status of architecture, it is this latter statement by Rogers that gets to the heart of the problem of continuity in modern Italian architecture. In contrast to his later comments, which attempt to recuperate a modern legacy—a legacy that was at the time being rewritten to erase its Fascist content—his earlier views suggest that the period immediately following World War II was, in fact, a time of discontinuity, the product of a profound search to satisfy the most basic material and spiritual needs. The cover of the January 1946 issue of *Domus* symbolizes the confrontation between modernity and this war-era “reality”—the stark graphics reminiscent of Rogers’s 1930s work with the architecture firm BBPR conflicting with the photograph of a wagon carrying the contents of a displaced household. The dilemma presented in this image is not isolated, however, as it reflects the difficulties faced by contemporary historical inquiry into the continuity of Italian culture through the Fascist period. For example, many leftist intellectuals at the time rejected attempts to see Fascism as a parenthesis within the development of the Italian liberal-democratic state, instead viewing it as inextricably linked to modern society. For them, the postwar era represented a period of revolutionary potential, a break with modernity.

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The question of continuity in postwar Italian culture is thus related to the difficulty of dealing with the Fascist legacy. It is closely tied to historicographic and interpretive questions about the nature of modernism during the Fascist period and the imbrication of architecture with a politics that was both revolutionary and repressive. The architecture of Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini of Milan, whose practice continued through this troubling period in Italian history, addresses these problems with particular poignancy. As founding members of the Gruppo 7: with Ubaldo Castagnoli, Guido Frette, Sebastiano Larco, Carlo Enrico Rava, and Giuseppe Terragni, their 1930s work seems allied to the rationalist call for a "new spirit" in architecture—a call answered at least in part by a move toward standardized solutions and the embrace of new materials and building methods. As Silvia Danesi points out in *Il razionalismo e l'architettura in Italia durante il fascismo*, however, projects such as their *Villa-Studio for an Artist* for the Triennale di Milano of 1933 express, through their Mediterranean characters, themes that were propounded by the Fascist regime, such as hygiene, nature, and health.¹ The Mediterranean quality of many of Figini and Pollini's works from this period may also be linked to the broader Fascist conception of the Mediterranean region as an "empire of destiny." This conflicted relationship to both the project of modernity and the politics of Fascism became increasingly complex in the postwar period, when the work of Figini and Pollini followed two distinct courses: one openly critical of the rationality of their earlier works and often pursuing the contemporary tendencies of so-called organic architecture; and the other seemingly continuous with their modernist work from the 1930s.

It is precisely with this complex understanding of the confluences and discontinuities in the work of Figini and Pollini that the exhibition *Luigi Figini e Gino Pollini: Architetture 1927–1991*, held at the Triennale di Milano from May 14 to August 15, 1997, should be examined. The exhibition (similar to a more intimate presentation at the Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto from January 11 to April 13, 1997) was curated by Vittorio Gregotti and Giovanni Marzari, and presented the full range of these architects' work in chronologically arranged installations. Figini and Pollini's output was conveyed primarily through drawings and photographs, supplemented by models and furnishings, as well as miscellaneous ephemera including letters, photographs, and publications. This display was further complemented by the paintings and sculpture of Fausto Melotti and Lucio Fontana, artists whose careers and interests intersected with those of Figini and Pollini. This presentation was less ambitious than the 1996 show on Giuseppe Terragni (part of the same exhibition program), which included a reconstruction of the famous Sala del 1922 from the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista of 1932. Nevertheless, the strength of the Figini and Pollini exhibition was its presentation of the evolution of their work over the course of a turbulent historic period, an opportunity not available in Terragni's case due to his premature death in 1943.

The full impact of this evolution was visible in the central display, which presented Figini and Pollini's projects from the late Fascist period, such as their 1938 proposal for the Palazzo delle Forze Armate in Rome, in the same space as their most compelling works from the wartime and postwar periods, including the Madonna dei Poveri Church in Milan (1952–54). This arrangement raises the question of continuity in their work by allowing the viewer to read subtle and unexpected connections between these historical periods; that is, to find parallels between the strong chiaroscuro qualities of the model photographs of the palazzo and the spatial effects created by the deliberately crude rendering of surface in the interior of the Madonna dei Poveri.

Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini, Olivetti works, Ivrea, Italy, 1947–49.
(from *Luigi Figini, Gino Pollini: Opera Completa*)

Giorgio Ciucci addresses similar confrontations in "La fortuna critica di Figini e Pollini," his contribution to the exhibition catalogue, *Luigi Figini, Gino Pollini: Opera Completa*, edited by cocurators Gregotti and Marzari. In his essay, Ciucci examines the history of criticism of the architects' work beginning with Edoardo Persico's commentary from the 1930s and ending with the more recent remarks of Manfredo Tafuri in *History of Italian Architecture, 1944–1985*.² Through a careful discussion of the constantly changing interpretations of Figini and Pollini's work, Ciucci questions historians' compulsion for creating a simple progression of ideas over time. Instead, he comments on the rapport between their projects and specific historical contexts, and the need to make more profound and suggestive connections between works from different periods.

The question of continuity was broached again and more directly in the exhibition's presentation of Figini and Pollini's projects for Olivetti, the business-equipment manufacturer for which they worked for over two decades. This material, which included drawings, models, publications, and photographs, was presented in one of two long hallways that literally split the exhibition in half, providing a cross section of the architects' careers. Their earliest commission, a 1934 design for a new residential quarter in Ivrea, displays early rationalist planning ideas while one of their last projects, the 1958 Olivetti social services building, also at Ivrea, combined their interest in organic architecture with a concern for the formation of community.

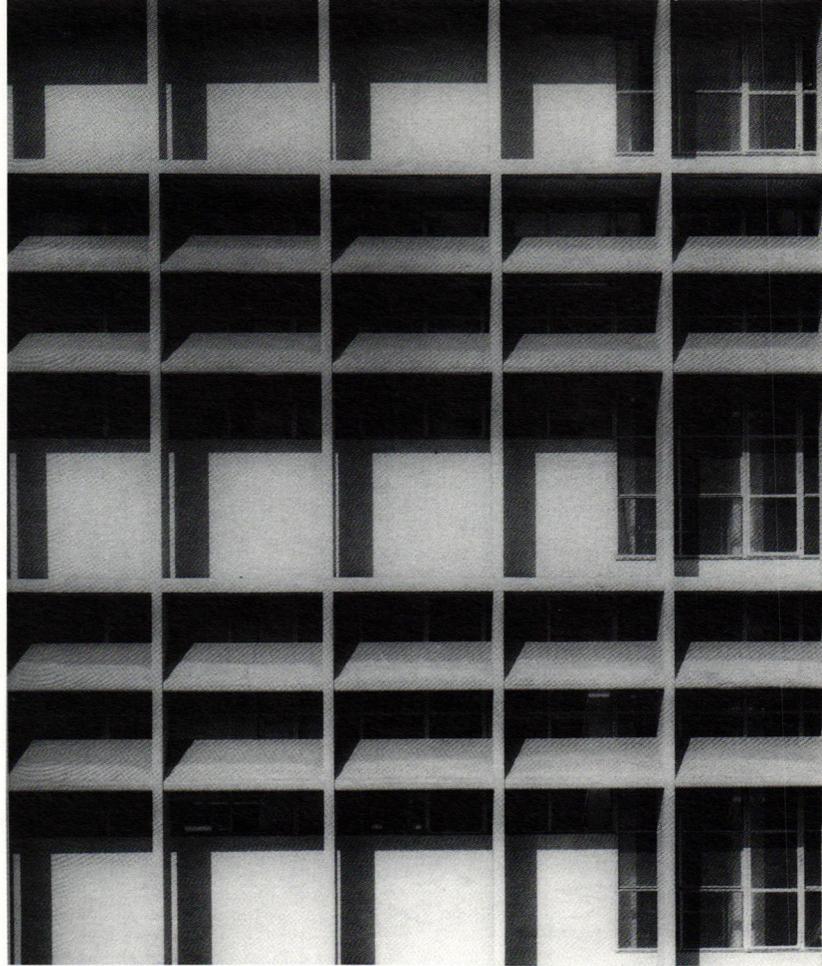
Carlo Olmo and Patrizia Bonifazio discuss the complexity of Figini and Pollini's long-term relationship with Olivetti in their dense and penetrating catalogue essay, "Serendipity a Ivrea," in which they tie the projects to the contexts surrounding their production—such as 1930s corporatism and Adriano Olivetti's *Comunità* movement of the 1950s, and polemics internal to architecture, such as those connected to Italian rationalism and organic architecture. Throughout the essay, Olmo and Bonifazio maintain a keen sense of the contingent nature of these works by presenting them as specifically responsive to the peculiarities of the client-architect relationship, the program, and the site.

The final and perhaps most compelling confrontation with the problem of continuity in the exhibition of Figini and Pollini's work was found in the attempt to define and characterize their individual contributions to their larger body of work. In this regard, the exhibition began with a didactic panel that included a quotation by Figini alongside one by Pollini, setting one architect's sensibilities against the other's. The exhibition concluded with a gallery in which the individual interests of each was portrayed through drawings, writings, artwork, and publications. This presentation underscored the collaborative nature of their practice and, perhaps more importantly, allowed the visitor to view individual works in relation to a broader creative framework. In the case of Figini, his compelling series of small drawings, such as *Omaggio a Melotti* of 1935, in their fusion of religious imagery and surrealist compositional tendencies, highlighted his artistic tendencies and thus allows the melancholy of the partnership's postwar works to be better understood. In a similar vein, the abstraction and rationality of the Olivetti work from the 1930s through the 1950s gained new significance in relation to Pollini's collaborations with art critic Carlo Belli, whose 1935 book *Kn* asserts the complete autonomy of abstract art from life.³ Given this understanding, it is possible to reflect on internal conflicts within individual works—such as in the Palazzo delle Forze Armate, where the rationality and discipline of the plan seem at odds with the expressive use of materials and the theatrical staging of the model photographs. This insight also allows the viewer to infer the constantly changing relationship between Figini and Pollini over the span of their careers.

This heterogeneous approach to understanding these architects' work is continued in the exhibition catalogue. Although it follows the typical Italian architectural monograph format, the catalogue provides a provocative exploration of the predominant themes of their work through a wide-ranging series of essays. In fact, essays like "Primi passi verso l'Europa (1927–1933)" by Italian architectural historian Marida Talamona go well beyond the limitations of the monographic format to situate Figini and Pollini in the broader historical context

of the early stages of development of Italian rationalism and to note their contributions to CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne). The book also compiles the results of their practice through comprehensive catalogue entries for each project—entries that include photographs, drawings, and descriptions, as well as a bibliography and a listing of archival materials. The one weakness of this otherwise fine volume is that, unlike the exhibition, the majority of the essays concentrate on work from the 1930s. This means that only a few authors deal with the full scope of Figini and Pollini's careers, and most do not address the problem of continuity within these architects' work in any substantial way.

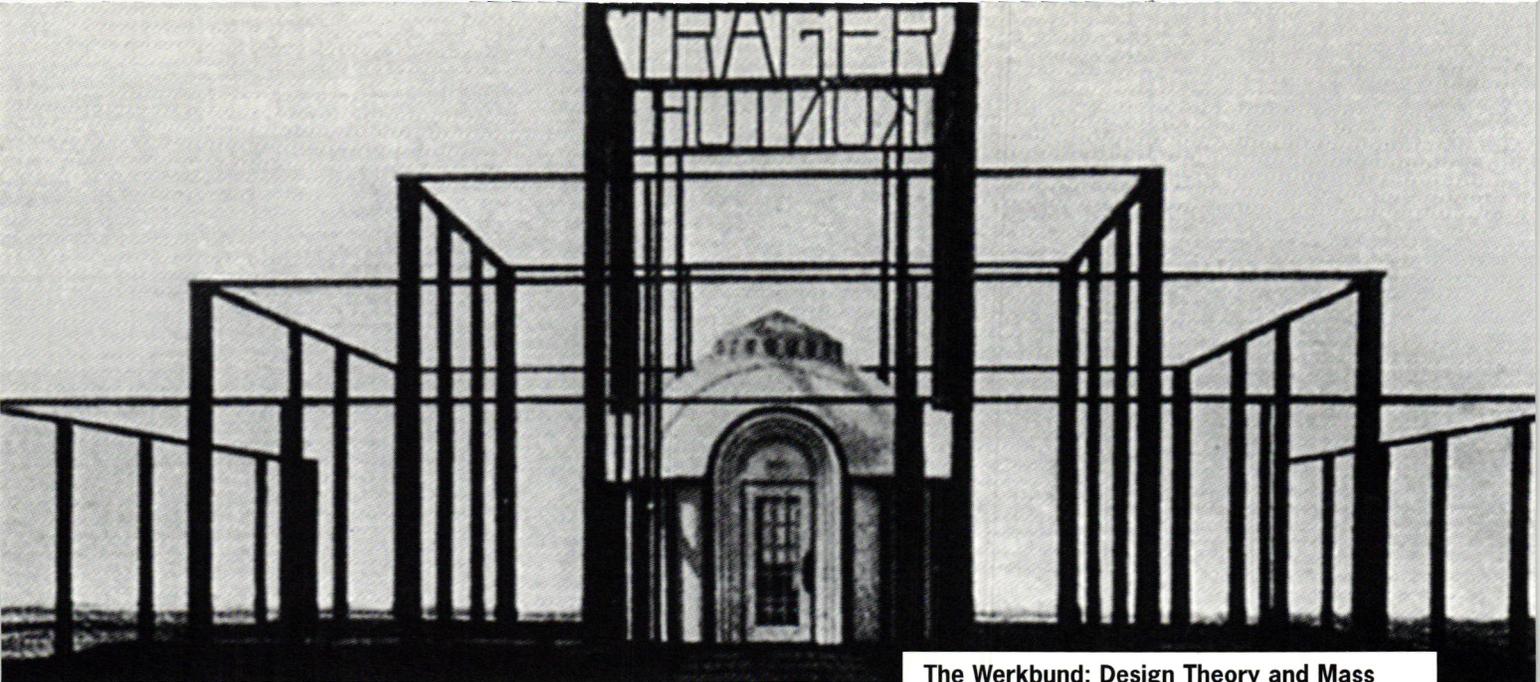
Nevertheless, the projects of Figini and Pollini as presented in both the exhibition and the catalogue provide a valuable backdrop for further inquiries into the development of modernism within the pre- and post-World War II periods. Rather than offer an easy interpretation of the work of this time or simple answers to the problem of historical continuity, they remind us of the complex circumstances in which the architects found themselves—circumstances that did not always allow for a clear and consistent formal and symbolic response to architectural problems. They also reveal an intense and constantly shifting dynamic between some of the major concepts that have shaped the history of modernism in Italian architecture—concepts that were, at times, compromised by their relationship with politics. Political exigencies, however, cannot be definitively resolved through architecture. The use of a rationalist vocabulary after the war does not represent a continuity of Fascism any more than the eventual abandonment of that vocabulary signifies a protest against its repressive politics. The true value of the work of Figini and Pollini—work that is perhaps less poetic than that of Terragni—lies in its ability to reveal the problems that arose from within modernity. Their work stands as a testament to the struggle of individuals to find adequate means of expression during the darkest and most difficult of times. ■



Close-up of Olivetti works, Ivrea, Italy, 1947–49. (from Luigi Figini, *Gino Pollini: Opera Completa*)

Notes

- 1 Silvia Danesi and Luciano Patetta, *Il razionalismo e l'architettura in Italia durante il fascismo* (Milan: Electa, 1988).
- 2 Manfredo Tafuri, *History of Italian Architecture, 1944–1985* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).
- 3 Carlo Belli, *Kn* (Milan: Edizioni del Milione, 1935).



The Werkbund: Design Theory and Mass Culture before the First World War

by Frederic J. Schwartz
Yale University Press, 1996
288 pp., \$66.00

Designing Mass Culture

by John A. Stuart

"Cheap" and "nasty" were the adjectives used to describe the majority of German decorative arts produced in the nineteenth century and displayed at the 1876 Centennial Exposition as examples of production for middle-class consumption. Motivated by efforts to discover viable relationships among newly formed social, economic, and aesthetic forces, German architects, artists, and intellectuals struggled to bring quality to German design over the next several decades. The result was nothing less than a design revolution, encompassing everything from posters and graphic arts to appliances and architecture. Against a backdrop of battles over styles and the movement of a feudal economy into an industrialized market, German design emerged as a standard-bearer for high quality, precision, simplicity, reliability, and, to some extent, affordability. This phenomenon sparked intellectual disputes about the nature of design in modern German culture, summoning issues from national identity to ethics.

The German Werkbund was founded in 1907 by a group of artists, architects, and businessmen on several principles, including the search for new formal directions expressive of industrialized production and the integration of creative individuals into the process of mass-produced design. From its inception, the Werkbund provided a central forum for some of the most prominent figures from all aspects of German cultural and political

life to discuss such issues. And as Frederic J. Schwartz's book *The Werkbund: Design Theory and Mass Culture before the First World War* reveals, early Werkbund intellectuals mapped critical territories regarding form and modernity that reverberated through the work of mid-century philosophers such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, not to mention the production of Charles and Ray Eames, Gaetano Pesce, Philippe Starck, and many others.

It was not Schwartz's intention to write the definitive history of the Werkbund, which dissolved in 1934 under the country's National Socialist rule. Joan Campbell's *The German Werkbund: The Politics of Reform in the Applied Arts* and Kurt Junghanns's *Der Deutsche Werkbund: Sein erstes Jahrzehnt* (The German Werkbund: Its First Decade) remain the reliable histories of the institution.¹ Neither is Schwartz's book a pictorial catalogue of designs by Werkbund artists and architects; the book's ninety-seven black-and-white images do not attempt to represent the entirety of the Werkbund's output. Schwartz's book is, however, one of the most penetrating and far-reaching investigations of the Werkbund yet written, for it touches on critical issues that shaped the context of early twentieth-century Germany—such as economy, law, methods of production, the nascent values of consumerism and commodification—effectively conveying the Werkbund's attempts to link capitalism with the production of culture.

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Bruno Taut's 1910 exhibition pavilion for the Trägerkontor company served as a demonstration of the firm's major product, the iron frame.

(from *The Werkbund*)

The Werkbund is organized into three main chapters: the first two chapters, "Style versus Fashion: The Werkbund and the Discourse on Culture in Germany" and "The Spiritualized Economy and the Development of 'Types,'" outline the conflicts between fleeting desires for the "new" (i.e., fashion) and the urge to establish German design with consistency and stability (i.e., style). Schwartz outlines how the growing alienation of consumers from production in the modern German economy spurred theoretical discussions within the Werkbund on the way form carries cultural messages. Style, he argues, using Peter Behrens as an example, was the formal notation of attempts to achieve unity between form and "the spiritual imperatives of a time"; whereas fashion was the result of inclinations allowed by capitalism to appear to be at a certain stratum in society. Schwartz discusses the contention of several Werkbund members, including Hermann Muthesius, that style was at once classless and above the class struggle in Germany, whereas fashion was a product of the middle-class struggle at the turn of the century. In chapter two, the author specifically recounts how the new definitions of an ethical dimension of the German economy, found in the work of sociologists such as Georg Simmel and Werner Sombart, paralleled the language of the Werkbund with regard to the aim of creating a moral or ethical imperative in German design production. He links this spiritual notion of design to the identification of a machine aesthetic that, he argues, provided an economic rather than a pure formal design language.

Schwartz's most significant contribution lies in chapter three, "Magical Signs: Copyright, Trademarks and 'Individuality.'" He begins this section with a rereading of the well-known 1914 Cologne debate among Werkbund members about the future direction of German design. As it is commonly recounted, Muthesius led a group promoting standardized design "types" (*Typisierung*),

countered by Henry van de Velde, Walter Gropius, Bruno Taut, August Endell, and others who endorsed artistic freedom. Schwartz challenges the notion that Muthesius's desire for conventionalized types represented conservative goals associated with the origins of the Werkbund. He argues, instead, that the proponents of artistic freedom were in fact closer to the Werkbund's founding principles, while representing a more realistic picture of the changing legal and economic structures of the times. By examining architecture and design within the larger context of sociology, economics, and legal studies, Schwartz's work goes further than previous histories, presenting a complete and clear account of the mechanisms driving the development of early modern design in Germany.

Schwartz's examination of the establishment of copyright law offers an original and informative perspective on the search for a standardized form of industrial production as it relates to individual creativity. In 1907, after years of struggle on the part of applied artists, Wilhelm II signed into law the observance of parity among traditional artists, architects, applied artists, and, to a limited extent, photographers. These laws allowed designers to retain originality, identity, and profitability in a market crowded with practitioners who made a living by copying historical (and not so historical) styles, which catered to a growing middle class. Notably, in this first investigation of copyrights and design, Schwartz identifies *Jugendstil* as a victim of legal simultaneity. Although *Jugendstil* artists and architects sought to change the cultural relationship between art and production, the lack of copyright protection allowed their organic forms to be easily copied and thereby relegated to the field of commodity.

Schwartz links the notion of a “spiritualized economy”—one driven by a moral and ethical imperative to reconnect artists to production—to his examination of the trademark in German economic production. As an example, he studies the recuperation of the symbol of the crystal, a mid-nineteenth-century Nietzschean sign for unity and harmony, as a trademark for corporate identity in the twentieth century. In 1901, at the Mathildenhöhe artists’ colony in Darmstadt, where Behrens was a resident, a crystal was the focal point of the opening ceremonies, which Behrens staged. The same “magical sign” reappears in the well-known AEG logo that he later designed. The spiritual unity of art and life was thereby transformed into an economic unity of form and commerce through the clearly identifiable abstraction of the trademark. This unity, however, had serious implications for the attempt of Werkbund members to bring artistic production closer to commercial production, for as the trademark evolved, art and design became increasingly subservient to the creation of brand recognition.

Despite *The Werkbund*’s rich offerings, some readers will be disappointed by the lack of color images and the author’s failure to address the images that do appear. To be fair, the book’s focus is the theoretical issues surrounding the Werkbund, not the work itself. But Schwartz often refers the reader to his illustrations without comment, and, occasionally, when discussing images, he formulates comparisons and conclusions that he does not substantiate.

Another oversight in the book is the absence of any treatment of the social antagonisms prevalent in Germany at the turn of the century. For example, he makes only brief mention of the fact that some influential German sociologists at the time believed that Jews, through their association with the chaos of modern commerce, were partially to blame for the inability of Germans to find a national “style” of design. He stops short, however, of commenting on the implications of this perceived relationship of Jewishness to German modernity. He also refers to the use of Orientalist imagery in product development and promotion without

critique. Schwartz alludes to the irony of cigarettes being called the “Moslem Problem,” and to contemporary descriptions of shopwindows with “a fascinating glow from the Thousand and One Nights,” but he doesn’t explore their social ramifications.

Women, too, scarcely figure in Schwartz’s history of modern design. At one point, the author refers to a photograph of the Warenhaus A. Wertheim department store in Berlin, depicting both male and female shoppers. The fact that these stores were designed to accommodate female consumers is worthy of note. By the turn of the century, women had assumed an important place in the commodity culture, affecting the way store owners conceived of public interior spaces, signage, and packaging. Examinations of the complex relationships between fashion and architecture, such as Mary McLeod’s essay, “Undressing Architecture: Fashion, Gender, and Modernity” in *Architecture: In Fashion* and Mark Wigley’s book *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture*, would have been useful cross-references.²

While *The Werkbund*’s thematic organization clearly highlights the broad discourses Schwartz identifies as coming together in this period, it also results in numerous subjects and figures appearing throughout the text in separate but overlapping discussions that could overwhelm readers unfamiliar with the period. The complexity of the subject matter and the intellectual versatility of the characters involved in the Werkbund compounds the confusion. Muthesius, Gropius, Behrens, Simmel, and van de Velde, to name a few, appear often and in a variety of contexts, sometimes making it difficult to trace specific voices throughout the work. The epilogue, for example—a brilliant exposition on the relationship of Werkbund discussions of mass culture to the later work of Frankfurt School theorists including Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, and others—should have been tied more clearly to earlier examinations of style and fashion.



The Werkbund, however, richly rewards persistent and careful readers. Schwartz's mastery of the material opens up vistas onto new historical and theoretical landscapes. His innovative research of copyright law and trademarks forges links between specific design works and theoretical discussions of mass culture, which, of course, reappear throughout the century. Inspired by Schwartz's thesis, for example, one may draw a connection between discussions of the AEG logo and Andy Warhol's poignant commentaries on mechanical reproduction and the individuality of trademarks in his 1962 *Campbell's Soup Can* series. Further, the celebrity factor and esteem for signature work that drive the majority of large-scale and high-profile commissions in our time may be traced to early efforts for professionals to develop "personal style." The expressive Guggenheim Museum by Frank Gehry in Bilbao, Spain (1997), may be seen as an heir to the Fagus Factory by Gropius and Adolf Meyer and the Glass House by Taut, which were both displayed at the German Werkbund Exhibition in Cologne in 1914, and were both highly identified with their creators.

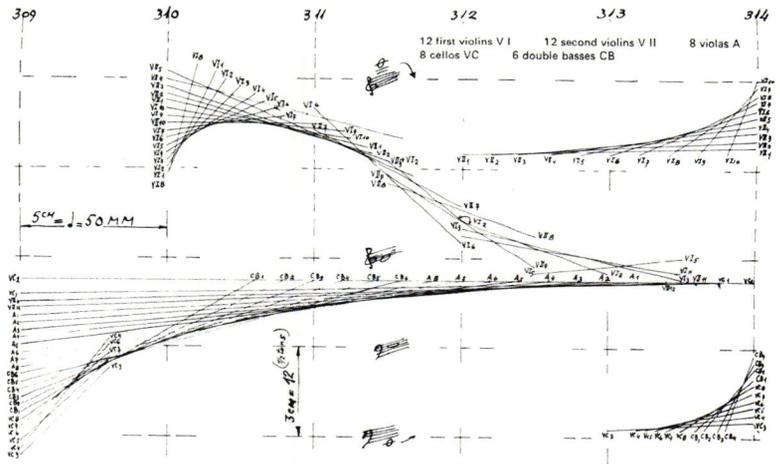
With the Internet, new strains are being placed on copyright law. Meanwhile, the global market demands—and receives—new spaces of commodity exchange in the form of virtual department stores. The dazzle of the shopwindow recalling a "Thousand and One Nights" in Arabia has been supplanted by the universal space of a computer screen, aglow with moving images, and pulsating buttons offering ever more links and minibytes of sound—the form of the new commodity culture. More than a history of an institution and an idea, Schwartz's *The Werkbund* provides a framework that could help us to understand design production today. ■

Taut designed many advertising structures for major industrial firms. Such buildings included the 1914 Glass House (above) from the Werkbund Exhibition in Cologne, which displayed products of the German glass industry, and the 1913 Monument to Steel (below) that was commissioned by an association of steel producers for a trade exhibition in Leipzig.

(from *The Werkbund*)

Notes

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| <p>1 Joan Campbell, <i>The German Werkbund: The Politics of Reform in the Applied Arts</i> (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) and Kurt Junghanns, <i>Der Deutsche Werkbund: Sein erstes Jahrzehnt</i> (Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1982).</p> | <p>2 Deborah Fausch et al., <i>Architecture: In Fashion</i> (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994) and Mark Wigley, <i>White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture</i> (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).</p> |
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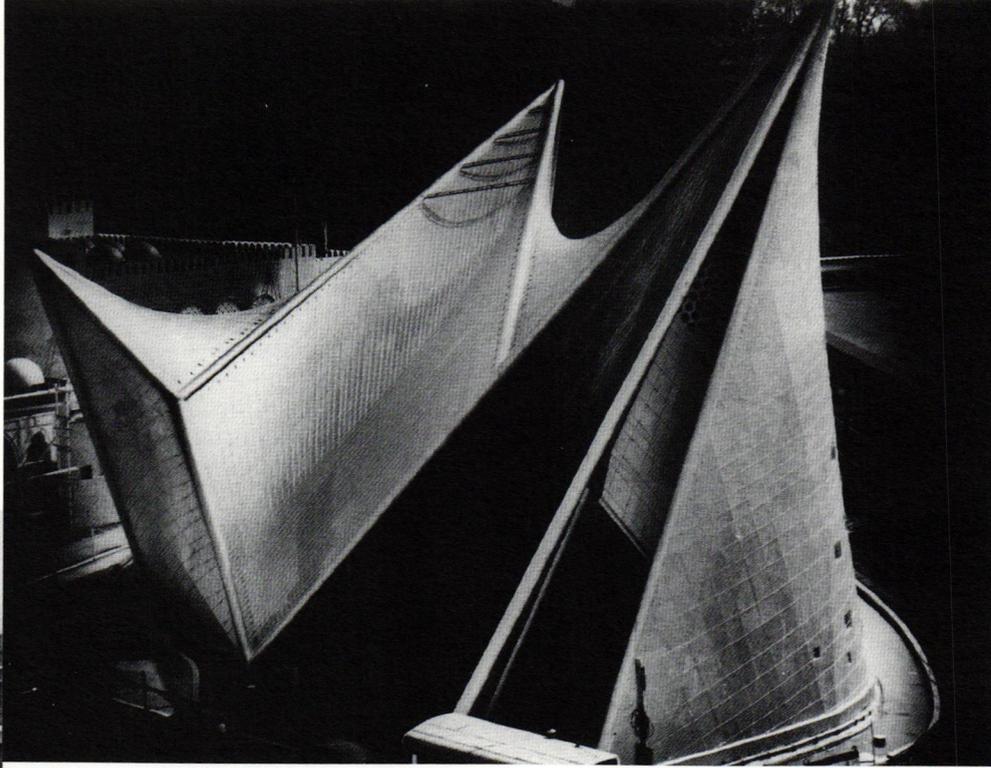
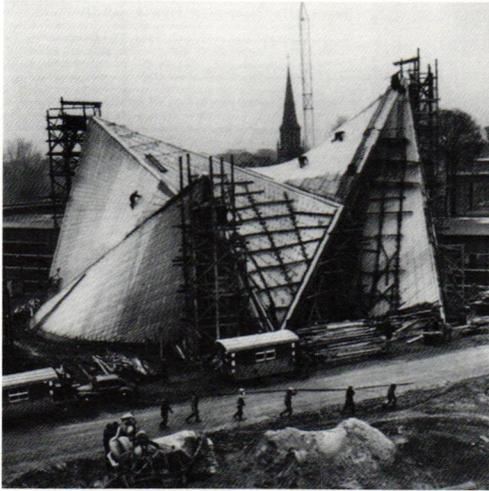
Space, Sound, in Seconds

by **Karen Michels**
translated by Seth Skolnick

Space Calculated in Seconds: The Philips Pavilion, Le Corbusier, Edgard Varèse
by Marc Treib
Princeton University Press, 1996
282 pp., \$52.50

A blend of architecture, images, colors, and electronic sound, Le Corbusier's pavilion for the Philips Group, the German electronics manufacturer, at the 1958 Brussels World Exhibition was a true *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a total work of art. It only existed for a year before being torn down, like many well-known exhibition buildings, consigned to oblivion, a piece of ephemera with little left by which to remember it. The noted exceptions are Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace of 1851 and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's German Pavilion of 1928–29, which have been materially reconstructed. Although of comparable historical significance, the Philips Pavilion has been relegated to cursory mention in a few monographs on Le Corbusier. Only recently have scholars begun to take note of it, starting in the 1980s, a period of intensive reexamination of Le Corbusier's life and work. Unique in the architect's oeuvre, the pavilion was the subject of my own master's thesis in 1984 at the University of Hamburg. Bart Lootsma also wrote about it around the same time in the Dutch journal *WONEN/tabk*. And, shortly thereafter, the pavilion was architecturally reconstructed as part of an exhibition on Le Corbusier's later works at the Badischer Kunstverein Karlsruhe, organized by Andreas Vowinckel and Thomas Kessler. Marc

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Treib's sumptuously produced monograph, *Space Calculated in Seconds: The Philips Pavilion, Le Corbusier, Edgard Varèse*, is the most recent study and the first to attempt a complete historical reconstruction of the short-lived work.¹

Treib devotes individual chapters to the history of the commission, the pavilion's construction, the development of its visual and acoustic interior environment, and the public's reception of the finished work. His careful attention to how Le Corbusier translated his artistic ideas into a built work will interest architects and architectural historians, while historians of art, music, and film will be pleased to find much exploration of contemporary developments in these fields as well.

The final form of the building was a result of three major influences: the patronage of the Philips Group; the collaboration between Le Corbusier and the composer Iannis Xenakis, who shared with the architect the role of project director; and the pavilion's innovative structural system. Highly progressive for the time, the Philips Group decided to dispense with the conventional practice of exhibiting its own products in favor of a conceptual presentation that artistically highlighted the potential of the electronics medium. The initial intention was that different artists would make contributions

according to their respective expertise; Le Corbusier was to execute the architectural part. But he quickly assumed sole artistic responsibility for the project and insisted (over the client's resistance) on the acoustic contribution of the French avant-garde composer Edgard Varèse. Le Corbusier was less interested in designing a temporary exhibition building than in exploring the new expressive possibilities that the commission afforded him. He sought nothing less than the development of a new artistic genre through the medium of electronics.

While the pavilion's self-supporting, curved ferroconcrete structure shares the formal language of some of Le Corbusier's most well-known works, it was Xenakis who contributed greatly to the building's final appearance. Its form bears an extraordinary resemblance to the graphic notations of Xenakis's experimental compositions executed at the same time: both sought to make visible the mathematical dimension of sound. Their common feature was continuous, increasing movement—in music, what is referred to as *glissando*, and in architecture, a hyperbolic paraboloid.² An unfortunate footnote to the development of the pavilion's extraordinary form is that the relationship between Le Corbusier and Xenakis ended due to disagreements about the building's principal authorship.

opposite

Marc Treib suggests that the form of the Philips Pavilion might have been influenced by the graphic notations of Iannis Xenakis's composition, *Metastasis*, of 1953–54.

(from *Space Calculated in Seconds*)

left

Construction of the concrete roof of the Philips Pavilion in early 1958.

(from *Space Calculated in Seconds*)

above

Le Corbusier designed the Philips Pavilion for the German electronics manufacturer the Philips Group.

(from *Space Calculated in Seconds*)

Although the building's geometry and structure were legible from the exterior, its interior spaces seemed irrational and without clear tectonic expression. In spite of Treib's claim that Le Corbusier had an early interest in geometrical shapes made from compound curves, the architect had initially envisioned something entirely different for the Philips Pavilion: a cavelike concrete shell in the form of a stomach. As in the interior space of his recently completed pilgrimage chapel at Ronchamp (1950–55), the pavilion's dimly lit, cavelike interior spaces were pierced by colored light. Le Corbusier's first conceptual sketches for the pavilion are, unfortunately, only superficially examined by Treib. They depict a smooth sculptural form suspended from a metal frame. This form recalls one of the side chapels at Ronchamp as well as an early idea for the Governor's Palace at Chandigarh, on which Le Corbusier had been working a short time earlier. Although this idea is never pursued, photographs of the model for the Governor's Palace show an irregular, bottle-shaped form with an overhanging roof projecting over the garden, providing partial enclosure for the governor's private prayer space. Although dropped from the final scheme, this shape reappears, suspended from the roof of the Philips Pavilion. In Treib's concluding chapter, he argues, quite correctly, that the Philips Pavilion did not achieve the expressive power and architectonic quality of Le Corbusier's other buildings of the period, such as Ronchamp and the Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles. Perhaps the historical judgment of the pavilion would have been different if Le Corbusier had pursued his initial, freer idea rather than the space-age "sputnik" iconography so pervasive during the late 1950s.

Le Corbusier created a multimedia composition, a *poème électronique*, to animate the pavilion's interior space. It consisted of montage projections of photographs, colored light, and nonfigurative forms that rendered the already amorphous interior space even more immaterial and mysterious. Le Corbusier intended his visual and acoustical presentation, described by Treib meticulously, to induce a "poetic shock" in the spectator. The architect's description of the presentation, which refers to montage processes and filmic conventions of the time, is richly illustrated in the book with black-and-white and color photographs taken during the Brussels exhibition. Despite the ample documentation and detailed descriptions, however, the chapter is lacking in interpretive content. Was the electronic poem merely a game in which Le Corbusier "joined tribal sculpture with rockets, geometry with intuition, light with darkness, horror with hope," as Treib conveys it? Or was it embedded with concrete social messages, as one may presume from Le Corbusier's many publications and manifestos that specifically outlined the concepts underlying his artistic creations?

The electronic poem functioned as a universal sign language, stimulating the spectator's emotions and intellect while creating a narrative structure for an experience of the pavilion itself. But Treib fails to mention the abstract prelude to this narrative: the alternating illumination of two objects suspended from two of the pavilion's interior apexes—a naked female mannequin and a geometrical model made of metal rods. The juxtaposition of matter (the human figure) with mind (the mathematical abstraction) echoes the motifs seen in the work of the Parisian surrealists or of sculptor Alberto Giacometti, and even reaching to German engraver Albrecht Dürer. In Le Corbusier's own words, the unfolding sequence of images sought to depict "how our civilization burst forth from tumultuous chaos to conquer the modern age," and culminates in the apotheosis of our own era—admittedly a banal view of historical development. Thus, civilization is depicted as beginning with "chaos"—the prehistory of human development and the limitations of mythical thought, represented by images of apes as well as a detail of Michelangelo's allegorical sculpture *Day*. Alongside and overlaying the images of skeletal or natural forms (with which the architect had become so familiar) were visual representations of the mechanized world, to convey the dichotomy of modern society. Tribal masks were juxtaposed with the heads of apes and buffalo, illustrating the progressive emancipation of human reason.

Notes

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| 1 | Karen Michels, "Le Corbusier, Poème Électronique: Studien zum Philips Pavilion, Weltausstellung Brüssel 1958" (master's thesis, University of Hamburg, 1984). See also Michels, "Le Corbusier, Poème Électronique: Die Synthese der Künste im Philips Pavilion, Weltausstellung Brüssel 1958," in <i>Idea: Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunsthalle IV</i> (1985): 147–64; Bart Lootsma, "Le Poème Électronique: Her verlangen naar synthese," <i>WONEN/tabk 2</i> (Jan. 2, 1984): 20–31; "Le Corbusier: Synthèse des Arts, | Aspekte des Spätwerks, 1945–65," exhibition curated by Andreas Vowinckel and Thomas Kessler, Badischer Kunstverein Karlsruhe, 1986; and the exhibition catalogue <i>Le Corbusier: Synthèse des Arts, Aspekte des Spätwerks, 1945–65</i> (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1986). |
| 2 | Peter Bienz, <i>Le Corbusier und die Musik</i> (Braunschweig, Germany: Vieweg Verlag, 1998). | |

The turkey and the partridge embodied the continuous process of domestication and subjugation. Photographs of African war gods, toy soldiers, and concentration camps showed the darker side of human nature. Medieval art represented the comforting and healing aspects of Christianity.

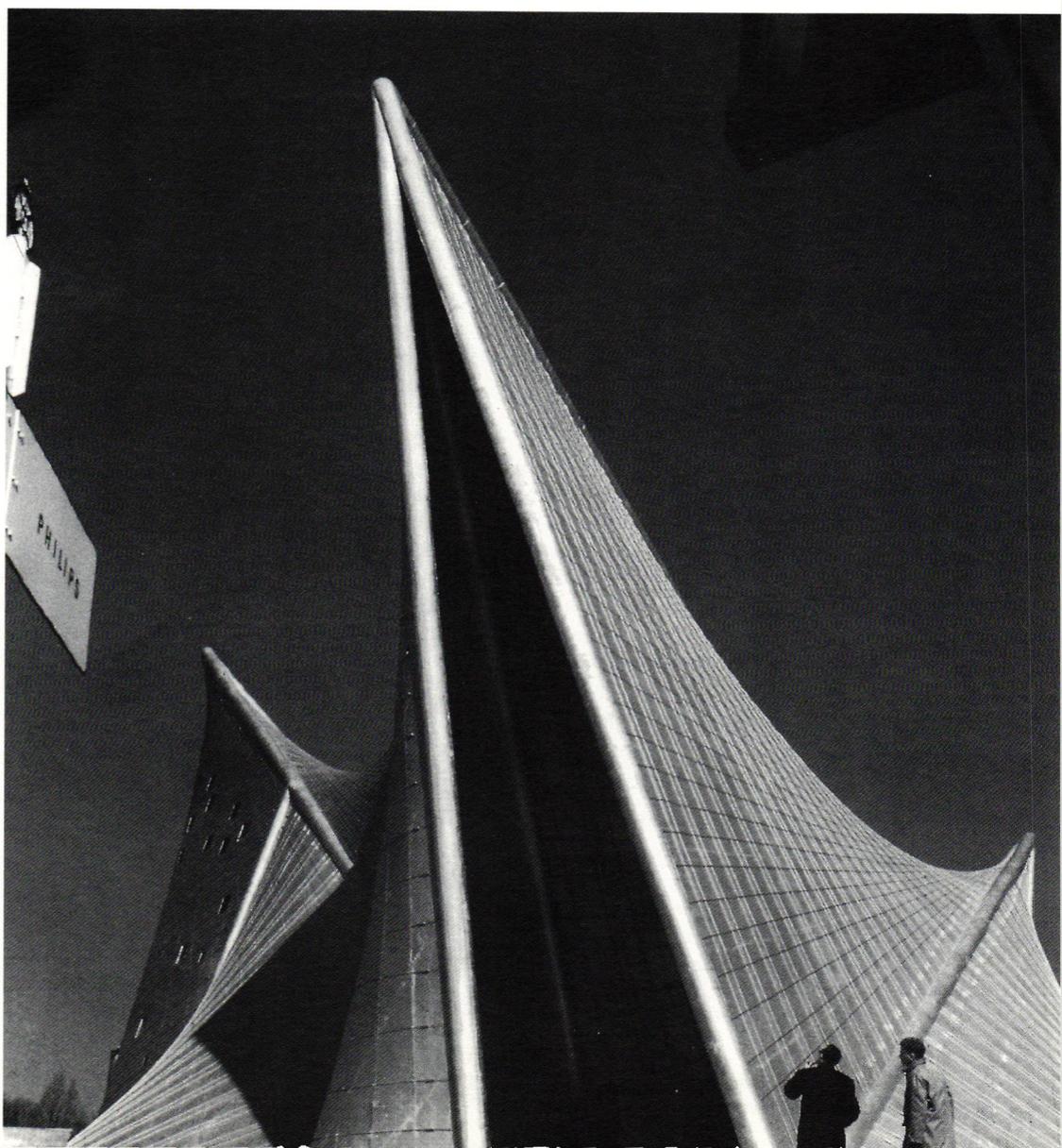
The tone of the *poème* then shifted as the projector suddenly stopped, and daylight entered the space, coinciding with the beginning of the Western industrial age. In contradistinction to the representation of the agrarian, primitive world, images of atomic bomb explosions and frightened children revealed the destructive nature of a society oriented solely toward technical development. The finale depicted the potential for the achievement of a contemporary utopia, in which the cosmos, technology, and nature are found in harmony, and racial, generational, and social divisions have dissipated. In a sequence ranging from social responsibility to egomania, Le Corbusier took note of his own contribution to such a future by including images of his own urban projects.

Treib goes on to examine Varèse's electronic composition and its interaction with the visual *poème* and the architectural space. The sound montage did not merely parallel the content of the electronic poem but actively engaged it, intensifying, exacerbating, or distorting the visual experience. "Routes" and "masses" of sound from speakers strategically placed along the walls of the pavilion created acoustical spaces that accentuated or reverberated against the structure's physical spaces. A total artistic experience, the structure's interactions among space, images, and sound anticipated today's multimedia installations.

As a microhistory, Treib's study is rewarding. His exemplary documentation provides a glimpse of an experiment and the artistic context from which it emerged. The Philips Pavilion was a sensitive antenna that simultaneously intercepted and broadcast the minute vibrations of its time. It bears out Walter Benjamin's observation that "the ephemeral is the just price for true actuality." ■

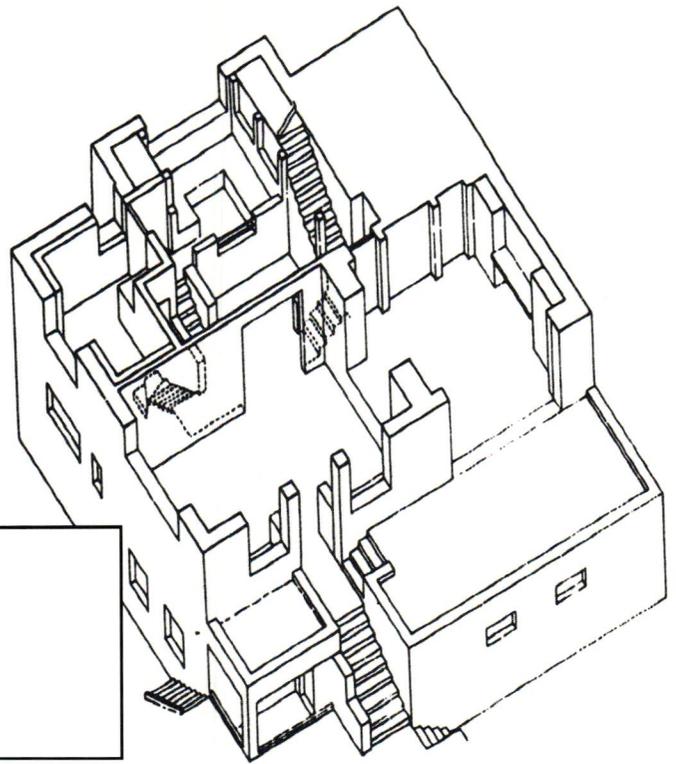
Visitors to the Philips Pavilion encountered a multimedia composition designed to show the possibilities of the electronics medium.

(from Space Calculated in Seconds)



Architecture and Nihilism

by Martin Jay



Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture

by Massimo Cacciari
 translated by Stephen Sartarelli
 introduction by Patrizia Lombardo
 Yale University Press, 1993
 306 pp., \$45.00; \$20.00 (paper)

An axonometric drawing of Adolf Loos's Moller House erected in Vienna in 1928. (from Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity*)

Venice, the Italian Futurists contemptuously proclaimed in their 1910 manifesto, *Contro Venezia passatista*, was a relic of a decadent civilization that should be ruthlessly left behind. "Let us hasten to fill in its reeking canals with the shards of its leprous, crumbling palaces," they snarled. "Let us burn the gondolas, rocking chairs for cretins, and raise to the heavens the imposing geometry of metal bridges and howitzers plumed with smoke, to abolish the falling curves of the old architecture." On the city's ruins they urged the construction of a new industrial and military center, a mighty wonder of modern technology that could once again rule over the Adriatic, "that great Italian lake."

Massimo Cacciari, who since 1992 has been the mayor of the stubbornly nonmodern city the Futurists vainly hoped to raze, presents, as might be expected, a somewhat different estimation of Venice's status and value. In *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*, a collection of his essays dating from the 1970s and 1980s, Venice serves as the most compelling antidote to the Futurists' grandiose fantasies of a thoroughly modernized urban machine. Perhaps more unexpectedly, it also functions for Cacciari as a corrective to any nostalgia for an organic civic community that supposedly existed in the pre-modern past. Instead, Venice provides him with an exemplary model of the postmodern metropolis, an urban site of multiple adventures without a telos, a nonutopian riot of signs without references, a place of radical differences without forced reconciliations. "Venice," he boasts, "has no signification, its being-as-game indicates that it is

language only. The image it presents embodies the crisis and conflict of *Kultur*—not its utopia or its form....There is no more synthesis among the dissonances. All appearance exists in itself and for itself—a perfect mask that hides being, or rather, reveals the loss, the absence of being."

There can be few elected officials in the world who successfully woo their constituents by trumpeting the virtues of nihilism and then identifying their city as its embodiment, but Cacciari is no ordinary politician. Nor is he a typical urban planner or architectural historian. A professor of aesthetics at the University of Venice, Cacciari draws on Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Max Weber and Georg Simmel, Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire, and, above all, Walter Benjamin to buttress an ambitious argument about modern life as a whole. This argument emerges, with slight variations of emphasis, from several discrete texts written at different times in Cacciari's journey from Marxist militant to devotee of nihilism or "negative thought." This collection effectively represents what Patrizia Lombardo in her helpful introduction calls his first and middle periods, which precede the more mystical and religious Heideggerianism of his most recent work. The first part of the volume is based on his early book *Metropolis* and a chapter from his *Walther Rathenau e il suo ambiente*, written when he was a collaborator of Manfredo Tafuri; the second and third parts gather together his numerous writings on Adolf Loos, including "Loos-Wien" from the book *Oikos*, his book *Adolf Loos e il suo angelo*, and chapters from his *Dallo Steinhof*.¹

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If Venice is Cacciari's normative urban site, Loos is unexpectedly the architect—or, rather, *Baumeister*, a term Cacciari uses, following Loos's own self-conscious promotion of the builder over the architect—who best embodies the nihilistic values he espouses. More precisely, Loos provides Cacciari with the opportunity to put some distance between his position and what he calls the project of “fulfilled nihilism,” which he cautions is as “absolutizing” and utopian as its redemptive opposite.

To make Venice the cutting edge of urban life in the late twentieth century and transform Loos from a pioneer of modern design into a prophet of uncompleted nihilism is no mean task. So, in order to understand Cacciari's case, it will be necessary to step back and consider his larger theoretical argument. His point of departure is Simmel's celebrated analysis of the conflict between the overstimulation of the nervous system and dissolution of coherent selfhood produced by life in the modern metropolis, on the one hand, and the intellect's struggle to make sense of that life and repair (what it perceives as) the damage, on the other. Cacciari adopts Simmel's diagnosis but rejects his prescription for a cure, which he chalks up to the German sociologist's still-potent nostalgia for a premodern community (*Gemeinschaft*) based on a redeemed *Kultur*. (Throughout his text, Cacciari employs German terms substantively to suggest the foreign provenance of such ideas and performatively to disrupt the smooth workings of a single language.) For Cacciari, any such yearning for meaningful, integrated life in an organic community comes up against the irreversible effects of the transition to a thoroughly capitalist society (*Gesellschaft*), whose urban form is the Metropolis.

Cacciari situates Simmel's residual redemptive illusions in a long-term intellectual project for overcoming the ostensibly alienating effects of modernization. He borrows the awkward neologism “transcendence” from the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter to name the yearning (*Sehnsucht*) for a holistic recuperation of negation, finding traces of this impulse in a wide variety of figures, including Johann Goethe, who sought to transfigure the chaos of his individual “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*) into poetic truth (*Dichtung*); Heinrich von Kleist, “whose nostalgia for the marionette is a nostalgia for the man still interwoven with the cosmos”; the pre-Marxist György Lukács, who hoped that the very form of the essay, with its implied acknowledgment of its own incompleteness, would be a prefiguration of a future collective totalization; and, in the Italian context, Antonio Gramsci, with whom he identifies historicist Marxist humanism. Against the holistic yearnings of such figures, Cacciari pits the Nietzschean use of the aphorism, with its nominalist refusal to be

turned into an anticipatory fragment of a larger whole and its embrace of the tragic contradictions the essay form foolishly seeks to overcome. In more practical terms, Cacciari charges, the same problematic ideal fueled the efforts of the William Morris devotees of the Deutsche Werkbund to recapture an aestheticized, unalienated form of labor in craftsmanship. Walter Rathenau, too, fantasized about a respiritualized industrial future, although his heroic idealization of a technological utopia was really veiled nostalgia for a lost organic past. Architect Peter Behrens's attempt to fashion a new kind of factory as a site for the realization of such a dream—a heterotopic enclave apart from the chaos of metropolitan life, wherein the sacred quality of productive labor might be nurtured—is no less dubious.

For Cacciari, any *Sehnsucht* for organic wholeness, any belief in the possibility of synthesis and order, is necessarily in vain. Affirming the Metropolis, which is Cacciari's allegorical term for a place of unfulfilled nihilism, thus means rejecting the City, whether as a restored premodern *Gemeinschaft*, a classical *polis*, or a modernist utopia. Drawing on what he takes to be Benjamin's sober acknowledgment that any utopia of urban community is necessarily a thing of the past with no prospect for restoration, Cacciari holds up his own Metropolis as a rebuke to the futile hope that we are living in an *Übergangszeit*, a time of transition to a redeemed future. “In the face of Venice, every value of the city—the essay form as the path to truth, the synthesis of nature and spirit, interior and exterior, the tangible realization of the harmony of the whole—becomes useless, uncomprehending, silent.”

How, we might wonder, should we build in this unforgiving environment? How can we live in a present that takes no consolation in restoring the past or creating a different future? For his answer, Cacciari moves beyond Venice to early twentieth-century Vienna and the work of Loos. Loos may seem an odd choice for a protopostmodernist hero; he has, after all, enjoyed an honored place in narratives of modern design, from Nikolaus Pevsner's to Kenneth Frampton's, as a demystifying rationalizer. His purist denunciation of “effeminate” decoration and Viennese aestheticism seems a far cry from the neobaroque impulse in much postmodernist eclecticism. Although it is easy to see how Loos's ascetic antiornamentalism might be directed against the Werkbund's inflated hopes of reconciling handcraft labor, subjective artistic freedom, and the demands of modern production, it is less obvious how it subverts the functionalism of the International Style.

Cacciari's answer relies on Loos's explicit repudiation of the goal of architectural synthesis, his hostility to the conceit that the master builder could create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Instead of privileging *Kultur* over *Zivilization* and seeking to restore the luster of the former, Loos accepted the

contradictions of the latter. Rather than endorsing the fetish of transparency in what Paul Scheerbarth called the *Glaskultur* of modernism and seeking to harmonize the exterior of a house with its interior, Loos celebrated their mutual opacity and incommensurability. Eschewing the temptations of organic style, which supposedly expresses the architect's unique genius, he preferred a nihilistic babble of irreconcilable visual languages. The neoclassical element in Loos's purism, evident in his respect for Karl Friedrich Schinkel as the last great German architect, meant, Cacciari argues, a repudiation of Greece in favor of Rome. Whereas the Greek model of architectural harmony with the environment implies an imposition of totalizing aesthetic values on built form (which can now only produce monuments to the dead), the Roman model suggests instead the willing embrace of those contradictions ("functionality and art, relativity and value, the reaffirmation of value and the impossibility of representing it, the limit of representation and the will to surpass it") that vitalize the living.

Cacciari's case for Loos also derives from the author's claim that the *Baumeister* was not a resolutely antitraditional thinker intent on overcoming the past and treating the present as a *tabula rasa*. "What metaphysically distinguishes *Baumeister* from *Architekt*," Cacciari explains, "lies precisely in the fact that the productive aim of the *Baumeister* grows out of the house and language handed down to it; this aim is, *a priori*, 'dwelling,' while that of the *Architekt* imagines itself and strives to be 'free,' and does not apply to itself the right of the past—it plans idealistically."

Rather than acting as a critic dismissively judging what must be condemned as obsolete—the stance, say, of the Futurist revilers of Venice—Cacciari's Loos was a more modest commentator, knowing, as Benjamin did, that commentary is an endless practice that can never restore original meanings or locate firm foundations. In architectural terms, this means eschewing the search for a spatial clearing in which the dominating genius can work his will; instead, it implies a recognition of the overlapping existence of distinct *places*—with the Heideggerian connotations of concrete "at-homeness" as opposed to the abstraction of infinite and uniform space—which nonetheless never cohere into a single place in which the dream of being fully at home can be realized. Although we live in a time of what the conservative German political theorist Carl Schmitt has called radical *Entortung* (displacement or disembeddedness), in which alienation has reached cosmological dimensions, Loos wisely never sought to restore what has been lost. "Loos[s] architecture does not seek the rationalization of 'pure' places," Cacciari avers, "but is aimed at showing the endless

contradiction between the thought-out space of calculation, the equivalence of the exteriors, and the possibility of place, the hope of a place."

Loos's metaphorical figure of the *Angel*, like that made famous by Benjamin in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," can only maintain a weak messianic hope for the redemptive homecoming that can, however, never happen. It knows the paradoxical importance of waiting despite the expectation that nothing will actually change. It thus resists both the utopian fantasies of modernist spatial rationalization beyond any residue of place and the no less utopian fantasy of equally placeless fulfilled nihilism, in which everything is a whirl of endless circulation and infinite dissemination (what Schmitt called universal *Mobilbachung*). Insofar as both of these are projects of completion, they fall prey to the same vain hope for definitive change and the effective solution of problems. As Cacciari writes in his epilogue to *Architecture and Nihilism*, "There is no absolute [sic] difference, but neither is there any overcoming of this difference in transformation. There is neither fixed 'original' tradition in itself, nor is there any realization of such in the process that translates it, as appears to be the case when teleological-symbolic factors reappear in the ambit of the architecture of nihilism fulfilled." It is this resistance to fulfilled nihilism that defines the subtle distinction between Cacciari's position and that of the "weak thought" of his friend, the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, or of deconstruction in some of its more reductive forms.

It will be obvious from this description of the argument of *Architecture and Nihilism* that its author's early Marxism has been left far behind. Even his interpretation of Benjamin, which follows closely that of Giorgio Agamben in his recently translated *Infancy and History*, diminishes the Marxist moment in his complex oeuvre, and with it the stubbornly redemptive yearnings that have allowed commentators like Richard Wolin (*Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*), Susan A. Handelman (*Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas*), and Leo Bersani (*The Culture of Redemption*) to read his legacy in very different terms.² Instead of hoping for the restoration of a lost experience (*Erfahrung*), however, Cacciari's Benjamin, like Agamben's, sees the very quest for such plenitudinous wholeness as little more than nostalgia for a blissful infancy prior to the acquisition of language, an innocent past that never, in fact, existed.

Whether or not Cacciari's reading of Benjamin, which is shared by other Italians of his generation including Tafuri and Agamben, is convincing, however, is less important than the conclusions he draws from it. Turning Benjamin into a solvent

of the deluded hopes for closure, plenitude, wholeness, and redemption that Cacciari sees as infusing virtually all of modern culture provides him with tacit legitimation for the uncompleted nihilism and “negative thought” that he otherwise never rigorously defends (at least in this text). It allows him to stigmatize all efforts to realize community and overcome alienation as dangerously utopian with inherently disastrous implications for the vitality of metropolitan life.

At a time when redemptive politics reeks badly and the line between utopia and dystopia is increasingly difficult to draw, Cacciari’s general argument seems attractive. There is also something invigorating about the application of weighty philosophical categories to the everyday concerns of urban planning and architecture that situates them at the center of the most profound cultural questions of our age. But the elevation comes with a cost, which is evident when one tries to think through the implications of Cacciari’s theoretical postulates. By proposing so binary an opposition between City and Metropolis—the former an emblem of misguided humanist utopianism, the latter an allegory of a nihilism so radical it refuses to achieve any closure, including the project of completed nihilism itself—he banishes the possibility of anything in between.

Cacciari himself seems to sense this danger in the second half of *Architecture and Nihilism*, which consists of a series of essays devoted to Loos. Here, the introduction of the vocabulary of place versus space, with its Heideggerian overtones of at least some “at-homeness,” provides a check to the resolutely anti-*Gemeinschaft* valorization of dissonance for its own sake that infuses the initial discussion of the Metropolis. But, significantly, Cacciari remains more clearly inclined toward the Metropolis than the City pole of his spectrum; nihilism can be defined as healthy in its “uncompleted” state, but he never considers the possibility that the unfulfilled project of creating a community might be worth supporting as well. That is, although the realized reconciliation of all contradictions may be akin to totalitarian oppression, the endless quest to achieve it may not be so evil. Like the telos of communication, which Cacciari also denigrates as inherently repressive, this quest may usefully function as a regulative ideal whose complete realization is never truly possible, but which provides the motivation for some of the most constructive impulses of human sociability.

Cacciari, moreover, is able to conceptualize the resistance to pure transparency (modernist *Glaskultur*) or absolute difference (completed nihilism) only in terms of Loos’s maintenance of the interior of the house as a place where at least

some meaningful experience is possible. Cacciari identifies this interiority with the “feminine” side of Loos’s work, which he links, through an interpretation of the German writer Lou Andreas-Salomé’s meditation on buttons, to Benjamin’s notion of collecting as a rebuke to the exchange principle of capitalism. What this analysis leaves out is the possibility that public places outside the house might exist or be fostered, places that are not figured as “feminine” or involve the purposeless activity of collecting for its own sake, but which nonetheless resist the circulating whirl of meaningless signs in the abstract space of the Metropolis. That is, there is no room in Cacciari’s scheme for a public sphere that is more than a variant of the discredited nostalgia for *Gemeinschaft* that he identifies with the City *tout court*. What Cacciari fails to grasp is the distinction between the *social* category of community with all of its connotations of integration, homogeneity, and rootedness and the essentially political category of a public sphere, which necessarily takes heterogeneity and difference into account, even as it tries to provide a framework for adjudicating the conflicts that it can never fully lay to rest. So disillusioned is he by the exhausted idealist historicism of Gramscian Marxism that he can only envision a politics of ephemerality, contingency, and nervous energy going nowhere. As a result, the Metropolis he celebrates can never treat anything as a problem because it has rejected in advance the very category of a solution.

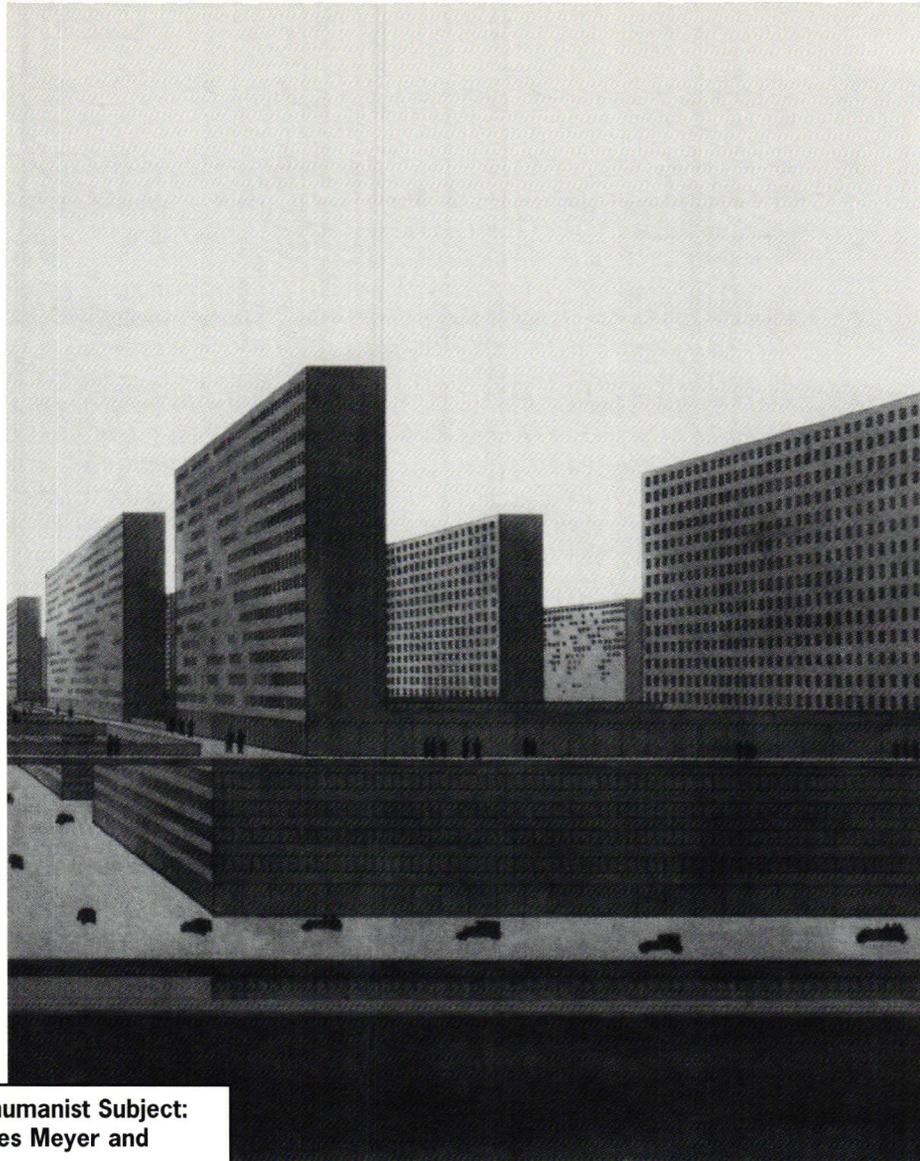
Now, however, that Cacciari is the chief elected official of the city that *Architecture and Nihilism* sees as the capital of the postmodern maelstrom, it is hard to imagine how he approaches the pressing issues of daily life that demand some concrete response based on civic collaboration. Reveling in uncompleted nihilism and keeping the specters of utopianism at bay won’t, after all, do much to prevent Venice from sinking into the sea. ■

Notes

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| <p>1 Massimo Cacciari, <i>Metropolis</i> (Rome: Officina, 1973); Cacciari, <i>Walther Rathenau e il suo ambiente</i> (Bari, Italy: De Donato, 1979); Francesco Amendolagine and Cacciari, <i>Oikos</i> (Rome: Officina, 1975); Cacciari, <i>Adolf Loos e il suo angelo</i> (Milan: Electa, 1981); Cacciari, <i>Dallo Steinhof</i> (Milan: Adelphi, 1980).</p> | <p>2 Giorgio Agamben, <i>Infancy and History</i> (London: Verso, 1993); Richard Wolin, <i>Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption</i> (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Susan A. Handelman, <i>Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas</i> (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Leo Bersani, <i>The Culture of Redemption</i> (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).</p> |
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Pioneer Posthumanists

by Marco De Michelis



Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer

by K. Michael Hays

MIT Press, 1992

352 pp., \$24.95

Marco De Michelis is a professor of architectural history at the University of Venice. He was a scholar at the Getty Research Institute from 1992 to 1993 and is the author of numerous texts on modern and contemporary architecture, including *Heinrich Tessenow, 1876–1950* (Milan: Electa, 1991) and *Bauhaus 1919–1933*, coauthored with Agnes Kohlmeyer (Milan: Mazzotta, 1996). He is currently the architectural editor of *Skira*.

K. Michael Hays's *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer* is devoted to the works of two anomalous masters of radical architecture who practiced in Europe in the 1920s: the Swiss Hannes Meyer, who served as the second director of the Bauhaus in Dessau (from April 1928 to July 1930) before leaving Germany for the Soviet Union and later Mexico, and the German Ludwig Hilberseimer, also a teacher at the Bauhaus, a friend and associate of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and an astute investigator of the architectural structure of the metropolis.

Hays presents his historiographic thesis in his introduction: Within the tradition of modernism, which he characterizes as “something to do with the emergence of new kinds of objects and events,” two strains of thought may be distinguished. On the one hand, there is the “modern humanist” architecture of Charles Garnier, Louis Sullivan, and Otto Wagner, in which the subject acts as “an originating agent of meaning, unique, centralized, and authoritative.” On the other hand, there is an

architecture attuned to the notions of “seriality, the renunciation of narrative time, the disprivileging of the purely visual, and the thematization of incompleteness and uncertainty.” In the latter case, social and collective practices following the dissolution “of psychological autonomy and individualism” replace the omnipotence of the subject; Hays defines this perspective as “posthumanistic,” following the path already traced by philosopher Fredric Jameson.

Hays considers the work of Meyer and Hilberseimer symptomatic of this “posthumanistic” condition, challenging their traditional allocation to the functionalist culture of *die Neue Sachlichkeit*, the New Objectivity. Hays’s reflections are based on two genealogies of thought: first, the critical, post-Marxist line of thinking that extends from György Lukács to Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Siegfried Kraauer, and Ernst Bloch; and, second, the diagnosis of the “reification of the subject under industrial capitalism” that emerged from the structuralism and poststructuralism of Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze, as well as Jameson.

The problem with Hays’s book begins with his hypothesis that both of his protagonists, Meyer as much as Hilberseimer, regularly reveal themselves as conscious “posthumanist subjects,” producing works that “delineate precise social agendas as well as aesthetic preferences; each offer[ing] an architecture that would be adequate to the social order he envisioned.” This theoretical-interpretative position neglects a large part of their thought and work.

Hays’s framework seems convincing, at first. It is possible to identify Meyer and Hilberseimer with the “practice of *Aufhebung* or sublation”; i.e., the reunification of art and social practice through the “negation” or “radical reformulation” of traditional concepts of architecture. This association is evident in Meyer’s attention to the collective nature of the production process, and in Hilberseimer’s interest in the “demise” of architecture as a subject of representation. Recent studies of architectural modernity have repeatedly encountered the themes of *Aufhebung* and the fundamental, technical criteria of the profession. These same themes inspired the reflections of Viennese Adolf Loos during the last years of the nineteenth century; of Mies van der Rohe soon afterward; and even those of an architect who

might seem distant from these ideas, the German Heinrich Tessenow. The demise of architecture—“an architecture deprived of architecture,” as Martin Wagner wrote of Tessenow’s diaphanous architecture in an article published by *Neudeutsche Bauzeitung* in 1910—comprises for these architects a limit and a risk, but certainly not a strategic objective.

In this perspective, Meyer fits easily in the paradigm of the “posthumanist subject.” Hays, however, allots him a crucial role in the theory of modern architecture that no lucid consideration of his work can justify. The historiographic thesis Hays develops in the first part of his book neglects Meyer’s provincial status and marginal relation to the events of his time, which are crucial aspects of his development. Meyer studied in the modest School of Applied Art in Basel before apprenticing in the Berlin atelier of Albert Frölich and Emil Schaudt in 1909, while his contemporaries Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and Bruno Taut trained with the likes of Peter Behrens and Theodor Fischer. From 1916 to 1918, Meyer worked in the studio of Georg Metzendorf in Munich and in the building department of the great Krupp Steel Company in Essen, which involved him in the design of the vast Garden City residential quarters at Margarethenhöhe and Hüttenau in the industrial region of the Ruhr.

Meyer’s first important independent commission, the Siedlung Freidorf, an experimental cooperative settlement in Basel (1919–21), was so profoundly lodged in his sympathy for European cultural reform that it was completely indifferent to avant-garde trends. Instead, he drew inspiration from the work of Andrea Palladio (whose drawings he diligently copied in his free time) because he believed it necessary to impose on the settlement an architectural order composed of unitary modules. Meyer himself lived in the Siedlung Freidorf from 1921 to 1925.

**Ludwig Hilberseimer's
1924 Hochhausstadt
project for a city street
reveals the architect's
interest in elementary
geometric forms.**

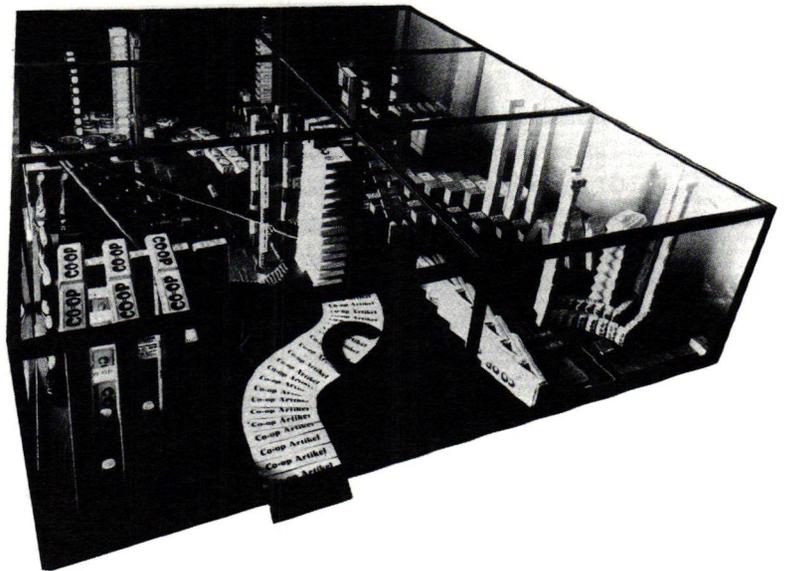
*(from Modernism and the
Posthumanist Subject)*

Hays assigns crucial meaning to a body of projects that Meyer called “Co-op” works, all of which were dedicated to the production of the Swiss cooperatives. Completed around 1925, they include a Co-op theater, a Co-op room, display cases, linoleum engravings, and photographs. Hays writes of these works, “Meyer reconceives the design process in such a way as to collapse the distinction between the aesthetic, the practical, and the cognitive function of artistic signs.” He develops a “design practice” as “an activity that can completely enunciate the desired change of relationships between art and the world only through a radical negation of the very discipline of architecture itself.”

What Hays so brilliantly describes as such a complex modernist design strategy is perhaps more likely the avant-garde experiments of a young architect longing to complete his lengthy years of training. In 1925 Meyer was anxious to free himself from the “dead end,” in his own words, of the classical architecture of the sort he practiced at the Siedlung Freidorf. In Hays’s rich and well-articulated reading of the Co-op Vitrine, an installation for an exhibition of Swiss cooperative products in Ghent and Basel in 1924 and 1925, Meyer’s assemblage of cans, boxes, tubes, and other articles of everyday use becomes a meditation on the loss of the subjective aura from mass-reproduced commodities. The composition of the Co-op Vitrine echoes the “repetitive and serial” distribution of commodities, and appears to be “an image or facsimile of the industrialized manufacturing process itself.” Hays sees a sign system that is, at its core, “class-oriented” and “opposed to bourgeois individualism.” In Hays’s reconstruction, Meyer is freed from the self-reflexive, autonomous, abstract, and bourgeois character of avant-garde modernism; his work (despite its abstract and avant-garde formal traits) is instead allied with the realism of Lukács, or the idea that representation of the social totality is founded on the proletarian point of view and the awareness of the centrality of the finished product in production and consumption. In reality, however, Meyer merely emulated the crucial work developed by the European avant-garde in the early 1920s: the experimental advertising of the Soviet El Lissitzky, the semantic inventions so loved by the dadaists and constructivists, the abstract geometric grids of de Stijl and suprematism, and the nonobjective photographs by Aleksandr Rodchenko and László Moholy-Nagy.

In 1926 Meyer elaborated his ideas in *Die neue Welt* (the New World), a brilliant exposé of the motives of modernist culture: the imperious civilization of machines, in which “Ford and Rolls Royce have burst open the core of the town, obliterating distance and effacing the boundaries between town and country”; the advent of new areas of knowledge, such as psychoanalysis, which “burst[s] open the all too narrow dwelling of the soul”; the diffusion of a new cosmopolitan and nomadic spirit; the ruthless negation of the past and history as impediments to the future; the subordination of the artistic character of architecture to technical, organizational, and functional themes; and the pronouncement of the death “of the art of a ‘thing in itself,’ as ‘art for art’s sake.’”

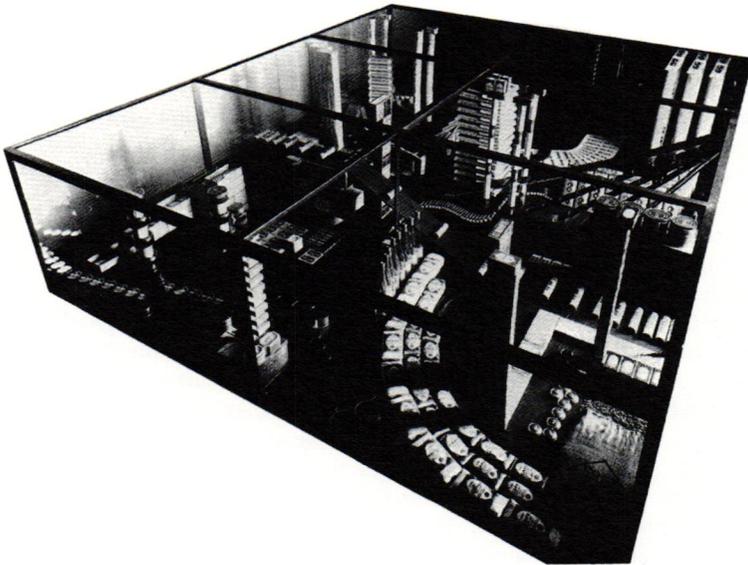
Meyer’s ideology of the “new world” recapitulates the progressive and emancipatory ideas so central to bourgeois intellectual production in the 1920s. In particular, these very ideas were central to the work of the group that gathered around the magazine *ABC*, founded in 1924, including the Swiss Hans Schmidt and Werner Moser, the Dutch Mart Stam, the Soviet El Lissitzky, and other young architects such as Meyer. “*ABC* believes in the dictatorship of the machine” is written in the magazine’s manifesto, printed in its fourth issue.



above and opposite
Two views of Hannes Meyer's 1925 Co-op Vitrine project, in which products from a Swiss cooperative were arranged to form an abstract urban landscape.
 (from *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject*)

Ultimately, *Die neue Welt* offers nothing original. Its technoconstructive and sociocultural approach to the practice of architecture had already been vindicated many times by Otto Wagner and congenially (concisely) formulated by Loos in his famous 1909 essay "Architektur." Le Corbusier in his 1923 *Vers une architecture*, and Gropius before him in 1913, had already given attention to factories and grain silos, positioning American industrial buildings, ocean liners, train carriages, and the like as prototypes of the new architecture. "Art is dead. Long live the art-machine of Tatlin!" was printed in capital letters on the poster held up by John Heartfield and George Grosz at the Dada-Messe, the 1920 dadaist exhibition in Berlin, and the same appeal resounded in countless constructivist manifestos. Beginning in 1919, Gropius put the Bauhaus students on guard against artwork confined within the limit of the frame and complacent with the perfection of its own craft. Instead, his school would be based on the idea of "popular and collective" art, free of the traditional boundaries that isolated it from the ferment of modern life.

In this context, Meyer appears to be more a fellow traveler than a solitary guide in this journey toward reconsidering the relationship of art and politics, of art and production. Hays traces a continuous line from Loos to Meyer, almost as



if it had become the latter's destiny to accomplish the radical development of the Loosian idea of *Sachlichkeit* and to break the illusion of continuity "between the bourgeois order and what is to develop out of it," until the "ineluctable progress of history toward the socialist future." This interpretation seems to be founded on a genealogy that has overly idealized the modernist debate: between Loos and Meyer lies the entire adventure of the European avant-garde in the early years of the twentieth century.

Even before Meyer assembled the serial, anonymous photograph of his Co-op Zimmer, one of the most brilliant pupils of the Bauhaus, the young designer Marcel Breuer, had formulated the same problem. He stated, in 1923, "Our stylistic question is not in any way a formal question.... We are today oriented toward functional problems, that is to the solution of functional problems. If we do not give form to things such as this that they function correctly, then the problem is concluded.... A chair, for example, doesn't have to be horizontal-vertical, nor [e]xpressionist or [c]onstructivist, nor made to the service of functionality, and does not have to adapt itself to a table, but it must limit itself to being a good chair."

My point is that a current swept through the debates of the 1920s, transforming the scene at large as well as the roles of its protagonists. The spirit of the age was agitated by the oscillation between two dominating poles: on one end, the avant-garde, which was intent on dissolving the old order by negating and surpassing the autonomy of art; and, on the other, the modern, which sought a new totality, a new synthesis that allowed a social place for artistic creation. In this new equilibrium between negation and construction, architecture became a factor in the governance and reform of daily life.

For years, historians have interpreted this polarity as a contradiction; here was the fatal flaw that rendered useless the contemptuous alterity to dominant systems of power. Over time, however, we've learned to recognize that the modern "project" is carried out at the precise moment of the forward thrust that gives meaning to the word. To form architecture is to "trans-form" and organize, to put things into order. In this respect, Adorno's notion of the inexorable incompleteness of the modern work of art remains extraordinarily fertile. Adorno wrote in his *Aesthetic Theory*: "Aesthetic harmony is never fully attained; it is either superficial polish or temporary balance. Inside everything that can justly be called harmonious in art there are vestiges of despair and antagonism."¹ This does not mean that a modern work of art exists only because of its imbalance and is fulfilled only by its own dissonance: indeed, its material evidence can only produce provisional orders, forming fragile harmonies and unstable equilibrium.

In this regard, the open spatial system of Loos's Raumlplan acquires meaning through the perfect regularity of its cubic enclosure. The Raumlplan embodies an unresolved tension between structure and openness, between the historicity of the closed, often symmetrical exterior volume and the spiraling sequence of its interior rooms. The same goes for the open geometries and asymmetries of the constructivist and de Stijl experiments, with their subtle balance of parts and proportions, and the work of modernists like Tessenow, who carefully concealed the too-absolute truth of symmetry.

The dilemma is not an academic one of trying to explain particular facts, specific roles, and exact priorities, but, rather, a question of whether the proposed interpretation succeeds in representing the richness and vitality of the issues at hand or if it results in a rigidly abstract scheme that elides particularities of time and place. Hays observes that, in opposition to the demiurgic figure of the architect-artist (epitomized by Le Corbusier, who remains ambiguously situated between the objectivity of technology and the subjectivity of invention), Meyer revindicates the "productivist" character of the new architecture. Hays cites Meyer, who wrote in 1928, "The new building is a prefabricated unit for site assembly and, as such, an industrial product and the work of specialists: economists, statisticians, hygienists, climatologists, industrial engineers, standard experts, heat engineers...and the architect? He was an artist and has become a specialist in organization!" Curiously, however, Hays invokes this programmatic pronouncement—so deeply integral to the educational debate at the Bauhaus—in association with the two works by Meyer (with his associate Hans Wittwer) that are the most suggestively poetic and exquisitely "architectonic": the design for the Petersschule in Basel and the League of Nations in Geneva, both of 1927. These projects represent the most original transplants of constructivist ideas in Europe. More appropriate examples of the architect's new role would have been the systematic structure of didactic architecture developed a little later at the Bauhaus in Dessau, or the theoretical, more explicitly Marxist elaborations that he formulated during his dramatic sojourn in the Stalinist Soviet Union in 1930.

Hays invokes the theoretical armament of Gilles Deleuze to address the axonometric depiction of the Petersschule, whose terrace hangs audaciously over the piazza from light metal cables anchored to the cubic volume of the school. He brings into play Deleuze's notion of the "abstract machine" that no longer has "a form of its own" and "operates by matter, not by substance; by function, not by form." This reading, however, prohibits the author from recognizing the

suspended terrace as one of the most pregnant architectural physiognomies, one of the most extreme and thus arbitrary architectonic inventions, justified, in this case, apparently only by a desire to exhibit the stretched lightness of the suspended structure in a nineteenth-century urban context emptied of energy.

Following such a speculative trajectory, Hays risks dissolving some of the most profoundly unresolved questions of modernity in programmatic affirmation. For the League of Nations, he claims that Meyer succeeded in transforming "the practice of negation" into an "operative technique" for an architecture liberated from the flaws of "the cognitive project of humanism" of the sort so well represented by Le Corbusier's aesthetic. Hays claims that "the dismantling of traditional formal conventions, the production of ruptures and discontinuities, the repudiation of the individual author as the originator of meaning, and the denial of the viewing subject of a place apart from life in which the mind is free to dream, to escape" materialize in design decisions that promote the serial character of constructive systems, for example, the use of materials like steel, concrete, glass, rubber flooring, cork-slab walls, and aluminum-sheet ceilings; "nothing less than a rejection of any transcendental conception of the architectural object"; the renunciation of any compositional device that would organize the diverse parts into a coherent unit; and, finally, the "annihilation of the traditional...representational form, [the] fragmentation of form and registration of dissonance, and [the] shattering of the basis of traditional artistic sublimation, the contemplative humanist subject."

How does Hays's framework account for the League of Nations's extraordinary graphics and the comprehensive expressiveness of the axonometric view? How does he explain the building's accumulation of sophisticated citations, such as the web of superstructures atop the Soviet-derived roof; the purposeful deformations of elements gracing the two bladelike skyscrapers; the futurist spectacle of elevators skimming behind glass façades; the subtle, rhythmic variations of the curtain walls; the variably articulated perimeter of the complex; the carefully studied curve of the roof of the assembly hall? Could this be the mere unself-conscious result of "organization" and "structural invention" in the service of social practice, as claimed by its architects? Alan Coquhoun addressed this question clearly in the book *Architectureproduction* with his observation that buildings like the Petersschule and the League of Nations "propose a rational and socially beneficent architecture, and they represent the 'good' future as opposed to the 'bad' past."²

The second part of *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject* examines the theory and architectural production of the German architect Hilberseimer, whose professional and intellectual formation differed profoundly from Meyer's. He studied at the Technical University of Karlsruhe, where he encountered one of the most influential German architectural theorists of the early twentieth century, Friedrich Ostendorf. He had an unusually deep familiarity with German philosophy, in particular the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. An active participant in the cultural life of Berlin, where he moved in 1911, he was close to Mies van der Rohe as well as other crucial protagonists of avant-garde art, such as Herwarth Walden of the Der Sturm gallery, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Richter, the November group, and the constructivists involved with the magazine *G*.

In this context Hilberseimer developed an approach that was dramatically divorced from the "artisan" and "reform" traditions central to the German Werkbund (founded in 1907) and, later, the Bauhaus, founded in 1919. Countering the myth of the Apollonian beauty of architecture entrusted to the "luxury" and elegance of his work, Hilberseimer proposed the "Dionysian *Kunstwollen*," embodying man's aspiration or the will of art "to shape the world as he wishes it to be," to give form to the state of tension between the work of art and the material comprising it. This objective, obviously nourished in confrontation with Alois Riegl and with Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, proposes a radical clarification of architecture's means, not for new beauty and fantasy, but for new formal structures; not as "composition," but as "construction"; not as "invention," but as "general rule," or what Nietzsche called the "great style." The elementarism and constructivism of Hilberseimer's approach are founded in architecture's originary figures, the cube and the sphere, the prism and the cylinder, the pyramid and the cone. In 1923 he wrote in the Nietzschean-titled essay "The Will to Architecture": "When geometric figures are transformed into proportional volumes, there one generates architecture."

The affinities between Hilberseimer's thought and Schwitters's reflections around the same time are surprising. The "functionalist" architect Hilberseimer praised Schwitters, perhaps the most important exponent of post-Dadaist Germany, writing that the materials of his art were not "used as such" but "produce[d] new unities and [gave] form to new figures." The creator of the *Merzbau* assemblages, in turn, praised Hilberseimer as an architect who, "moving from his own formulations of rational thought, achieves the right figuration (*Gestaltungen*)," emphasizing themes of "figurative principles" (*Gestaltungsprinzip*) over formal invention. In an article on the 1928 Weissenhof settlement

in Stuttgart, planned under Mies's direction, Schwitters describes a small house by Hilberseimer as admirably "basic, normal, and without fantasy." He contrasts this to the dangers presented by Le Corbusier's congenital, though romantic, devotion to excess and the cult of the new.

Thus Hilberseimer's architecture raises a question that remains unanswered: his laconic forms question the "birth" or origins of the architectonic figure, rather than being resigned to architecture's demise. His representations appear—only superficially—as abstract, rational diagrams for urban and domestic organisms, but are, indeed, attempts to register the materialization of elementary rules and founding principles. Once again, Hays overlooks such obstinate opposition, remaining focused on the normative and programmatic character of the work. He only sees the attenuation of the accents, dissonances, and disjunctions of Hilberseimer's work—the regularizing of elements and the rigidity of serial and cellular forms, the growing metaphorical character of his projects—without at the same time recognizing the Dionysian aporia that refuses to give up on the materiality of the architectural figure and tries to recognize the primary character of its established rules.

Following Hays's reasoning to its extreme conclusion, that is, to recognizing Hilberseimer's "abolition of architecture as a communicative action or representational practice," seems inevitably to legitimize the marginality of the architectural product in regard to its abstract "normativeness." But this is not the case. Hilberseimer did not proclaim the dissolution of the architectural text; on the contrary, he noted its constructural concretization and the "blend and clash" of form and material.

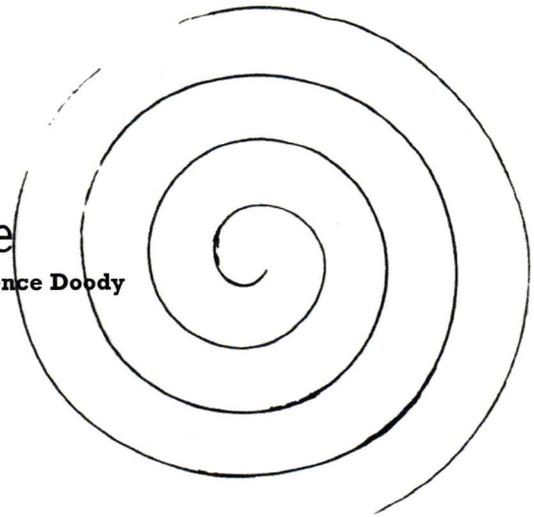
The historian's true territory is the open and fragmentary character of the architectural text: its multiple actors, the different intentions that give it life, its provisional and unstable results, and the many techniques of its making. No single component of analysis can assume an objectively paradigmatic function, and the reaction may be produced by the impact of various elements that provoke convincing critical results. Hays himself addressed this crucial question in the 1995 *Assemblage* "Tulane Papers, The Politics of Contemporary Architecture Discourse." In his article, he recognizes that architecture is "embedded in some context," but that its execution—the sequence of manipulations that produce it and the plurality of subjects involved—ends up modifying the original context, producing new meanings. ■

Notes

- 1 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984).
- 2 *Architectureproduction*, ed. Beatriz Colomina and Joan Ockman (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988).

Reading in Space

by Terrence Doody



Constantin Brancusi's Symbol of Joyce.

Architecture and the Text: The (S)crypts of Joyce and Piranesi

by Jennifer Bloomer

Yale University Press, 1993

222 pp., \$50.00; \$19.00 (paper)

The title of Jennifer Bloomer's book, *Architecture and the Text: The (S)crypts of Joyce and Piranesi*, not only indicates her subjects, but it also implies her theoretical premises, displays her general method, and even shows us something of her style. She warns readers at the outset, "[The] following chapters make no pretense at objectivity: they represent the residue of my self, my cultural condition, my passion (love and hate) for architecture." She also claims that her book is "a puzzle and, like a puzzle, it is meant to be difficult and challenging, but fun." The license that deconstruction gives its users—to refuse the priority, stability, or integrity of its referent or frame of reference—poses difficulties for readers, resulting in arguments like Bloomer's, which do not seem impelled by logic or necessity because they have no end outside themselves.

Deconstruction is not in the business of delivering insight into the matter at hand, but of validating itself by demonstrating that the matter at hand can be deconstructed. The challenge for Bloomer, therefore, is to keep her argument from being so completely personal that it is only a performance—in other words, entertaining, perhaps, but intransitive. The relationship she develops between James Joyce and Giambattista Piranesi exists nowhere but in her book and in what she would call the "space of writing." And although she makes her version of Piranesi interesting, Piranesi doesn't give me any new information about *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*.

She writes: "These chapters were...written out of a frustration with attempts to describe in a linear fashion what we do when we design. I have tried here to demonstrate an approach to design rather than to explain it in a scientific fashion." As play and speculation, *Architecture and the Text* does offer, as she hoped it would, "some pleasure." As design or pedagogy, however, I don't know.

By architecture, Bloomer does not mean building but discourse, and by discourse she does not mean recent architectural writing but architecture as possible allegory—and allegory as defined by the Marxist saint Walter Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.¹ For Benjamin, allegory is more complicated and far less stable than the classical structural relationship between the narrative ground and an upper level of meaning. It is, rather, an unsettled combination of nature and history; "a simultaneous elevation and devaluation of the profane world" (which both confirms and demotes the sacred); a tension between the realms of visual meaning and verbal meaning that favors the fragmentary, palimpsestic, and hieroglyphic; and a form that resists the conventions of narrative. Bloomer writes:

But what happens to the building in this constellation of ideas? The status of the building itself as it is simultaneously positioned within its architectural history and the history of architecture and the theories of history is a case in point. The building is the object of the history of architecture, but it is a slippery kind of object with respect to theories of history. The building is a document of something that happened. It is a document of great transparency (translatability)...Simultaneously it is a document of great opacity because of its use as a functional object over time.

Terrence Doody is a professor of English at Rice University. His essays on James Joyce have appeared in the magazine *Novel: A Forum for Fiction* and *Why the Novel Matters: A Postmodern Perplex*, edited by Mark Spilka and Caroline McCracken-Flesher (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). Joyce is also at the center of his recent book *Among Other Things: A Description of the Novel* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998).

Later, she continues:

And this place is allegorizable...by allegory itself. Because in allegory, "any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else"; the profane (material) world becomes a place in which each person, object, or relationship is of no particular significance. At the same time, these things that are used to signify acquire a power that makes them then different, locates them on a higher plane, that is, render them sacred. (emphasis added)

By "the text," however, Bloomer does not mean generic allegory, or Benjamin's *The Origin*, or even Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which is the great matrix of deconstruction and the foundational text for a practice that, in principle, denies foundations. "The text" is a rhetorical shorthand, a verbal gesture, by which Bloomer actually means the idea of the text, or of textuality as an ontological condition, or of intertextuality as a limitless field of interpretation. As every advanced student knows by now, a text is a web or a weaving, a pattern composed of something other than itself. It is not, therefore, self-identical and necessary. It is a historical construct that can, by definition, be deconstructed. Moreover, a text is filled by empty spaces between the threads, as signs are filled by the metaphorical space between signifier and signified. It is within this space that structure itself and relationships are made; and it is here that architectural space becomes a purely formal value and the space of writing a metaphor for the possibility of limitless interpretation, the space of a formal activity that no material content can determine or withstand. Bloomer explains how Joyce and Piranesi meet in this space:

Annie Dillard writes that *Finnegans Wake* comes "close to vaporizing the world and making of language a genuine stuff" (*Living by Fiction*, 72). The book, like Piranesi's drawing, presents a world as it is embedded in the language (verbal or architectural). Just as *Finnegans Wake* is a "lousy read" so is the *Campo Marzio* a crummy map. The material world we know is nearly vaporized in the collision that produces these collections of fragments, but the resulting new worlds comment on the world we know as insightfully, perhaps more so, as the most finely wrought mimetic object.

Finnegans Wake does not offer us the page-turning prose of an Elmore Leonard novel, but there is more to it than the performance of its own language. As Bloomer herself says, *Finnegans Wake* is itself an examination of structure, and one of the fundamental structures it examines is that of the family. Still, she eschews going into mythical identities of HCE and his wife, Anna Livia Plurabelle; his shame and her forgiveness; the Cain-and-Abel relationship of Shem and Shaun; and the incest motif related to their sister Issey (Iseult). Joyce's use of Victorian history and his theory of consciousness get similarly scant treatment. Meanwhile, she describes Piranesi as a "recorder, visionary, theoretician, and practitioner" known for his "voluminous etchings," but she focuses only on the *Campo Marzio Ichnographia* plan, the *Collegio*, and the *Carceri*. Moreover, she shows us only five fragmentary images of the *Campo Marzio*: she offers no complete view, nothing to compare these images to, for nothing in the images themselves is as important as her interpretation.

Piranesi looked about and found, to his horror, the impassive cage of the Cartesian-Newtonian universe descending onto his world. The *Campo Marzio Ichnographia* is a product of his reaction. The drawing represents the real and the unreal, the past and the future, a place and no place. With it, Piranesi shatters history and geography, time and space. The device is critical. It is allegorical. Piranesi's construction of architectural bits, the sediment of history, corresponds to the fractured narrative of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Because this passage tells us so little about *Ulysses*, I can only imagine what it tells us about Piranesi. For what Spiro Kostof tells us about Piranesi in his brief treatment in *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* is quite different.² As the author of the *Carceri* series, Kostof writes that Piranesi does indeed "create a destabilized world that is the very opposite of classical order";

but he is more important as a patriot and revisionary historian of Rome and the Roman architectural tradition. And the “oblique views,” “windswept atmosphere,” and “immense vistas” of the etchings indicate that Piranesi was also a theorist of the Gothic sublime, a category of experience that stands at an immeasurable distance from the punning “(S)cripts” of deconstruction.

“(S)cripts” is the kind of language that characterizes *Finnegans Wake*. In the tension between what we hear—“scripts,” which is ironically a kind of writing rather than speech—and what we see—a visual pun that encloses both a code and an underground vault—there is a great deal of language’s natural instability. (It is also an example of Benjamin’s allegory.) The typographical play, the “(S),” however, derives from Jacques Derrida, and is a small preview of the tedious, often distracting visual surface of Bloomer’s prose. She has been obsessed, she writes in the preface, with both Joyce and Piranesi for a long time, and her argument is indeed obsessively self-involved, always explaining its method and justifying itself, necessarily, because there is no other necessity to it. And so her pages are filled with headlines and subheads; parentheses and capitals; and a breathless rush of citations, fragments, connections, puns, and stunts. Here is an epitome:

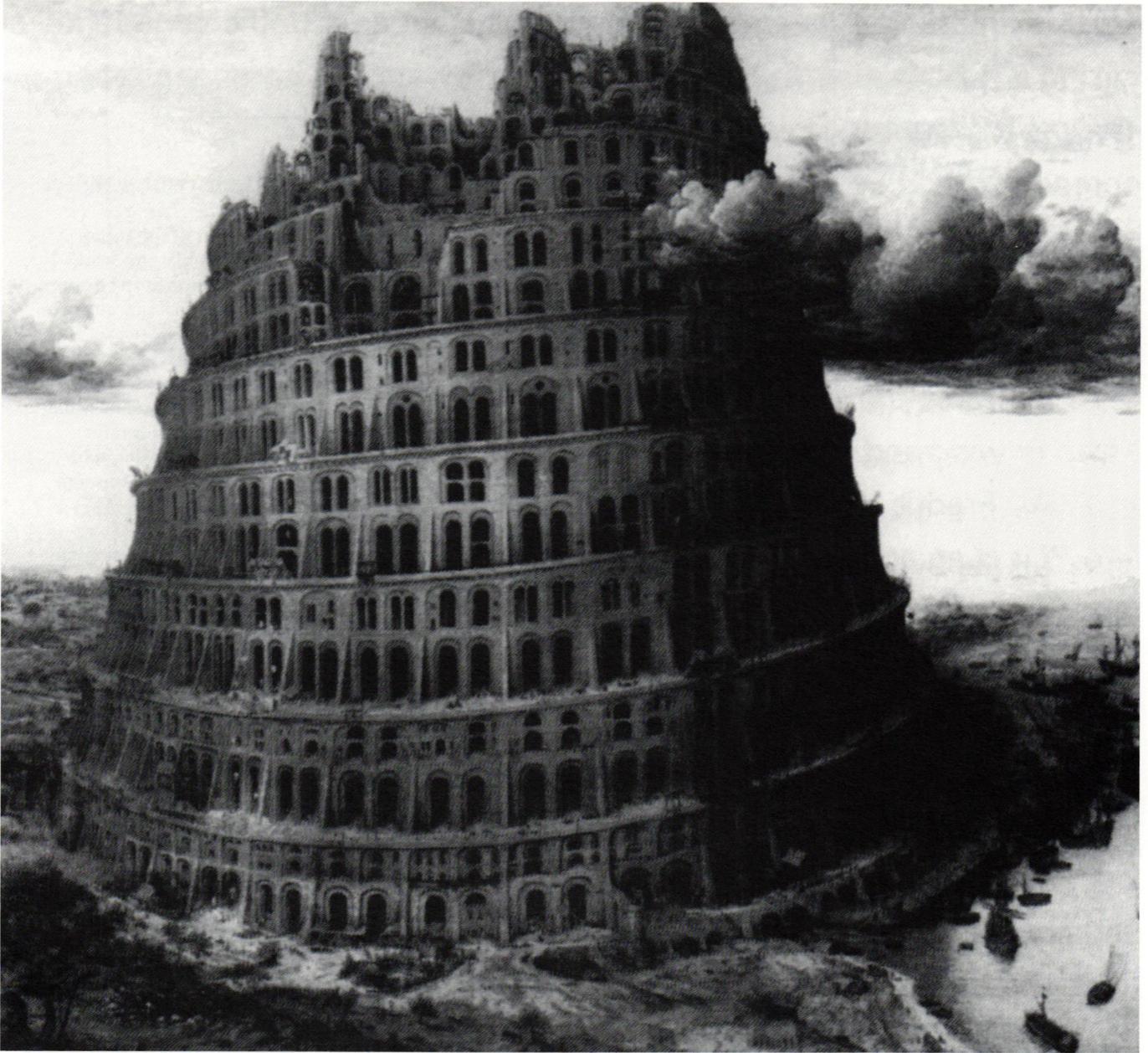
The *Collegio* is an assemblage of [CRYPT]s, glands, and follicles, [VESSEL]s and valves, accommodating, checking, diverting endless flow; a generative section that will not be extruded, will not obey the tyranny of linear time; mole-work bearing the trace of the tarantella, the activity of hysterics at the mercy of their motile voids. A mercurial vessel. A taupologie machine: a “wholemole millwheeling viciclometer” that “secretly undermines the laws to which it pretends to subject itself” (*Sphere and Labyrinth*, 31). A [HYSTERICAL DOCUMENT], it is a representation of the “psychical house” that Freud built, a [HOUSE] with strange apparatus in the middle: an intricate void, where the (family) history is en[CRYPT]ed (inscribed and secreted). “A cataleptic mithyphallic! Was this Totem Fulcrum Est Ancestor yu hald in Dies Eirae where no spider webbeth?” (*Finnegans Wake*, 482.4–5). Held-In Desire, Halled-In Desire. The *Collegio* is a paradox: a vital vivisection of a vessel of the patriarchal symbolic order dancing off the poisons of that order that circulate through its body, it is a momentary catalepsy of an architecture of desire.

But Bloomer never connects her own obsessiveness to the obsessiveness in *Finnegans Wake* or the *Carceri*. The relentless, exhausting demand of Joyce’s language is not always liberating play; it can be crushing and claustrophobic, and it can take your breath away, but not always in wonder. And this inescapable closure feels to me like the sensation of the always-recursive, exitless spaces of Piranesi’s prisons. The cage of the Cartesian-Newtonian universe from which he frees us, he replaces with another kind of cage that shares the sublime’s terror but not its dissolving light. And this entrapment is no fun.

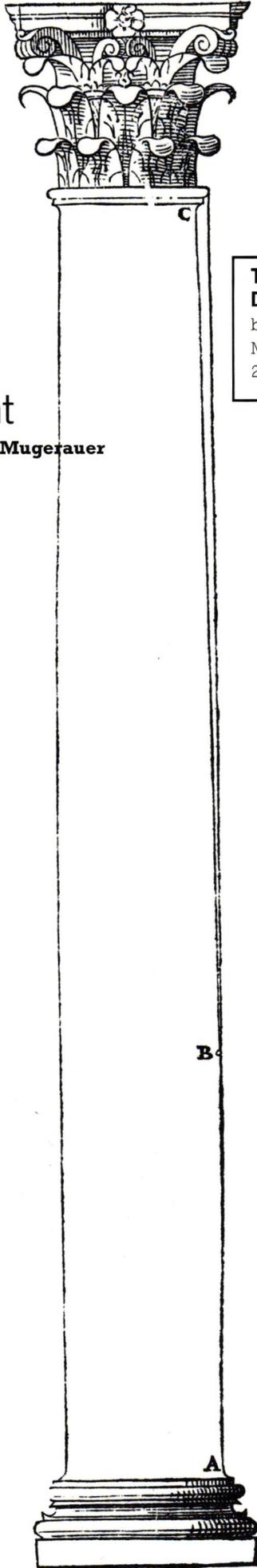
In a chapter of *Ulysses*, “The Oxen of the Sun,” Joyce wrote his own critique and revision of traditional allegory. It took him a thousand hours to write the chapter and, line by line, it is probably the most difficult prose in the novel. But it is a virtuoso performance, his imitation of every significant narrative style in English prose since the Anglo-Saxon, to the tune of “Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better.” The British novelist Anthony Burgess, who wrote two books on Joyce, felt with admiration and reluctance that “Oxen” was probably more fun to write than to read. Bloomer is very intelligent, and the difficulties her book presents are never the result of her prose, which is always clear and impassioned, always suffused with her conviction that what she is telling us is important, absolutely. She probably had more fun writing it, however, than we do reading it. ■

Notes

- 1 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: NLB, 1977).
- 2 Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).



Pieter Breughel the Elder,
Tower of Babel, 1563.
(from Hilde Heynen,
Architecture and Modernity)



Wigley's Haunt

by Robert Mugerauer

Robert Mugerauer is Meadows Foundation Centennial Professor in the School of Architecture and Planning, and a faculty member in the departments of Philosophy, Geography, and American Civilization, at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of *Heidegger's Language and Thinking* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1988), *Interpretations on Behalf of Place* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), and *Environmental Interpretations* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995). He currently is completing a manuscript titled *Cyberspace and Bodily Place*.

The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt

by Mark Wigley
MIT Press, 1993
296 pp., \$19.95

The title and advertising apparatus of Mark Wigley's *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt*—and the stated intentions of the author himself—arouse the expectation that this work will treat the fruitful exchange between architecture and deconstruction. Dust-jacket blurbs by qualified commentators Mark C. Taylor and K. Michael Hays further this promise, the latter praising the book's insights into “the logic of space, structure and ornament, surface, materiality, media, gender, and politics.” According to Wigley, well-known for his work with Philip Johnson on the exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture* held at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1988, the book emerged in part from his desire to open things up in the spirit of today's interdisciplinary encounters.

But readers should not be misled. *The Architecture of Deconstruction* is not about architecture and deconstruction. Rather, it is about the role of architectural metaphor and figure as an architectural force in the writings of Jacques Derrida (his “Haunt”) and, to some extent, those of Immanuel Kant. The book is nowhere as good as its competition: those interested in philosophical and deconstructive reflections on architecture should consult Karsten Harries's masterful work on Kant and representation, reread Kent Bloomer on ornament, ponder the oft-reprinted exchange between Derrida and Peter Eisenman, revisit Michael Benedikt's meditation on reinterpreting the meaning of the architectural canon, and think carefully through Martin Heidegger's short essay “Art and Space.”¹ Those intrigued with the mystery of the uncanny (*unheimliche*) and the house-home will enjoy Anthony Vidler's superior *The Architectural Uncanny*; while those interested in language and the radical rethinking inspired by Heidegger and Derrida will benefit from John D. Caputo's intelligent *Radical Hermeneutics* and Gerald Bruns's deft *Heidegger's Estrangements*.² If you really want to read some Wigley, pick up his “Heidegger's House.”³ Those who stubbornly insist on reading *The Architecture of Deconstruction* might be able to appreciate it in a way that I have not, but that Taylor and Hays apparently have.

Just as Derrida's sympathetic readers have begun to explore the positive openings of undecidability in moral issues, Wigley's *The Architecture of Deconstruction* seems to insist on the perversely autistic character of his nihilism. Contrary to the spirit of deconstruction, which aims to admit the formerly displaced, Wigley proceeds by fatally enforcing many old exclusions and some new ones—precisely the opposite of what is championed by Derridians such as Caputo.⁴ As a result, the author fails to deconstruct metaphysically privileged architectural metaphors such as “ground” and “foundation” because he does not allow other critical texts to interrupt his own monologue and because he misses (or mistakes?) the critical flaws, ambiguities, and undecidable points in the dominating discourses.

Wigley's main interest is in pursuing and undoing the subjugation of architecture that has occurred in modern metaphysics, an obvious and commendable project for a professor in a school of architecture (he teaches at Princeton University). Heidegger and Derrida are thus important to his project because they lead the way toward “unreading” the metaphysical tradition and restoring the potency of buildings (especially houses); they also expose how architecture and language conceal death, the abyss, and absence, to the detriment of our living without illusions.

The book begins with and spends much time on language and translation rather than actual buildings because of Wigley's view that “as Derrida argues at one point, ‘the question of deconstruction is also through and through *the* question of translation.’” The author finds that deconstructive architectural discourse is “a matter of thinking of writing as a kind of architecture and tracing the architecture already embedded within Derrida's discourse.” Thus, he explores whether there is adequate *transference* between architectural and philosophical discourse—specifically, transference that adequately informs the construction of Derrida's philosophical discourse.

However worthy a project this is, it is likely to be of little interest (and perhaps even a disappointment) to many design professionals given Wigley's horrendous privileging of language over drawing, space, and buildings. Upon encountering such extreme statements as “[T]he very construction of space as such is always discursive. Space is only ever a discursive effect,” readers will be ready to applaud Henri Lefebvre's critique of Derrida's substitution of mental space for physical space and for socially constituted or produced space.⁵ More problematic still, Wigley persistently conflates architectural discourse and architecture. Although he is clearly more interested in language and discourse than in physical space and buildings, he is not consistent about focusing on discursive issues such as architectural metaphors, images, figures, and the architectonics of writing and thinking.

Wigley attends to the last mentioned feature because both Kant and Derrida carefully construct complex systems of thought and writing in which, reflexively, they elaborate theories concerning the structures of our mental and symbolic representations. Insofar as they both insist, in different ways, that there is no final way to understand “ultimate reality” apart from the human constructions of thought and language, the intricate organizational or formative structures—the architectonics—of their writing would be their greatest achievement.

As to the subjugation of architecture that occurs within architectural metaphors or analogies, Wigley moves through a complex three-stage argument that develops an analogy between architecture and architectural discourse and translation. Staying close to Derrida, he notes that in language, it “is the translation that produces the myth of purity and, in so doing, subordinates itself as impure. In constructing the original as original, it constructs itself as secondary, putting itself into exile from the very space that it produces.” He completes the figure: architecture “effects its own subordination to building. There would be no building without the self-effacement of architecture. Structure is an effect of this withdrawal. Inasmuch as it is always reading this effect, deconstructive discourse is always concerned with architecture.” As a middle term he presents the claim that architectural and philosophical discourse subordinate themselves to architecture: “In the end, to translate deconstruction here will be to unearth what it is of architecture that both philosophical and architectural discourse attempt to bury and yet depend on: the irreducible strangeness of architecture that must be concealed by a range of institutional practices central to both discourses and yet also protected by them because its very survival is actually their very possibility.”

Wigley's claim appears to be that architectural and philosophical discourse subordinate themselves to architecture, which subordinates itself to buildings. His project makes sense, then: he wants to and does displace both building and architecture by not treating them, undercutting them in favor of architectural discourse.

Wigley locates a critical, complex moment—when “the philosopher is first and foremost an architect, endlessly attempting to produce a grounded structure”—appropriately in Kant. He writes, “Although [Kant] employs architecture to describe metaphysics in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he subordinates architecture in *The Critique of Judgment* as an inferior art.”⁶ It is precisely because of the false and posturing domination of representational metaphysics in Kant's writings that both Heidegger and Derrida focus on him. The deconstruction called for would likely proceed from a critical section of *The Critique of Judgment*, “Section 51,” which,

amazingly, Wigley never explicates in his discussion of the book. It is in this section that Kant explains how architecture is distinct from both nature and the other arts: whereas the other arts may represent things as they exist in nature (as a sculpture represents a horse, for example), architecture represents only what is possible through human construction and nonnatural—i.e., prior artistic—representation (whether drawings or precedent buildings such as temples and huts). Thus, as a representation of representations, architecture provides the central site for deconstructing the concept of art or representation itself. That a representation can re-present something depends precisely on its having a correct relation to its original (which is its “ground”) and on the possibility and necessity of this relation being established—founded—by epistemology and metaphysics. Unfortunately, Wigley’s analysis compounds the basic error of saying that “architecture is grounded”: since Kant explicitly argues that any “grounding” of architecture lies in its human, arbitrary aesthetic purpose, he is not speaking at all about a metaphysical ground as Wigley supposes.

It is telling that the text breaks off just when Wigley begins discussing the critical building elements of column and ornament. In fact, the section on columns in *The Critique of Judgment*, “Section 87,” would have been a fabulous place for Wigley to engage Kant, since the column, as a representation of a representation, is architecture *par excellence* and a major point for deconstructive rereading and displacement. As to ornament, Wigley offers the oddly superficial statement that “ornament is bonded to the structure,” a claim that becomes even less intelligible given the completely confused spatial metaphors that occur at this point in the text.

Wigley’s important chapter devoted to the house is also troublesome. While the chapter “The Domestication of the House” contains insights, the author’s uncritical repetition of Derrida’s claims fails to engage either Heidegger or Derrida, a fault throughout the book that undermines any credibility about how this version might be an advance beyond Wigley’s earlier doctoral dissertation. Here the lack of fresh argument occurs in regard to the texts where Heidegger begins to think about origins, or, as Heidegger puts it, where he thinks “originarily,” rather than metaphysically, about the house and dwelling. Heidegger’s starting point is that to be always underway in thinking and questioning is precisely not to be safe and comfortable at home, and it is only in an uncanny and homeless manner that mortals can be at home, in the mode of homecoming, on the earth. Thus, Heidegger’s later and best thoughts, which moved far beyond a “secure house,” are barely and ill presented.

Heidegger focuses on the image of the house because we have the unending task of doing our best to become “at home” in the world, which he understands to be the dynamic gathering—of mortals with divinities, heavens, and mortals. “At-homeness” is achieved in a manner not necessarily reducible to what is humanly produced or to human desire, much less to the bourgeois idea of comfort. For Heidegger, each historical culture strives to become at home in the flux of being, which unfolds in particular existential courses or unique ways of being.

Although what Wigley says about presence and absence and displacing metaphysics is convincing, it is at least a major point of contention (if not wrong) to “conclude” that the house remains “first and foremost a representation.” Not only does Heidegger oppose this conclusion with all his vigor in his later writings (and with a rigor that eludes Wigley’s somewhat casual treatment), but even in his earliest work, he unread such a position and establishes a replacement, as in the potent passages about the prephilosophical life-world that reverberates in Rainer Maria Rilke’s description of a destroyed building in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*.⁷

Heidegger cites a long passage from Rilke’s 1949 *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* describing the experience of looking at the traces of an apartment that have been left, after demolition of the once-attached building, on the now-exposed, “exterior” wall of the still-standing building, “to which the wallpaper was still attached, and here and there the place where the floor or ceiling began”:

The tenacious life of these rooms refused to let itself be trampled down. It was still there: it clung to the nails that had remained; it stood on the handsbreadth remnant of the floor....And from these walls, once blue, green, and yellow, which were framed by the tracks of the fractures of the intervening walls that had been destroyed, the breath of this life stood out, the tough, sluggish, musty breath which no wind had yet dispersed. There stood the noondays and the illnesses, and the expirings and the smoke of years and the sweat that breaks out under the arm-pits and makes the clothes heavy, and the stale breath of the mouths and the fusel-oil smell of fermenting feet.

Heidegger goes on to make the point that Rilke's work shows us how our life-worlds are primary phenomena, and scientific abstractions only secondary, and that metaphysics does not provide a ground for our houses, lives, and world—there is no ground. The value of the creative experience and words of the poet (or those of a philosopher, or the drawings of an architect) is that they bring forth for us this primary reality: they are “nothing other than the elementary emergence into words, the becoming-uncovered of existence as being-in-the-world. For the others who before it were blind, the world first becomes visible by what is thus spoken.” Since Wigley cites this work on other grounds, why does he fail to bring forward Heidegger's real contribution?

The Architecture of Deconstruction presents another half-dozen vital issues, but Wigley's quick treatments of them either are marred with serious mistakes or simply fail to interestingly explore them. Because such errors and omissions are a disservice to readers and the subject matter, I had wanted to document them, though I have to omit treatment in this short review. In all the specific problems, however, is the author's stubborn focus on material that simply does not work to support his points. Nor does he successfully utilize the potent deconstructive methods and strategies as we might expect. It is reasonable to write something that has a small potential audience; that is one of the freedoms of scholarship. But it is problematic for a supposedly deconstructive work to self-defeatingly and insistently, almost proudly, reinscribe itself within exclusions that are not only unnecessary but actually harmful. They are harmful because they inhibit the deconstruction, impoverishing rather than enriching the project, and because they separate the author from others who share his interest in the relation among philosophy, literature, and architecture, and the tensions between the human needs to construct and then deconstruct cultural systems.

There are, of course, admirable aspects of the book. The author obviously is talented, often writing supple prose, as at the beginning of the preface (and who would not wish to have written the line about “academic appointments and disappointments?”), and he does bring up many juicy problems. Moreover, the book's central issue of the architectonics of Derrida's writing is important.

But I suspect that the author already knows about the weaknesses I have mentioned, for his own words resonate with the problem: “Despite the fact that deconstructive discourse has started to speak about architecture, I have rigidly, if not perversely, maintained my focus on the architecture embedded in that discourse before it does so. I hope this self-imposed restriction, whose brutality to the complex rhythms and nuances of the discourse cannot be overestimated, opens that discourse to some possibilities it currently resists or masks. I hope its very narrowness constitutes some kind of opening.” Unfortunately, it does not. The refusal to interrupt himself with other voices pointlessly closes down the conversation. Inexplicable for an author so familiar with deconstruction and a publisher as reputable as the MIT Press, the usual critical apparatus of authoritative manuscript readers and tough-minded as well as sensitive editors did not succeed here. This work was not ready to be a book, and the author was not done any favors by its premature publication. ■

Notes

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| <p>1 Karsten Harries, <i>The Ethical Function of Architecture</i> (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997); Kent Bloomer, ed., “Humanistic Issues in Architecture,” <i>Journal of Architectural Education</i> 29 (September 1975); Jacques Derrida, “Why Peter Eisenman Writes Such Good Books,” <i>Threshold</i> 4 (spring 1988): 99–105; Derrida's “A Letter to Peter Eisenman” and Peter Eisenman's “Post/El Cards: A Reply to Jacques Derrida,” both in <i>Assemblage</i> 12 (1990): 7–17; Michael Benedikt, <i>Deconstructing the Kimbell</i> (New York: Lumen Books, 1991); Martin Heidegger, “Art and Space,” <i>Man and World</i> 6 (1973): 3–8.</p> <p>2 Anthony Vidler, <i>The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely</i> (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992); John D. Caputo, <i>Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project</i> (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Gerald Bruns, <i>Heidegger's Estrangements: Language, Truth, and Poetry in the Later Writings</i> (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).</p> | <p>3 Mark Wigley, “Heidegger's House,” <i>Columbia Documents in Architecture and Theory</i> 11 (1992): 91–121.</p> <p>4 Caputo, <i>Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction</i> (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).</p> <p>5 Henri Lefebvre, <i>The Production of Space</i> (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).</p> <p>6 Immanuel Kant, <i>Critique of Pure Reason</i>, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan and Co., 1929); Kant, <i>The Critique of Judgment</i>, trans. James Creed Meredith (London: Oxford University Press, 1952).</p> <p>7 Heidegger, <i>The Basic Problems of Phenomenology</i> (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).</p> |
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Placing Identity

by **Ellen Dunham-Jones**

Ellen Dunham-Jones is an architect and associate professor in the School of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her research and writing focus on the impact of digital media and the global economy on architectural design and development.

Although Marc Augé's book *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* is quite specifically directed to anthropologists, his provocative argument will be of interest to those in the many disciplines engaged with the life of places, including designers, geographers, sociologists, and any student of contemporaneity. Director of Studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, Augé argues for the need for the practices of anthropology and ethnology to recognize the significant impact of contemporary conditions on place and individual identity. Simply structured into thirds, his book begins with a discussion of the arguments supporting an anthropology of "the near" versus that of "the elsewhere"; he continues by defining the specific characteristics of traditional "anthropological place"; and he concludes by differentiating the "anthropological places" of localized cultures from the pervasive "non-places" produced, according to him, by contemporary conditions of "supermodernity." In addition to specifically defining places in terms of how they contribute to social identity, Augé calls attention to several distinctive characteristics of non-places, offering a critical discussion of generic contemporary conditions such as airports, shopping malls, highways, and so on. To this emerging area of study,

Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity

by Marc Augé
translated by John Howe
Verso, 1995
121 pp., \$18.00

Atlanta

photographs by Jordi Bernadó and Ramon Prat
texts by Randal Roark, Richard Dagenhart, Maria Lluïsa Borràs, Rem Koolhaas, Enric Miralles, and Rafael Argullol
ACTAR, 1995
163 pp., \$69.00

he contributes a much-needed vocabulary and discourse that focuses on social relations and individual identity.

Although his study is welcome, less so is his introduction of yet another term to describe contemporary life: "supermodernity." As a concept, supermodernity is comparable to postindustrialism, late capitalism, and the condition of postmodernity. Unfortunately, Augé himself does not make this comparison or distinguish his term. Instead, he consistently refrains from presenting his argument in the context of related research, with the exception of the work of a few carefully chosen, exclusively French authors. Augé argues that supermodernity is defined by conditions of excess, manifested principally in the acceleration of time, space, and identity. In contrast to modernity's temporality of linear progress, supermodernity is marked by a temporality of the immediate, divorced from the past. The postmodern collapse of the grand narratives of history loosens the present from the sense of an unfolding destiny.¹ Instead, we live in a perpetual now whose meaning lies only in its immediacy, an immediacy that is hyped and accentuated by media events and fashion.

The ubiquity of the immediate also operates spatially. Augé re-presents familiar arguments about how the technological shrinking of the planet results in greater global awareness, noting how the growing influence of and interaction between cultures challenge indigenous symbolic universes and identity. He then argues that, as place and history—the traditional reference points for collective identification—are destabilized by these processes, people are driven to give greater meaning to their identities through heightening their sense of individuality. Although arguments about alternative group affiliations as well as gender and racial identities could counter this claim, Augé's aim is to draw attention to what "identity politics" could mean with regard to the multiplicity of subject positions that characterizes supermodernity.

Nowhere is this increase in individualization more apparent than in the progeny of supermodernity, what Augé calls "non-places." These are defined not so much by what they are as by what they are *not*—they are the antithesis of places that foster a sense of belonging; in other words, traditional or anthropological place. Always focusing on aspects of socialization, Augé defines anthropological place as the idea that the inhabitants have of their relations with the territory, their families, and others. It is invested with meaning to the degree that it is a place of identity, of relations, and of history—in other words, to the degree that it bonds the individual and community to a social, spatial, as well as temporal continuity. Non-places, on the other hand, exude a sense of the generic or prototypical. They lack identity and relationships to anything local, and replace historical reference with the urgent, perpetual present. In one of his most original observations, Augé points out the degree to which wordless transactions and nonverbal communication dominate non-places. Signs provide instructions for their use: "No Smoking," "Exit Right Lane," "Cash Only," and that peculiarly French contrivance, the announced "Meeting Point." In contrast to the social positioning communicated by anthropological place, everyone in non-place is addressed anonymously. Personal identity is subsumed under the temporary condition of passenger, guest, shopper—consumer identities that result in solitary contractuality rather than contribute to an organic social whole. The silent purchase of the necessary ticket or the credit card transaction allows access to the chosen, but nonetheless predetermined, anonymous identity. Whereas the civic agenda of anthropological places sublimates individuality for the purpose of fostering group identity, non-places' treatment of everyone as the same, anonymous individual produces disengaged solitude. Although designed to handle crowds, non-places reinforce not individual identity but one's identity as a solitary individual. Their proliferation prompts Augé to speak of the need for an ethnology of solitude.

Augé also points out very perceptively how supermodernity alters traditional places. If, as Augé claims, anthropological places operate according to a formal diagram of routes, crossroads, and centers, their functioning is severely disrupted by the imposition of the non-place ring and network. He gives as an example the construction of a typical bypass around the now-designated historic center of a town. The bypass itself represents the degree to which mobility and integration into the larger economic system supersede direct or immediate relations. The town's significance as a place is presented to motorists through commercial-looking billboards announcing its just-passed features. Rather than being integrated into the lived experience of the inhabitants, historic sites are aestheticized and circumscribed, made into spectacles to be viewed by tourists, into scenes rather than places.

Augé is hardly a nostalgic, but he is critical of supermodernity and insistent that anthropologists learn to recognize supermodernity's erosion of anthropological places' ability to foster communal identity. He warns ethnologists to beware of the "totality temptation"; i.e., the urge to see a place, a culture, and each individual as a complete, transparent totality, denying any degree of individualization, alienation, or difference. Such essentializing is suspicious on any account, but it is particularly problematic under the universalizing conditions of supermodernity, which diminish the isolation and containment of the cultural attributes of a particular place. Often operating as amateur ethnologists, analyzing the place and culture of a site, architects would also do well to heed Augé's warnings. Rather than simply assuming that the problems of non-places can be fixed by applying the traditional tools of place making, or that cohesive communities can be achieved simply through the construction of more traditionally organized places, architects need to be aware of the degree to which local cultures are becoming increasingly disengaged from place, increasingly absorbed in supermodernity.

Kenneth Frampton's writings on critical regionalism elaborated on Paul Ricoeur's description of this tension in terms of local culture versus universal civilization. In a lecture on the subject, Frampton specifically referred to Augé's description of non-places as further evidence of the need to resist assimilation into the global marketplace.² For Frampton, non-places represent the commodification of the environment, the imposition of the universalizing order of multinational capital and its landscape of anonymous buildings, as atomized as the anonymous individuals in non-places.

opposite

Marc Augé calls airports "non-places," or sites that lack identity or a relationship to the local community.

(from *Non-Places*)

Frampton advocates the development of localized architectural movements that synthesize the modern and the traditional, and the architectural recuperation of what he calls “place-form” (site-specific building forms and practices) as the means to resist the further proliferation of universalizing non-places and to promote difference.

Augé, on the other hand, is less critical of non-places. His book’s prologue is a brief narrative of a typical journey to an airport. As the traveler settles into his seat on the plane, he welcomes the solitude of being “alone at last.” Similarly, in the epilogue, Augé describes the prohibition against drinking alcohol while over the airspace of Saudi Arabia as the “intrusion of territory into space,” from which returning “after an hour or so to the non-place of space, escaping the totalitarian constraints of place, will be just like a return to something resembling freedom.” Relative to the determinist, hierarchical, and totalizing space of anthropological place, the anonymity of non-place is presented as liberating. He likens non-place to Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia. The individual is alienated but free, free to be alone and anonymous, to step into multiple subject-positions; and to defer the kind of static, constraining identity associated with anthropological place.

So just where does freedom lie? In the anonymous but commodified and universal world of non-place? Or in critical regionalism’s proposed world of differentiated but communally regulated places? Is the right to self-determination to be measured at the scale of individuals or communities? These questions parallel recent discussions in identity politics between the humanist appeal to communal political action and the antihumanist recognition of difference and fractured subjectivity. The ability of anthropological place to provide a common base, unifying individuals into communal political action, allies it with humanism. Augé’s neorationalist formalization of place into a geometric diagram of routes, intersections, and centers further reinforces the humanist impulse to universalize an idealized order (though this could easily be considered a tautological argument, as it depends on Augé’s universalization of the particularities of place into a single diagram). Against such a determinist and hierarchical system, the solitude and autonomy of non-places are more representative of the decentered and alienated antihumanist subject.

A series of books currently being published by ACTAR invites further speculation on the question of the relative freedoms and constraints of places and non-places. ACTAR, a collaborative group of photographers, designers, and architects based in Barcelona, produces the magazine *Quaderns d’Arquitectura*, one of the most intelligent and critical architecture journals available today, known especially for examining the relationship

between architecture and urbanism. This focus is evident, too, in the ACTAR book series and its accompanying exhibitions. Each volume documents a single city with beautifully reproduced untitled photographs, augmented by short critical essays. Idealizing diagrams and historical plans, the means by which architects have tried to understand the progressive order of a city from a humanist perspective, are deliberately omitted here, in favor of the more “realistic,” and perhaps disorderly, view of the city provided by contemporary photographs. The titles produced so far are *Berlin*, *Atlanta*, and *Lleida Panorama* (Lleida, Spain), cities that have recently undergone significant growth and transformation.

The presentation of *Atlanta*, in particular, allows the reader to reflect on the city’s status as a place or non-place. In *Atlanta*, the different styles of the book’s two photographers, Jordi Bernadó and Ramon Prat, reveal the multiplicity of the city’s identity. Lush in their tonality, the large-format, perspective-corrected, mostly black-and-white duotone photographs by both photographers studiously avoid the kind of picture-postcard views usually associated with books on places. Bernadó’s preference for banal scenes shot at eye level gives his images the appearance of neutral documentation. The images are the equivalent of the ethnologist’s presumably representative samples. Yet the empty foregrounds in wide-angle shots and the absence of people, familiar monuments, and any sense of intimacy reveal a very deliberate attempt to portray Atlanta as a surreal non-place.

Meanwhile, Prat’s cropped and far more formalized compositions are comparable to fine-art photographs. He finds hidden correspondences in his carefully framed views. Compositional relations—a streetlamp visually collapsed precisely onto the corner of a building—allow us to see the city as an identifiable, relational place. In combination, the subtle tension between the approaches of the two photographers reminds the viewer of the selectivity and subjectivity of any attempt to define identity, either of people or place. Along with the equally independent and generally probing essays, which are unlinked by even so much as an editorial preface, *Atlanta* presents multiple identities.

Architects and urban designers interested in the patterns of late-twentieth-century development are fascinated by Atlanta. Rem Koolhaas’s seminal study of the city in 1987 (republished in *Atlanta* as an essay) might have something to do with its appeal.³ At a time when the models for postmodern urban designers were drawn from either Colin Rowe’s studies of the figural spaces of the Nolli map of Rome or the suburbs depicted in Werner Hegemann and Elbert Peets’s 1922 *American Vitruvius: An Architect’s Handbook of Civic Art*, Koolhaas sought out Atlanta as an example not

of what the ideal should or could be, but of how the real city was unfolding. As the site of significant economic growth and unconstrained development in the 1970s and 1980s, a time of corporate diversification, mergers, and increased globalization, Atlanta is both a generic and prime example of late-capitalist, postindustrial development. Its downtown high-rises dot a checkerboard of empty parking lots. Atria, skybridges, and underground shopping complexes all work to reduce the activity on the street, turning the downtown focus inward; meanwhile, massive new mall-office-residential developments located at the intersections of spoke roads and bypassing highways spawn outwardly focused growth. Typical of what Joel Garreau calls "edge cities," Atlanta's growth reflects the decentralization of commerce and dwelling, and their dispersal on the suburban/rural periphery.⁴

Perhaps the most condemning of the book's essays is Rafael Argullol's, in which he refers to these "micropoli" as "an urbanism of war," fortified islands in the verdant countryside, enclaves of prepackaged consumer dreams that simulate a sanitized city while redefining the original city as a savage enemy. Koolhaas similarly finds Atlanta's new architecture deliberately divorced from city building (i.e., place making). He describes a site model in an Atlanta architect's office with five large, unrelated projects on it deliberately kept secret because the separate clients didn't know of each other's projects. "Alarming, it suggested that the elements that had once made the city would now cease to work if they got too close together," Koolhaas writes. Instead, both the downtown towers and the "perimeter centers"—the oxymoronic term for the Edge City mall-office complexes—sit isolated in their moats of parking, sporadically bordered by ornamental trees, oriented only to the highway.

The formulaic, hermetic, and ever-new aspects of such market-driven disurbanism fit neatly into Augé's definition of non-place. In fact, much in *Atlanta* reinforces his thesis. Bernadó's opening photograph of a McDonald's parking lot with its assortment of familiar icons sets the tone: the golden arches, American flag, trimmed landscaping, and utility poles could be absolutely anywhere. It is a prototypical non-place. The sole human figure in the photograph stands at an outdoor phone booth, with his back to the viewer. Above his head, in the distance, a highway sign points to Atlanta, the only clue as to where you are. The lack of relation between the physical structure of the city and the events that occur within it comes up repeatedly throughout the book. The photographs especially delight in displaying incongruity. Many of the texts, however, warn readers not to judge the city on appearances alone. Richard Dagenhart writes,

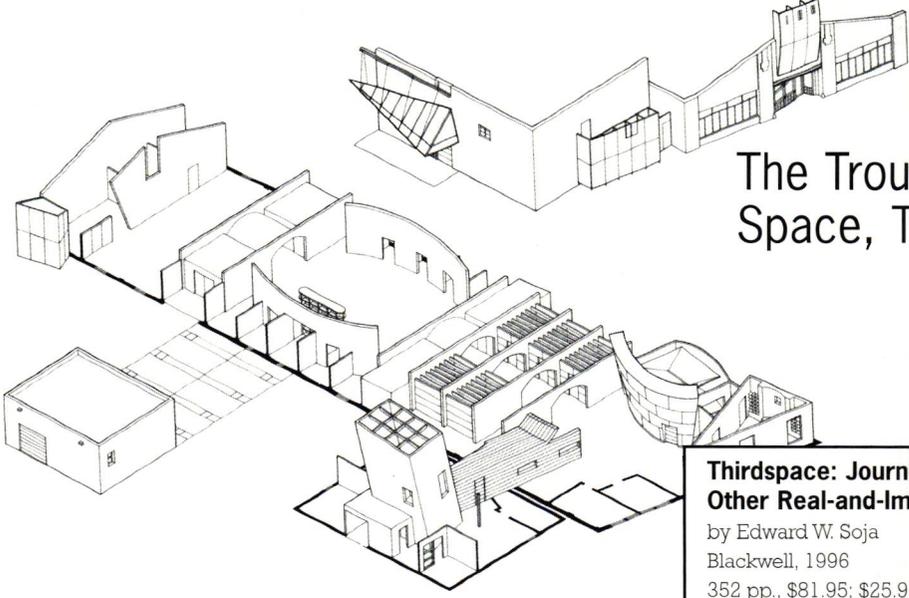
"In the new city of highways, parking lots, bridges, paths, and malls, relationships among the fragments are formed by circumstances, not formal or predetermined structures." Similarly, Koolhaas observes Atlanta's "intensity without physical density," and Randal Roark notes, "The city simply cannot be understood formally or architecturally and its true vitality is not revealed in what is physically visible."

But, what is this invisible intensity that allows for vitality without spatial order? Is it the thrill of mobility? Is it the constant change and flux in the environment that provide a sense of infinite possibility, infinite identities? Such an interpretation is consistent with the antihumanist identification of physical order with constraint, and the lack of physical order with individual freedom. This association, however, runs the risk of mistaking individual freedom for the free market. The invisible intensity propelling Atlanta is unconstrained capital. The only freedom being enjoyed is that of the architects. Koolhaas writes, "Working on new urban configurations, they have discovered a vast new realm of potential and freedom—to go rigorously with the flow." As it has learned to do so well, capitalism in Atlanta presents itself as offering choices and change, opportunities and freedom (and even difference, if only at the superficial level of fashion). While Atlanta may lack physical order, it is thoroughly embedded in the order of the postindustrial economy, under all the constraints and inequities that sustain such a system.

Ironically, both *Non-Places* and *Atlanta* reveal how easily the individualism of capitalism and the individualism of antihumanism can become compounded. By emphasizing concepts of difference and the inherently fragmented and multiple nature of identity, much of contemporary critical theory has undercut the possibilities for shared agendas. As Chantal Mouffe has articulated in her explorations of radical democracy, it is perhaps through the recognition of the nonshifting ground on which we stand, the places we share, that we can conceptualize our identities as individuals and as citizens in a way that does not sacrifice one to the other.⁵ This is the challenge, as much for critical social theorists as for designers and analysts of places. While critical social theorists (such as Edward W. Soja) have begun to address issues of spatiality and the reproduction of uneven development, the conditions of places and non-places still need to be examined rigorously, so as to avoid further cases of mistaken identity.⁶ ■

Notes

- 1 See Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le Savoir* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979).
- 2 Kenneth Frampton, "The Owl of Minerva," lecture given at the ACSA European Conference, Copenhagen, 1996.
- 3 This is the early, more critical version of Koolhaas's essay, which he reworked for publication in his book *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1996).
- 4 Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).
- 5 Chantal Mouffe, "Democratic Politics and the Question of Identity," in John Rajchman, ed., *The Identity in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 34.
- 6 Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).



The Trouble with Trialectics: Space, Time, and the City

by Edward Robbins

Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places

by Edward W. Soja

Blackwell, 1996

352 pp., \$81.95; \$25.95 (paper)

The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century

edited by Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja

University of California Press, 1996

483 pp., \$40.00; \$19.95 (paper)

Edward W. Soja's *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* and Allen J. Scott and Soja's edited volume *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* provide challenging approaches to contemporary urbanity. If *Thirdspace* is the theoretically richer of the two, *The City* is more insightful, with its broad range of perspectives and issues. In both books, Soja demonstrates his deep appreciation for the city and its multiplicity of spaces and spatial representations while highlighting the problems faced by those (including himself) who attempt to describe, theorize, and understand it.

Thirdspace is Soja's response to the challenge he set in his earlier book, *Postmodern Geographies*, to create a theory of society in which time and space become equal parts of our theoretical discourse about society.¹ In *Thirdspace*, he makes inspired reference to Jorge Luis Borges's short story of 1949, "The Aleph," to convey the difficulty, even impossibility, of capturing the complexities and simultaneities of the city in linear narrative form.²

Borges's Aleph is a point in space and time, visible from every possible angle at all times, where all other points and times coexist without overlapping or transparency. For Soja, "The Aleph" is a "humbling and cautionary tale, an allegory on the infinite complexities of time and space," as well as "an invitation to exuberant adventure." Soja assumes the intellectually risky task of proposing an understanding of the city akin to that of the Aleph—e.g., with a fresh view of the relationship among its historical, social, and spatial conditions. In other words, he suggests a way of thinking "differently about the meanings and significance of space and those related concepts that compose and comprise the inherent spatiality of human life." This is the objective of the book and the meaning of *Thirdspace*.

The elusive notion of *Thirdspace*, however, cannot be profitably used, Soja avers, unless we first learn to think "trialectically." According to him, trialectical thinking creatively fuses modernist and radical postmodernist perspectives and is far more inclusive than traditional dialectical thinking, which is limited to the totalizing "either/or" discourse of modernism. Eschewing binary reductionism, trialectical thinking encompasses the rich and complex realities that comprise the world as we experience it. Trialectical thinking means always thinking about the "Other," an act Soja describes as "thirthing-as-Othering," which allows issues such as class, gender, and race to be addressed equally and simultaneously.

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Frank Israel, Bright and Associates, Warehouse Conversion, Venice, California, 1988–90. Charles Jencks, in his essay, "Hetero-Architecture and the L. A. School," notes that some of the best works by contemporary Los Angeles architects are conversions of existing buildings on difficult sites. (from *The City*)

Central to trialectics is the addition of spatiality to the old historicity-sociality duality to create a broader ontological presence: "historicity-sociality-spatiality." Space is no longer relegated to the background against which history and social life unfold. Spatiality—previously ignored by social theorists—is seen as both a product of social practices and an agent of social behavior. Soja implies that adding spatiality to the traditional dialectic will add a new dimension to our understanding of the world. Trialectics provides a "theoretical rebalancing" that will allow us to embrace all the dimensions of our lives.

But the definition of Thirdspace remains puzzling because Soja sees it as both ontology and epistemology. It is about being as well as a way of being. Thirdspace as a mode of thought is "a sympathetic deconstruction and heuristic reconstitution" of more conventional ways of thinking about space, which Soja labels "Firstspace" and "Secondspace" epistemologies. Firstspace epistemologies have dominated spatial discourse. They understand spatial practices in the material world as measurable and perceptible. Secondspace epistemologies consider space as filtered through the prism of the mind; i.e., mental conceptions and representations of space. Thirdspace epistemologies attempt to reinvigorate the former two by going beyond the body/mind distinction and viewing space as layered, simultaneous, infinite. Thirdspace is inclusive and singular, imagined and real, like the Aleph. It presupposes that space is both represented and representing, and that it is by nature about, but never quite delineates, the Other. It provides a basis for expanding our understanding of social and cultural practices because it is open to all material locations in society and all possible representations of those locations. Like Michel Foucault's heterotopia, which represents countersites where all other sites in society are "simultaneously expressed, represented, contested, and inverted," Soja's notion of Thirdspace, as he claims, allows an understanding of a world that is revealing and unsettling, knowable and illusory, providing degrees of certainty even as it creates endless uncertainty.³

Soja's *Thirdspace* insists on the multilayered and simultaneous nature of reality, recalling Michel de Certeau's suggestion that we need "to think the very plurality of the real and to make that way of thinking the plural effective."⁴ Given that reductionism is still the norm in many social and cultural theoretical discourses, an inclusive theoretical discourse that encourages greater participation by diverse groups and a broader range of strategies of resistance to current social practices is welcome indeed. But can such an approach produce knowledge that is not merely abstract but grounded in real-life experiences? Thirdspace is so tenuous in its relation to everyday notions of "difference" that such terms as "Otherness," "multiplicity," and "simultaneity" remain opaque. They are used more to reject the idea of a unified and totalizing world than to shed light on what "difference" implies. For example, why is difference important if we are not all, at some level, part of a single world system that determines the extent to which each of us is included or excluded from social and cultural opportunities? Furthermore, without contextualizing difference, how can we measure the varying degrees of difference or the relative importance of things, real or imagined? Without delineating the relationship between the dominant and the dominated, for example, the universal and the local, or the unified and the disconnected, we have no sense of the layered, multiple, and potentially contradictory or antagonistic dynamics among different—though overlapping—social and cultural practices, structures, and spatial locations.

Soja, however, does not delve into the fine distinctions of how dominance and exploitation, for instance, create difference, or how oppression often stems from a hyperawareness of difference. Nor does he clarify how forms of difference resist or define localities within a structure of domination. Like many contemporary theorists, he has the tendency to reduce all to simple forces, which mysteriously create diversity, then deny the right to difference and Otherness. But he never defines or describes those forces, perhaps because that would demand a more specific analysis of what difference and Otherness encompass.

Take, for example, Soja's description of feminist discourse on female space. He ascribes their "marginalized" spatial location and that of other disadvantaged groups to a deliberate societal strategy of domination. In doing so, he and the feminists whose perspective he shares inadvertently provide a theory of patriarchal practices, which is all encompassing and totalizing. Soja's treatment would be much richer and more well-rounded if he ventured to explore (to name some possibilities) how the configuration of women's space is a by-product of the market; how women's backgrounds, educations, races, classes, and other circumstances shape their ability to perceive or resist the various sociopolitical strategies that create "patriarchal" places; how women can resist the unwanted "spatializing" of their world, and how their resistance can, in turn, affect the very nature of spatial ordering. Soja avoids these issues because addressing them would position thirding-as-Othering as a response to historical social practices—in which case, one might conclude that the role of space varies with the circumstances and practices that define it. Trialectics, then, would be moot.

The ambiguity of the role of spatiality is clear in Soja's discussion of Henri Lefebvre, whose theories on the modern world, like Soja's, recognize that we live in space and that space conditions who and what we are. For both of them, social life is spatial because it is materially located and culturally and socially represented. Spatiality for Lefebvre, however, cannot equal history and sociality because it is a product of history—particularly of the logic of capitalist production in the late twentieth century. Although not equal to the forces of production and sociality, spatiality does, nonetheless, profoundly influence production, and may at times be seen as an almost autonomous social and cultural influence. Lefebvre is not concerned with what might appear to be a contradiction. His argument acknowledges that confusion and inconsistency are part of any large, totalizing system.

Soja is right, certainly, like Lefebvre, to remind us that conventional social theory has for the most part ignored space. Space hardly exists in most theoretical discussions or representations of material life, despite the fact that we live in a spatial world and spatial metaphors, tropes, and categories permeate everyday as well as theoretical discourse. Being in a place or a specific location is critical to who we are. But Soja never explains what spatiality is or where space resides. He assumes that we know what space is, but do we? Our spatial knowledge differs from field to field (physics, cultural anthropology, architecture, geography, and so on) and is also continually changing, so, clearly, the answer is not obvious. As Albert Einstein wrote in Max Jammer's *Concepts of Space: The History of Theories of Space in Physics*, "If two different authors use the words 'red,' 'hard,' or 'disappointed,' no one doubts that they mean approximately the same thing because these words are connected with elementary experiences in a manner which is difficult to misinterpret. But in the case of words such as 'place' or 'space,' whose relation with psychological experience is less direct, there exists a far-reaching uncertainty of interpretation."⁵ Even if we do know what space is, we all do not necessarily perceive or understand space the same way, as Soja should be well aware.

When Soja speaks, for example, of feminist writer bell hooks's choice to work from a space of "marginality," what are we to make of this? Is this space real or imagined? And does Soja consider relevant the fact that hooks is a tenured English professor at a major university in a major city, and that her written work finds a place in major media outlets? Certainly hooks has the right to define her own location in space. But Soja uses common figures of speech and spatial metaphors without providing true spatial analyses. If hooks chooses marginality, what are we to make of an unemployed single mother living in Greenpoint wanting to operate from a space of centrality? Is her choice comparable to the choice that hooks has made? The issue is not spatial location, but power and control. Who, for example, gets to choose his or her place in society, and who has it defined for him or her because of his or her social position? These are questions Soja avoids.



How do the material conditions that define one's location influence, affect, or define the representation of that location? How do various notions of spatiality—such as high and low, center and periphery—relate to the political and social contexts in which they arise, or to the location of the individuals employing such notions? These, too, are questions Soja does not address. Despite his extensive examination of spatiality, he never presents any actual spatial analysis or new narrative form to help apply the concepts of trialectics and thirding-as-Othering. This absence becomes most apparent in the second half of *Thirdspace*, which is devoted to Los Angeles. Throughout his analysis, Soja emphasizes the role of dominant political and economic structures, describing culturally hegemonic practices and the places they create. While readers may well appreciate his explanations of how capital shapes cities and his clever descriptions of Los Angeles (for example, he calls it the “carceral city,” in reference to its defensive demeanor), they will be disappointed at his failure to convey a sense of the resistant practices or unique localities that are *not* necessarily explained by the hegemonizing calculus of late capitalism. Everyday practices seldom enter Soja's analysis; he offers no evidence that those of us who reside in the quotidian world are actually fooled by what he and theorists like Jean Baudrillard consider simulacra and other examples of hegemonic or consumerist practices. I, for one, have never known anyone who really thought that Disneyland was anything other than what it is—an expensive but enjoyable amusement park. In one chapter, he compares life in Amsterdam and life in Los Angeles, but his efforts end up being more of a political and economic comparison than a spatial one.

Most disappointing is Soja's failure to provide any clues as to how a Thirdspace narrative would differ from other, more conventional narratives. He builds his argument through the analysis and critique of the works of other important theorists, most importantly Lefebvre, but also Foucault, Baudrillard, and a number of feminist theorists including hooks and Gillian Rose, and offers a brief historical and empirical section to buttress his argument. He uses a photography exhibition to bring readers on a different kind of tour of Los Angeles, but even his reading of the images—as formal reflections of late capitalism—is conventional. In an exhibition he organized at UCLA's architecture school (where he teaches), *1789/1989—Paris/Los Angeles—The City and Historical Change*, he intended to present a “visual geohistory of the present urban scene.” He writes, “Remembering the events and the particular sites and sights of the exhibition provides an opportunity to begin grounding Thirdspace in the specificities of the urban.” Still, he misses an opportunity to discuss these sites and sights as documents recording multiple layers of urban space in ways that text cannot. In fact, throughout *Thirdspace* he fails to take advantage of the simultaneous and spatial natures of illustration as a narrative form. In the chapter “Remembrances: A Heterotopology of the Citadel-LA,” he uses illustrations only to augment his narrative.

Soja is also conventional in the way he approaches the work of other theorists. He is generally uncritical unless they do not support his theory of spatiality. His critique of Hayden White, for example, the author of *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* as well as *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, suggests that Thirdspace trialectics, despite claims of openness and inclusiveness, may be as closed to different perspectives as any other theoretical approach.⁶ He sharply critiques White's review of Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, attacking him for not seeing space as the equal of history and thus rejecting his reading.⁷ He goes on to say that *Design Book Review's* decision to have a historian rather than an architect, urban designer, or geographer review

The Bastaventure, a model by Edward W. Soja for the exhibition he helped organize, 1789/1989—Paris/Los Angeles—The City and Historical Change.
The name of the model comes from a combination of the Paris Bastille and the Bonaventure Hotel.
 (from *Thirdspace*)

The Production of Space illustrates “the subtle hegemony of critical historiography and historicism even within spatial disciplines.” I know of no such hegemony in architecture or urban design, and there is no dearth of calls by urban designers and planners for the recognition that spatial discourses are as important as historical approaches to society. Those among us who have tried substituting spatial narratives for conventional historical narratives have found them wanting. Does that mean, as Soja implies, that we reject a radically open theoretical discourse?

Soja, like many postmodernists, so ardently believes that the privileging of time over space stands in the way of expanding our sense of our world that one cannot even question whether space and time may be regarded as equal. But the earliest definition of space “as denoting time or duration,” according to dictionaries and modern physics alike, renders the issue moot. There is no space without time, and no time without space. If history in its broadest dictionary definition is “a narrative of past events; an account, tale, story; a learning or knowing by inquiry,” and not an ontology, as Soja would have it, then what is included in history and how it is weighed are crucial points to debate. Should our sense of spatiality shape our sense of history? Should space be folded into history? Or should it be weighed equally with history within the trialectic? To the first two questions, I would answer yes, but the answer to the last question is not so clear.

History is not a process; it is a narrative about a process. That process encompasses many things, such as our material practices in space, the way we represent space, and the way our representations of space help us define our lives. What’s important are the *practices*, whether spatial or political—economic, cultural, or social—as well as how these practices interrelate and are described. Our debates should center on the relations between human practices in all their diversity and complexity—how they are conditioned, formed, and structured by past practices, and how they, in turn, acquire their own structural logic and create new realities.

But do trialectics and *Thirdspace* help in this regard? They might have, had Soja ventured beyond the abstract to address the particularities of any of the spatial tropes he discusses. For example, the notion of “periphery” requires delineation of what a periphery is, and to what it is peripheral. To imagine “spaces of difference” demands that we carefully define difference and the extent to which boundaries, distances, or relationships are caused by or result from difference. Moreover, we need to know where and when spatiality is important—clearly, a mutable issue. All this is missing from Soja’s work. I was no more able to understand where space resides, how it is located, what it does, how it influences us, and how it might be best represented and perceived after reading *Thirdspace* than before.

Readers will learn just as little about spatiality from *The City*, which was edited by Soja with Scott and published almost concurrently with *Thirdspace*. This collection of theoretical essays, case studies, and policy-oriented papers is presented as part of a larger quest for a more systematic study of Los Angeles and, by extension, other major world cities. In their introduction, the editors describe the book as a “historical geography,” although the essays tend to be more focused on history than space. While Soja and Scott do look at regional development and make reference to physical phenomena (such as the technopoles taking shape on the periphery), spatial relations are explained primarily with reference to conventional factors such as economic cycles, demographic shifts, and immigration trends. And their prescriptions for L.A.’s salvation (most of the book was written while the city’s economy was flagging and the possibility for “social unrest” was higher) are admirable in their emphasis on community development and empowerment, low-income housing, job generation, and more responsive local and regional governance.

In his own essay, “Los Angeles 1965–1992,” Soja looks at the parallel restructuring of the city’s political economy and spatial form. He looks at the successes, failures, massive wealth, and extreme poverty that typifies the region. Again, he organizes his description around a historical geography and provides a number of spatial tropes to delineate this geography. But when examined carefully, his depiction reveals a region shaped by economic and

political forces. Its spatial configuration (at one time considered unique, though rather typical today, echoed by Phoenix; Washington, D.C.; and other deconcentrated cities) certainly has had a profound effect on the social and cultural life of Los Angeles. No historian or social analyst would deny this. The point is, what Soja claims is a new and revolutionary approach to understanding the city does not actually produce any substantial insight that traditional approaches have not already generated.

Most of the essays, however, do provide fresh takes on the city. For example, Richard Weinstein's "The First American City," Charles Jencks's "Hetero-Architecture and the L.A. School," and Michael Dear's "In the City, Time Becomes Visible: Intentionality and Urbanism in Los Angeles 1781-1991" all critique L.A.'s physical designs in relation to their larger historical and cultural frameworks. Particularly interesting is the contrast between Jencks, who sees in Los Angeles blooming heterogeneity and cultural diversity, and the other contributors, who see in the same designs evidence of deep-seated fragmentation and conflict.

Mike Davis in "How Eden Lost Its Garden" and Margaret FitzSimmons and Robert Gottlieb in "Bounding and Binding Metropolitan Space: The Ambiguous Politics of Nature in Los Angeles" argue that space is crucial to understanding environmental issues. Meanwhile, a number of the essays in *The City* use sociological analyses to examine specific communities and develop a picture of the problems they face. These include Scott's essay, "High Technology Industrial Development in the San Fernando Valley and Ventura County," and Susan Anderson's examination of black attitudes about Los Angeles, titled "A City Called Heaven: Black Enchantment and Despair in Los Angeles."

The book's many essays are noteworthy in their own ways, for they deal impressively with important aspects of Los Angeles. But one wonders, given its breadth, why some perspectives were included and others left out. Why, for example, are there essays on the African-American and Latino presence in Los Angeles but not one about Asians? And if minority communities are important, why is nothing written about the "dominant" white middle- or

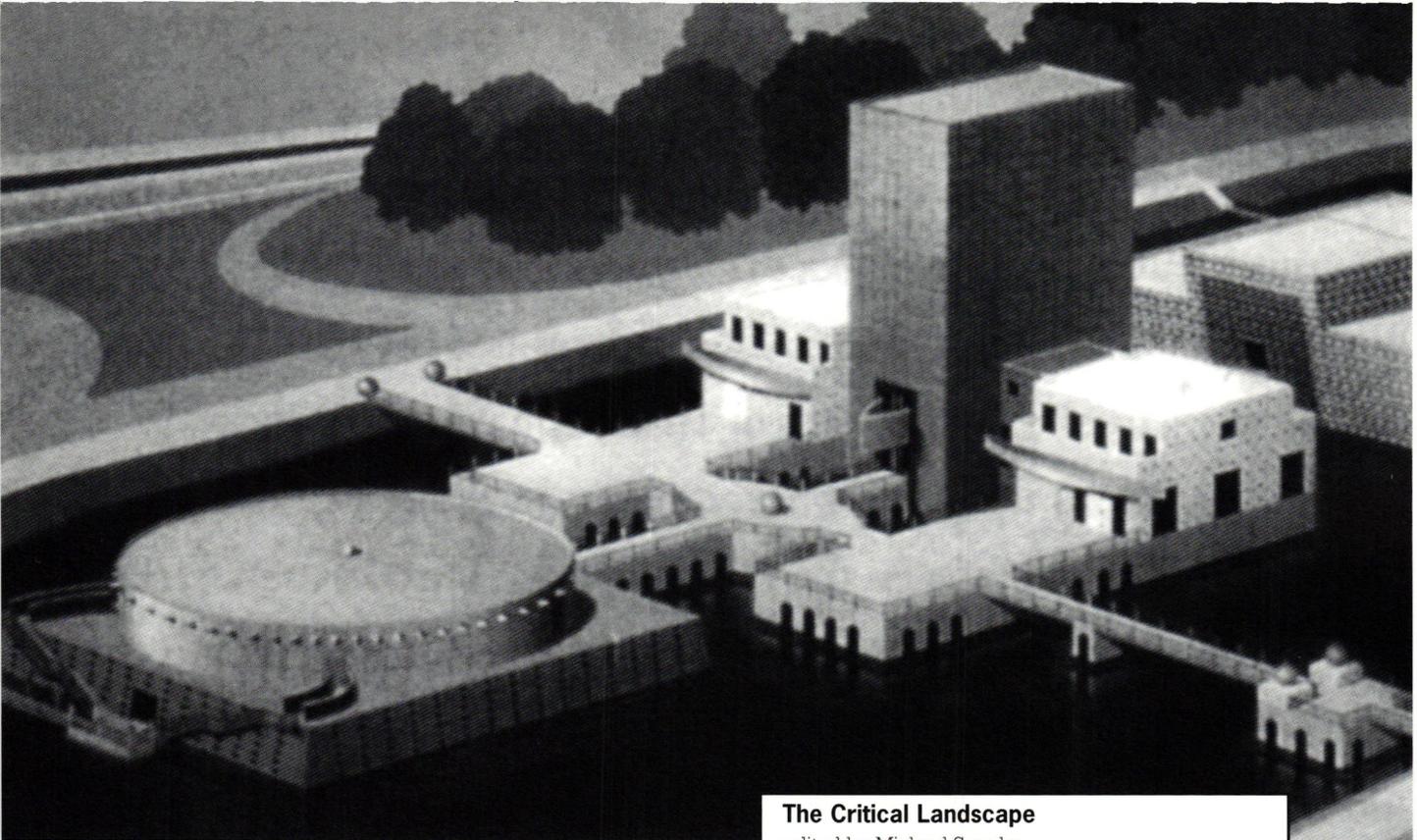
upper-class communities that apparently serve as the norm against which difference or otherness is measured? As many contributors suggest, it is these communities' values and needs that serve as the basis of most policy formulations. For a book that is nearly five hundred pages long, perhaps such expectations are unreasonable, but the lack of comment is noticeable nonetheless. Furthermore, while the essays encompass a broad range of complex issues, there is no concluding overview.

The editors did not intend *The City* to serve as a final statement about Los Angeles. As all the contributing writers make clear, Los Angeles, like all cities, is still being created. Los Angeles presents a challenge for policy makers to create a more equitable and environmentally sound city, offering greater opportunities for its diverse ethnic, cultural, and social groups to participate in urban life. *The City* conveys a sense of the difficulties with which any city in the world must come to grips.

This approach may provide a clue as to why *The City* does little to clarify the vagaries of *Thirdspace*, even though editors Soja and Scott conscientiously gathered a variety of perspectives on a single city. As alluring as a concept like the Aleph is, it is a fiction. What the essays in *The City* make clear is that the problems our cities face are not fictions. They are real and palpable and created through our practices and the narratives we use to make sense of those practices. What is truly needed, then, is nothing as abstract and elusive as "thirthing-as-Othering," but a history that will encompass the many and diverse practices and experiences that shape and are shaped by the world in which we live. Some of these are spatial, some of them are not. Whatever they are, we still await a narrative that will encompass and embrace the complexity and simultaneity embodied in our cities. ■

Notes

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| <p>1 Edward W. Soja, <i>Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory</i> (London: Verso, 1989).</p> <p>2 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Aleph," <i>The Aleph and Other Short Stories: 1933-69</i> (New York: Bantam Books, 1971).</p> <p>3 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," <i>Diacritics</i> (spring 1996): 22-7.</p> <p>4 Michel de Certeau, <i>The Practice of Everyday Life</i> (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).</p> <p>5 Max Jammer, <i>Concepts of Space: The History of Theories of Space in Physics</i> (New York: Dover Press, 1954).</p> | <p>6 Hayden White, <i>Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe</i> (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); White, <i>Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism</i> (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); and White, <i>The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation</i> (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).</p> <p>7 White, "The Production of Space," <i>Design Book Review</i> 29/30 (summer/fall 1993): 90-3.</p> |
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The Critical Landscape

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Orthodoxies of the Anti-Orthodox

by William S. Saunders

Two conflicting attitudes toward intellectual history are perhaps best represented in predominant ideas about philosophy and art: while philosophers build on the work of their predecessors and try to make progress, to be more logical, more "right," artists learn from their predecessors but are not interested in making "progress" per se; rather, they are committed, above all else, to giving form to their prehensile feelings. Their success, in fact, is often gauged by the degree to which their work is not influenced by other art. In such a view, there are no such things as out-of-date or up-to-date art—only art and would-be art. The best poetry of, say, Geoffrey Chaucer remains as fresh and vital as that of any contemporary poet. Art lovers with a healthy resistance to the idea that the newer is the more valid often want to treat philosophy like art, looking to it not for Truth, but for truths that can enrich experience.

If, following this line of thinking, the notion of intellectual progress is largely illusory, then the desperation with which so many cultural theorists try to stay perfectly up-to-date and "correct" in their thinking seems a sad expense of energy. Of course, theorists should try to be informed about others' theories and new "social and material conditions." But to narrow their horizons to a few valid ideas, excluding countless others, seems a

needless deprivation. Since the early 1970s, in cultural theory we have seen the glorification—and then, often, the discrediting—of the authority of Roland Barthes, Theodor Adorno, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin, and so on. In the December 1996 issue of *Assemblage* Juliet Koss writes, "The freedoms of simulacra are not entirely comfortable; postmodernism, according to last summer's *October*, is 'a word that appears to have radically fallen out of favor.' The search for inspiration and legitimization, an activity of no small importance in cultural discourse, has led...to European modernism....The words *nostalgia*, *authentic*, and *essence* are no longer anathema." We are now to move on, Koss claims, in our search for "legitimization," from Benjamin to Sigfried Kracauer. Intellectual life becomes thin gruel indeed when only one or two thinkers are considered authoritative at any one time, and when the affirmation of pluralism is mere lip service.

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However, for most of the writers in *The Critical Landscape*—an anthology of essays edited by Michael Speaks (who graduated from Jameson’s Ph.D. program at Duke University) and based on a 1995 conference organized by Arie Graafland and his students at the Technische Universiteit (TU) in Delft, The Netherlands—postmodernism is radically *in* favor, and nostalgia, authenticity, and essence are untenable. *The Critical Landscape* returns to a fairly consistent set of ideas, which, though different from those in *October*, is similarly tyrannical in its dictates of what is legitimate and what is not. In *The Critical Landscape*, the negative buzzwords are colonization, grand narratives, domestication, totalization, control, conservatism, essentialism, nostalgia, surveillance, the Enlightenment, appropriation. Meanwhile, “legitimate” ideas include desire, fantasy, pluralism, freedom from any “ground,” Nietzschean thought, difference.

The irony about the fixed ideas that dominate *The Critical Landscape* is that they are assertions of the need not to have fixed ideas, since certainty and truth are no longer valid goals. In this light, one expects, but does not find, references to diverse, less familiar philosophers, theorists, and artists rather than the predictable, anthologized few. But more disappointing—and insidious—are the authors’ simplistic assumptions about the world we share, displaying a disturbing level of *knowing* about “contemporary conditions.” Many have the unfortunate habit of equating these conditions with middle- to upper-class life in the First World. Repeated reference is made to “digital, postindustrial society,” as if it is a universal reality, eliding the fact that the majority of the people in the world still don’t have computers, televisions, or phones, and don’t consume the products of popular culture. Another distorting assumption is that industrial and manual work is everywhere waning, when in fact it has merely shifted more to developing countries.

But most troubling, perhaps, is how the authors perpetuate the impression that this particular moment in time has clearly definable, dominating characteristics, rather than a diversity of them; and that there is only one appropriate response, rather than a variety of valid possibilities. Consistent with these assumptions is the manner in which the contributors persistently (and condescendingly) paint the inhabitants of the developed world as cartoon characters of sorts, gullibly controlled by advertising, popular culture, television, computers, the Internet, and so on. So, despite its broad intentions, *The Critical Landscape* addresses a narrow set of conditions and interests (perhaps unintentionally reflecting the fact that almost all of the contributors are white, materially comfortable Europeans and North Americans).

It is not my intention to make generalizations about the Delft conference or this compilation of essays by sixteen different authors. Six of the essays—including, for example, Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre’s re-presentation of their concept of critical regionalism, and Michael Sorkin’s piece on a collaborative housing project in Vienna—stand apart from the other essays, which are ensconced in postmodern discourse. And one piece, by Kyong Park, satirizes postmodern dogma. (It should also be noted that not all of the essays in the book originated at the Delft conference; some were later additions, and others have appeared previously in print. The book provides no notes on the origins of essays, however, or contributors’ backgrounds; nor does it have an index.)

Still, even with essays steeped in postmodern orthodoxies, a dissatisfaction with postmodern theories occasionally surfaces in the form of a sad longing for normative thinking or a reinstatement of “reality” and ideals. Significantly, this attitude is displayed most clearly by the book’s youngest author, Jasper de Haan, an ex-student of Graafland. De Haan writes, “Students seem to be hungry for theory—as a last straw to grasp at, and in order to have something to hold onto in a world where good and evil seem to no longer exist. Students often lose interest when it turns out that theory is unable to offer simple answers to their questions and when the only outcome of any contact with theory merely results in the production of new questions.” In other words, he is imploring, *Please give us something to believe other than disbelief.*

De Haan continues, the book is “supposed to make clear that it is not enough to simply say that everything is permitted and that everything has already been done—that it is still possible to make meaningful connections and to make significant buildings. Discussion should perhaps focus less on defining concepts and more on the objects themselves.” It isn’t that the students don’t want to theorize; rather, they feel deprived by postmodern skepticism and want to turn their minds to the social and material world. In this climate, it is no wonder that Rem Koolhaas, a theorist who builds, is such a hero for them.

opposite
The Groningen Museum, located in the Dutch city of Groningen, was designed by Alessandro Mendini and several other architects and designers. Michael Müller, in *The Critical Landscape*, explores how the museum contains few references to local architectural traditions and instead reflects the aesthetics of the global media.

In the introduction, Graafland embraces the usual assumptions about “our postmodern condition” but longs to go further. “In daily life, it is true, judgments must be made, but there is no longer any ideal we can look to. And in this context, who are we, for that matter? If we follow Lyotard, we are no longer the unitary subject of history moving toward a final goal. ‘We’ have ceased to exist, but ‘we’ must still make judgments.” Theory is telling Graafland one thing, but life is telling him the opposite. Why is it so hard for him to trust his experience and cast off theory? If, following the dominant orthodoxy, all perceptions of reality are socially determined and constructed, then there can be no normative basis for choosing anything, such as what is good. “It is...not surprising that the question of the ‘quality’ of the built (and unbuilt) environment reverberates loudly today,” writes Graafland. “[O]rienting values have now disappeared.” The author is torn: he must view even Koolhaas as part of the postmodern surrender to (rather than leading beyond) pernicious contemporary conditions. Koolhaas’s Sea Trade Center “is postmodern in the sense...of a complete acceptance of the phenomena of our current society...The building is ‘at home’ in our world of pastiche.” For Graafland this is unacceptable, but he can imagine no alternative.

The essay by Rypke Sierksma, also at TU-Delft, is representative of the strengths and weaknesses of *The Critical Landscape*. Titled “Terra Trauma,” the piece is wily and sophisticated in its act of philosophically killing off the fathers—in this case Kenneth Frampton, Tzonis, Charles Jencks, and Peter Eisenman. But Sierksma is unconsciously dogmatic with the ideas with which he uses to slay them. He is rigid in the name of being faithful to the “fluid,” “weak,” “groundless” postmodern condition. Fragments of the gospel according to Sierksma follow:

“the pervasive transformation of almost all activity in work and in ‘everyday’ life into...a situation dominated by gadgets and machinery”

“Megalomania and sociopathy...are both unmistakably on the upswing presently”

“The old guard intellectuals...try heroically, but in vain, to counteract postmodern man’s experiencing of an ever more rapidly disappearing history”

“the disappearance of class and the withering of state dominance”

“the actual reality of the vacuous postmodern ego”

If one is fortunate enough to know “actual reality,” then one can make statements like “Eisenman does not understand the world around him.” This postmodern theorist is not living by his beliefs. And if vacuity is our inescapable lot, that makes Sierksma, with his certainties, an unwitting intellectual kamikaze.

The Foucaultian view—recurrent in *The Critical Landscape*—that people are manipulated by insidious, hidden forces has produced its own brand of moral and political fervor that, paradoxically, can be as guilty of distorting history as the totalizing controls it is trying to subvert. Beatriz Colomina’s essay, “Battle Lines: E.1027,” on Le Corbusier’s treatment of Eileen Gray and the house she built for herself and Jean Badovici at Cap Martin, is a good example. On the wall of the house, Le Corbusier drew a mural said to depict, nude, Badovici, Gray, and a third figure he called “the desired child, which was never born.” (Gray was lesbian.) Colomina quotes Le Corbusier saying that murals destroy walls. She notes that he never mentions Gray in his written accounts of the house and describes his building, above Gray’s, as his own “sort of watchdog house.” Colomina points out a swastika in the mural.

These bare facts carry for Colomina enormous psychological, social, moral, and political significance: Le Corbusier—as an individual, a modernist, and a male—represents grotesque oppressiveness. Colomina is open about her (admirable) values—values that make these “facts” a horror story. But she is unconcerned with whether or not her assertions about what Le Corbusier and Gray were thinking, doing, and meaning to do can be solidly supported. She finds her villain and nails him; her moral outrage results in a form of intellectual violence, yet it is Le Corbusier’s violence against Gray that she castigates.

Many of Colomina’s statements of “fact” are footloose: she writes of “the inevitable relationship of modern architecture to the military.” Inevitable? “Drawing, as has often been noted, played a crucial part in Le Corbusier’s appropriation of the exterior world.” But why does she assume that his drawing was an act of domination rather than loving attention? About Le Corbusier’s cabin, she writes, “The imposition of this appropriating gaze is even more brutal if we remember that Gray had chosen the site because it was...inaccessible.” Lacanian clichés and all, she characterizes Le Corbusier’s building as a “violent occupation,” but who is to say whether or not he chose his site simply because it was the best buildable land? And who is to say that Gray felt oppressed by Le Corbusier’s presence? Colomina assumes that a local mason destroyed Le Corbusier’s mural because he loved Gray. “I like to think that he did so on purpose,” she writes, and that is exactly the problem: what one would like to think isn’t always borne out by the “evidence.” Again postmodern principle overrides supple reflection.

With the intensity of Colomina, but with more cheek, Park offers “Nuclear Heritage Park,” a mock proposal for the conversion of American military bases into theme parks.¹ His bleak parody targets electronic entertainment technology and the military-industrial complex, with its euphemisms and indifference to suffering. Parodying culture’s conversion of “destructive objects into pleasurable desires,” he unveils our growing preference for fantasy over reality, and our preoccupation with escape from our bodies and from death.

Park’s hideous mock propositions are reminiscent of Jonathan Swift’s 1729 “Modest Proposal,” while its totalitarian techno-think underpinnings recall George Orwell’s *1984*, Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil*, and Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*. But his biggest debt is to Baudrillard, who has written extensively on Americans’ embrace of simulation. Park writes, “No longer will there be just one reality that we inherit and that rules us. With more than one reality, we could choose a reality. Complete and convincingly real, fully interactive, and deftly manipulative, the simulated adventure in the Nuclear Heritage Park will mark ‘the death of reality and the triumph of imagination.’”

At the heart of Park’s project is a critique of the all too common postmodern/poststructuralist idea that, since we can know nothing, we are free to fantasize anything. But such an attitude is reprehensible in its indifference toward human destructiveness and the implications of a fully wired world. In this respect, it is ironic that several of the contributors to *The Critical Landscape* fall for the very futuristic clichés that Park satirizes. “With the transformation of one’s body-image into ‘a new body, a new voice, and a new identity,’ we can elude...facial, gender, or class-based dichotomies,” he prophesizes sardonically. “Eternity, manipulated by technology, seems feasible with the potential for a corporeal presence without organs.”

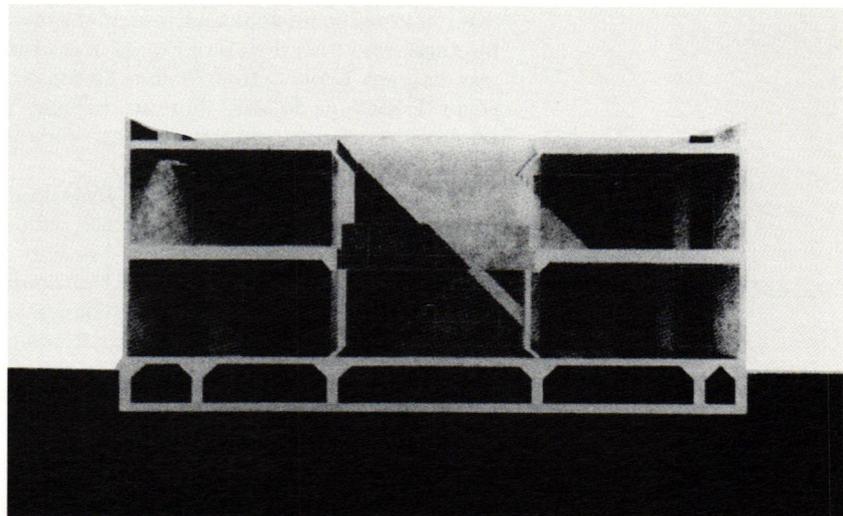
The postmodern idea that everything is commodified in contemporary experience pervades Michael Müller’s “The Shopping Arcade as a Museum: On the Strategy of Postmodern Aestheticization,” an exploration of architecture as an accomplice of consumerism. Focusing on Hans Hollein’s 1990 Haas House shopping arcade in Vienna, Müller, a professor of art history at the University of Bremen, asserts that, in a hedonistic “lifestyle society,” everything becomes aestheticized, i.e., given over to surfaces and images. Aestheticization “blurs once again the boundaries of traditional areas of artistic production, which have been unable for some time now to claim artistic form as something specifically their own.” And, he concludes, “Where everything turns into form, art loses its special status.” Müller’s association of art with form, however, is reductive. Aesthetic experiences, whether acts of finding form for feeling, or finding

feeling from form, are common even in an age of media saturation.² Yet these experiences have never been easily accessible—they require focus, intelligence, and sensitivity. If mass culture reduces all to commodified surfaces, it does not necessarily follow that a minority “alternative” culture of “depth” is impossible. According to Müller, Hollein believes that his buildings “will only have an effect on observers if the design understands the mechanism of mass consumerism, and finds ways of incorporating this attitude into its aesthetic.” But who is to say that the “consuming masses” are incapable of comprehending work that is unhesitatingly, uncompromisingly artistic, such as the museums of Rafael Moneo or Frank Gehry?

Thankfully, Müller can’t swallow the whole postmodernist hog. He writes that “mainstream architecture has this time [in the Haas House] allied its narcissism all too willingly to the thoroughly aestheticized consumer culture” (as if architects had any other choice). Characterizing the Haas House as “an affirmation of wealth,” he at least realizes that consumerism is only for those with money to spend.

The hegemony of the surface in contemporary life is also a central concern of K. Michael Hays. In his “Abstraction’s Appearances (in Mies, Adorno, and Some Others),” the lineaments of the world are theoretical debates and their historical development. All-important for Hays, a professor at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design, is defining the ever-changing qualities of social, cultural, and material conditions, and theorists’ responses to those conditions. His theorist must be without the illusion that the present is like the past.

Tadao Ando, Row House, Osaka, Japan, 1976. Karen Wilhelm, in *The Critical Landscape*, argues that modern architecture and pictorial art are part of a “grand attempt to heal the wounds created by the Enlightenment.”
(from *The Critical Landscape*)



To explore the extent to which the work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was determined or autonomous, Hays contemplates his 1922 skyscraper drawings and Seagram building against the backdrop of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, Manfredo Tafuri's *Modern Architecture*, and Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*.³ His first inclination is to accede to the notion that all cultural production, even critical awareness, can only reflect its time and place. So he sees the Seagram building, with its repetitious glass-and-steel surface, as mirroring the workings of dominant culture, in which surfaces nullify depth and tactility.

Hays occasionally betrays his discomfort, however, with the nihilism of this position; in his heart, art seems autonomous. His essay begins with a quotation from Adorno—"Art remains alive only through its social power to resist society"—and he later writes, revealingly, "I must be careful with my attributions, for talk of art in general (let's think of it with a capital 'A') normally must presuppose a primitive accumulation of the capital of aesthetic experience and allude to what you already know about art; it must make appeals to greatness or the Idea or Spirit or something like this, and if you don't know about these things already, then no one can tell you." Hays does not dismiss vagaries such as "greatness" (usually too embarrassing for postmodernists to discuss). In fact, his not-at-all-mystical "something like this" is, I believe, "feeling as active knowing," which is what only art can articulate and is precisely the source of its value.

Still, the notion that art can partially lead and create culture is difficult for Hays to embrace. He wants to convince and be convinced that experience and creation cannot deflect the influence of dominant modes of production. This leaves pure art a dim memory: "We can neither hear art's song nor delight in its labor but can only sense that we are missing out on something...the genuine experience that can never be brought back from prehistory." But those who trust their own experiences of art may disagree. To quote from Wallace Stevens's poem "Esthétique du Mal," there are, happily, "so many selves, so many sensuous worlds," and these are the gifts of art.

Speaks, the editor of this volume, also takes up the topic of determinism, in this case, with regard to epistemology. The most precise and philosophically minded of the book's contributors, Speaks asserts in his essay, "From the Foundational Postmodern to the Immanent Modern: Reading Jameson Reading Architecture," that the philosophical tradition that seeks to find, define, and build a "ground" of knowledge has been invalidated. Following a "pragmatist/constructivist" tradition culminating in Althusser's ideas, he posits that the only thing that can be known with certainty is that knowledge is groundless—in other words, that thought is the groundless result of culturally conditioned production.

This epistemology may be questioned with the ideas of Italian philosopher Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944), who regarded reality as equivalent to the act of thinking itself—an unfixed and unfinished dialectic in which the subject is forever uniting itself, in conflict, with its opposite, the object. "Truth" is an unavoidable construct of thinking; even the statement "I can know nothing" is an assertion of truth. Following these ideas, the determinism that permeates postmodern theory contradicts itself: if you think that your thinking is determined (mere ideology), then by your own logic that very thought is also determined and therefore invalidated. But Gentile would consider even this thought a free, undetermined act.

Speaks comes close to this realization at the end of his essay, where he affirms Jameson's reading of the Gehry House in Santa Monica, California (1978), as a "failure to map" the postmodern condition as itself "not a failure" but a successful expression of the "ideological material-concept of postmodernism itself," with its uncertainties and provisionalities. Speaks writes, "The importance of Jameson's postmodernism, then, is not that it gives us greater access to the Real, or returns us to the firm ground of systemic philosophy, but that it catapults us from the closed space of ideology (wherein postmodernism is understood as either true or false) to the open space of a science (in which postmodernism is understood as an immanent modern ideological product)."

But there are logical inconsistencies in Speaks's conclusions. First, Althusser's "scientific" thinking, based on the assumptions of cultural determinations of thought, does not escape but redefines "the ground" of truth as precisely this "scientific" assumption or the "withering away of philosophical certainty." The awareness of culture as production is itself assumed to be a new certainty, in conflict with the desire to break down conclusiveness by drawing attention to what lies outside or contradicts it. Second, even within the constructivist emphasis on "the representation of the subject's Imaginary relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence," there lingers the assumption that postmodern conditions—the hyperspace of global postindustrial capital and its "flows," however unrepresentable—are givens; thus, reality sneaks in the back door. Third, Jameson and Speaks think of the Gehry House as an "allegory" representing the postmodern epistemological failure, rather than as a preconceptual act of struggling with dilemmas it may grasp only tacitly. An allegory is certain; a work of art, uncertain. A sensible phenomenological/constructivist compromise would not see acceptance of inevitable failure as a "good enough" success, but, instead, would view knowledge as always part failure and part success, as the act of trying to move from failure to success. Despite these problems, Speaks comes closest of any author in *The Critical Landscape* to act on postmodern ideas; he courts irresolution.

In "Lost in Space," Mark Wigley, associate professor at Princeton University's School of Architecture, also toys with and disposes some clichés of postmodernism—particularly the idea that the historical change from modernism to postmodernism brings with it radical newness. Wigley notes the traditional perception of architecture and urban design as tools with which to create a sense of order and orientation within otherwise untamed worlds. He traces this idea from Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel *Robinson Crusoe*; through Kevin Lynch's cognitive maps, György Kepes's visual orientation, and Gordon Cullen's comforting environmental aesthetics; to Jameson's nostalgia for Marxist certainties in the face of disorienting postmodern spaces.

But Wigley criticizes this need for orientation, invoking Benjamin to propose an alternative; i.e., disorientation and the vitality and openness it brings. ("*Disorientation produces vision*," he writes.) Wigley's distaste for external control is so great that he laments that "it becomes increasingly difficult to be lost" (as if being lost is a great goal). He writes, "The apparent disorder of the contemporary city has been matched by a proliferation of new ordering devices. Multiple forms of surveillance monitor every space." He observes the control of movement, for example, through the space of John Portman's Los Angeles Bonaventure Hotel, which "is completely dictated by vast escalators and elevators." Haunted by Big Brother, Wigley is almost controlled by his suspicion of control.

But do we really feel constantly watched by unseen eyes? Do we really feel the need to alter our behavior as a result of it? Not in my experience. Wigley's picture is Foucault-think run wild. He does have a point about the extent to which commercial environments prepackage experiences (for instance, of tourist sites) and manipulate behavior (to buy). By the end of his essay, he regains his balance, moving beyond orthodoxies and questioning the assumption that the postmodern experience is radically new. "Much contemporary discourse about the new technologies, whether pessimistic or euphoric, exactly duplicates arguments made over a century ago....The old story of the loss of the story is being retold....But are we really lost? Or to put it another way, did people know where they were in the age of the big stories?" he asks, alluding to Lyotard's grand narratives. He rejects the absolutism of theoretical clichés: "The users of buildings are neither lost nor found but caught between the two....Do we have difficulty telling stories? I don't think so. The small stories are multiplying and the big ones, while obviously untenable, continue to operate."

The "play between a sense of home and a sense of being lost" is "endless," he continues. "So-called postmodern space is...but the latest stage set for the routine drama of architecture." So-called? Routine? In this book, these words are blasphemous and thus liberating.

So how does "the Dutch giant Rem Koolhaas," as Graafland calls him, fit in all this? Not so well, ironically. *The Critical Landscape* ends with a conversation between Graafland, de Haan, and the disloyal hero, who states bluntly that if people are to keep creative thinking alive, they must avoid formulating their intellectual positions. Most of the essayists in *The Critical Landscape* are guilty of this, perhaps motivated by the urge to defend against the vulnerabilities of not knowing. Koolhaas does not mind that his project at Lille "has been shot to ribbons by the French intellectuals [for having] no intellectual defense," because an "intellectual defense" would have constricted the unpredictable engagement he sought.

Koolhaas tries to act on the conviction that he has an undefinable authentic self that is larger than his ego, like a bottomless well from which he can draw insight and inspiration. He wants his thinking to retain a preconceptual, near-primitive quality. By contrast, orthodox postmodernists commit intellectual suicide by arguing that authenticity is impossible because all human work (including their own) is the arbitrary construction of a delusional non-self. One can't resist savoring the fact that a book that begins by stating its objective to "provide an answer to the question of what an architect should be doing" ends with Koolhaas saying, "I have seen so many people destroyed by the fact that they had a position and that they were aware of their position." ■

Notes

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| <p>1 The genesis of this project is not explained. A footnote in Park's essay refers to a 1990 Nuclear Heritage Park video produced by Joshua Pearson and Gardner Post. "The Nuclear Theme Park" was not presented at Kyong Park's Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York until 1994. Park founded the Office of Strategic Architecture in 1992, and in some unclear manner furthered the work on the Nuclear Heritage Park, but it is impossible to say what part of the essay represents Park's ideas alone.</p> | <p>2 Such a definition of the aesthetic is suggested or presented in the work of Susanne Langer, Ernst Cassirer, F. R. Leavis, R. P. Blackmur, John Dewey, R. G. Collingwood, Benedetto Croce, and Giovanni Gentile, among others.</p> <p>3 The most recent English translation of Theodor Adorno's <i>Aesthetic Theory</i> was published by the University of Minnesota Press in 1997. Manfredo Tafuri, <i>Modern Architecture</i> (London: Academy Edition, 1980); Henri Lefebvre, <i>The Production of Space</i> (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991).</p> |
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The Language of Counterreformation

by Steven A. Moore



Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices

edited by Thomas A. Dutton and Lian Hurst Mann
University of Minnesota Press, 1996
329 pp., \$54.95; \$21.95 (paper)

Admiration and loathing are unexpected responses to a single book. Such is the case, however, for *Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices*, a compendium of essays edited by Thomas A. Dutton and Lian Hurst Mann. My admiration is for the intentions of two editors and five contributors who examine gender, race, ecology, and history as conditions of architectural practice. They believe that architecture is a social and material practice rather than an abstract and aesthetic discourse. My loathing is reserved for the piously obscure language used by the editors. Sadly, readers not initiated in the doctrines of critical theory will be excluded from this much needed examination.

As the title implies, *Reconstructing Architecture* is intended to be a critique of deconstructivist and recent postmodern, or antifoundational, modes of theorizing architecture. The editors have two goals: to unmask deconstructivism as the political disengagement of liberal academe and populist historicism as a regressive tactic of the new Right; and to reestablish the Marxist values of critical theory as the basis for socially responsible architectural practice. Implicit in these editorial objectives is the claim that enlightened socialism is the first principle of the modern movement in architecture and that its values remain relevant to the political and economic conditions of contemporary life. By returning to these ideas, the editors' task is, in a sense, an exercise of counterreformation: *Reconstructing Architecture* is a summons to readers to recall and complete the original project of modernity.

The postmodern retreat from the social agenda of early modernism may be attributable to two primary developments: first, the failure of technology, which was initially embraced for its socially liberating potential and informed modern building types such as mass housing; and second, the appropriation of the modern aesthetic by formalists to sustain the dominance of the cultural elite. The contributors to this anthology reject the abandonment of social responsibility and demand that architecture is (again) understood as a material critique of the market, and not merely as an aesthetic text available for random deployment.

In lieu of an architecture of false aesthetic subversion, as is practiced by Peter Eisenman or Robert Venturi, the editors promote an architecture of "realism." Realism, in the sense intended in this book, requires architecture to discard social appearances and reveal the actual workings of society. The editors, however, in their introduction and individual essay contributions, write in a manner that is so radically out of touch with reality that they undermine their own admirable intentions. The logic of their language begs a historic analogy: just as the Counter Reformation aimed to purify and expand the Roman Catholic church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by halting the spread of Protestantism, so does *Reconstructing Architecture* attempt to arrest the detracting doctrines of postmodernism. But like the overly pious Jesuits who inadvertently helped ensure the flourishing of Protestantism through their zealous

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inquisition tactics, Dutton and Mann, with their self-righteous and exclusive language, may be indirectly abetting the visibility of postmodern discourses rather than preserving the mantle of Marxism.

In their introduction, Dutton and Mann attempt to provide a thorough picture of progressive thought. They adopt too many ideas of too many other people, however, and then fail to explain them intelligibly. Readers are assaulted with a relentless stream of Marxist jargon; a litany of sacred phrases including “mass consciousness,” “class-driven transnational capitalism,” and “the bourgeois capital estate”; and a seemingly infinite number of words derived from “hegemony.” My complaint is not that the concepts buried in these terms are irrelevant to contemporary conditions. But, as Bertold Brecht argued, and as Mann herself ironically cites, “true realism...needs to change with the changing times.” The real struggles of contemporary life cannot be captured in the now exhausted master narratives of “class war.” In my view, the editors’ “holy language” of counterreformation subverts the very possibility for a radically democratic architecture.

For example, Dutton’s essay, “Cultural Studies and Critical Pedagogy,” makes a compelling argument that architects, rather than indulging themselves in the exercise of formal, subjective expression, should participate in communities as material ethnographers. By this, I presume he means that architects have the critical skills needed to interpret material worlds, and thus are better able to construct alternative worlds for those who live without material wealth. His example of the work of Brazilian activist-educator Paulo Freire is interesting, but too brief to be useful. Likewise, his case studies of three architectural projects are lost in superficial aesthetic analyses that subvert his stated position.

Mann’s concluding essay is similarly troubled. It outlines four alternative directions for the continued investigation of “critical realism” in architecture—“objectivated realism,” exemplified by the projects of Machado and Silvetti Associates; “new realism,” best demonstrated by the projects of Rem Koolhaas; “hyperrealism,” as in the projects of Diller + Scofidio; and “activist realism,” exemplified by the work of her own organization, AgitProps, which engages marginalized citizen groups in political action related to public space. In Mann’s opinion, the most effective of these directions is her own. It is this superficial and self-serving use of history that compels a critique of the language used to construct it.

Fortunately, readers can avoid the irritating gap between rhetoric and intention by turning to the book’s five other essays. Margaret Soltan’s essay, “Deconstruction and Architecture,” is clearly written and historically instructive. She does a highly responsible job of articulating the political intentions of deconstruction before offering an alternative reading of deconstruction as a social practice. She cautions that “deconstructive architecture has constituted an attempt to critique the ideology of foundationalism in the most ‘founded’ creative sphere—that of building.” Her point is that architecture is always a material practice with physical and social gravity. Soltan states that proponents of deconstruction such as Jennifer Bloomer and Mark Wigley “mistake linguistic assertion for worldly activity.” Verbal play, in Soltan’s world, cannot be substituted for “oppositional practices” that have material and social consequences. She points to the Hysolar Institute at the University of Stuttgart (1987) by Behnisch and Partners as an example of critical architecture, not because of its visually complex and fragmented appearance, but because it “says, most simply, what proponents of solar energy say: We should change our ways.”

The best essay in this volume is Richard Ingersoll’s “Second Nature: On the Social Bond of Ecology and Nature.” He conceptualizes the “ecology question” as founded equally in nature and culture, arguing that saving the planet and saving the community are inseparable propositions. To reduce entropy, which may be understood as the antithesis of conservation (as entropy increases, order and available energy decrease), design action must have two dimensions: ethical and technological. The ethical dimension owes to the presupposition that nature has been transformed by culture, and thus humans have a responsibility for the world we now have. Technology, as an instrument for efficient production, may be helpful in fulfilling that responsibility by staving off the misappropriation of scarce resources. Ingersoll asserts, “It is in this frequently contentious betrothal, between *moral imperative* and the *desire for well-being*, that the most important critical positions on ecology and architecture emerge” (italics in original).

One cannot, however, consider the ethical or technological problems of high-entropy design ahistorically. As Ingersoll is well aware, ecology is excluded from most architectural discourse primarily due to the utopian program popularly ascribed to it. Utopian dreams, far from providing a lamp to light the way, inhibit real social progress because they avoid the political processes required to achieve immediate social goals.

Behnisch and Partners, the Hysolar Institute, University of Stuttgart, 1987. Although the formal complexity of the Hysolar Institute reflects a deconstructivist agenda, Margaret Soltan asserts that its ecological accomplishments far outweigh its aesthetic ones.
(from *Reconstructing Architecture*)

Unlike the other contributors to this volume, Ingersoll concludes his essay by clearly tying the material context of architecture to the history of social intentions. He argues that entropy will only be diminished if we change our attitudes toward building. Good buildings, according to his criteria, can no longer be defined solely in terms of pleasing proportion, clever detail, heroic structure, or sensitive interpretation of the program; they must also be evaluated as to whether or not they enhance the life of nature and the public realm.

Whereas Ingersoll explores the uneasy relationship between building and ecology, Sherry Ahrentzen reveals the divided and multiple opinions on gender as a value in architecture. Drawing on convincing evidence, her essay, "The F Word in Architecture: Feminist Analysis in/of/for Architecture," concludes that feminism is not a monolithic position, but, rather, is a set of competing positions that share a common commitment to the condition of women in particular and to social justice in general. She distinguishes three different feminist perspectives: first, the liberal feminist position, which argues that differences between sexes should not be acknowledged and that women and men are entitled to equal rights and opportunities; second, the cultural feminist position, which works to transform current professions, institutions, and practices to become consistent with values historically attributed to women; and third, the contextual feminist position, which goes beyond transforming architecture according to female experiences to approaching it within the appropriate social context (e.g., contemporary patriarchal society) within which it is realized—in other words, any significant achievement of gender equity in environmental design must involve transforming the social context of architecture. Although Ahrentzen disclaims any hierarchy to the perspectives presented, she clearly favors the last.

Bradford C. Grant establishes architecture, building, and planning as racially constituted activities in "Accommodation and Resistance: The Built Environment and the African-American Experience." To help readers understand how African-American architects operate in society today, he identifies three significant historic periods—those characterized by slavery, Jim Crowism, and the civil rights movement. Grant argues that black architects' limited patronage—by plantation owners, segregated black institutions or communities, and the government under the mandate of affirmative action—has "conspired to make the African-American architect professionally invisible."

Following the categories of "accommodation and resistance" theorized by Cornel West, Grant presents four modes of practice in which African-American architects might escape the "mental bondage" and invisibility of their present condition. First, there is "mainstream identity," or what West calls the "Booker T. Temptation"—principally a strategy of accommodating the mainstream power structure. Second, "group insularity" is a strategy by which collective, self-empowering networks like the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA) keep African-American and other marginalized architects informed of mainstream issues while advocating the concerns most relevant to minority practice and education. The third mode is the "independent," an idealistic strategy that locates the black architect as a unique individual within the market. Lastly, the "organic catalyst" refers to those who practice what West describes as the "politics of difference," producing work that occupies the middle ground between accommodation and resistance. Grant, like West, cites African-American architects like Max Bond of Davis Brody Bond Architects in Manhattan and Sharon Sutton of the University of Michigan as exemplary of those who occupy the preferred middle ground of contemporary practice.

Social architecture is the subject of Anthony Ward's essay, "The Suppression of the Social in Design: Architecture as War." His is the least convincing of the contributions because it uses the counterreformation tactics initiated by the editors, although he does offer some useful observations about the history of this brand of building. History, for Ward, is largely dominated by the Enlightenment's bifurcation of architecture-as-art (the culture of taste) and architecture-as-science (the culture of knowledge). In Ward's view, capitalism has dominated both ends of the art-science polemic; thus, competing design theories have been alternately valorized or exorcised from architectural history. He offers history's neglect of architects William Morris and Hannes Meyer as proof that their mutual vision of social architecture has been suppressed because they posed a threat to dominant capitalistic interests. While Ward's conspiracy theory of history is less than rigorous, his observation that both art and science serve the interests of competing networks is insightful. Readers, however, might prefer to gain this insight from writers such as Bruno Latour, who, in *Science and Action*, develops the "actor-network theory," which explicates the social process of fact construction.*

The editors of *Reconstructing Architecture* should be commended for asking readers to consider the social content of architecture through the philosophical questions of Soltan, the ecological concerns of Ingersoll, the feminist sensibilities of Ahrentzen, and the racial insights of Grant. Perhaps the book's most valuable lesson, however, is that arguments are more successful when linguistic means dovetail with political ends. ■

The Advanced Photovoltaic Systems Manufacturing Facility in Fairfield, California, designed by Kiss Cathcart Anders in 1993, uses photovoltaic panels to generate electricity from light rays.
(from *Reconstructing Architecture*)



Note

- * Bruno Latour, *Science and Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).



Against ART

This is an adaptation of an address that Luis Fernández-Galiano delivered in Madrid on November 12, 1997, on the occasion of his induction into the Royal Academy of Doctors, a public institution dedicated to the enhancement of the sciences, letters, and arts. The Royal Academy of Doctors is distinct from Spain's other royal academies in that it is interdisciplinary and closely linked to the country's universities. Dr. Fernández-Galiano is the youngest member to be admitted to the academy since its founding in 1920 under King Alfonso XIII; he was elected to join the ten-member Architecture and Fine Arts section, which also includes musicians and engineers.

by **Luis Fernández-Galiano**

translated by Andrew Cruse

IN TITLING THIS DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES "AGAINST ART,"

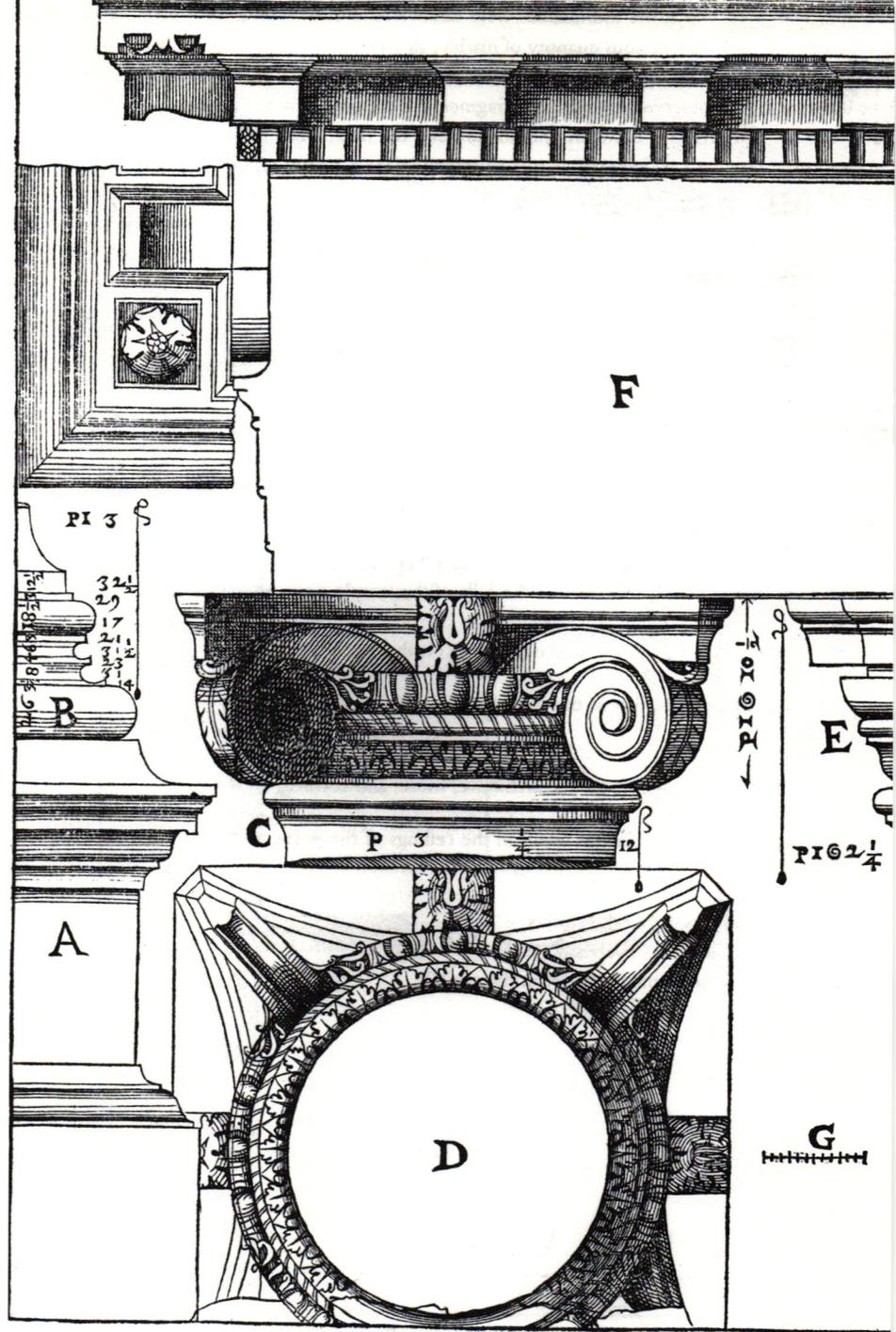
I must ask myself whether my intention is to express antagonism toward the army of self-styled artists who crowd the contemporary cultural panorama, or to conceal a blunt and irascible love for the art of our time. I do not know. But I know that architecture today has been kidnapped by the most trivial and vacuous type of art, and this has cut it off from the rich and nutritious ties it once maintained with other disciplines. In isolation, architecture has become vain and narcissistic, permanently confined to contemplate its own image, in love with itself and its shadow.

In the end I will be told that architecture is one of the arts. But I will hasten to add that it is a useful art, a practical and public art, one that unites artifact and artifice while separating the service-oriented professional from the introverted artist. Of course, architecture can draw nourishment from contemporary art, but an activity with such an omnivorous tradition should not limit itself to this source of formal and intellectual sustenance. Furthermore, it would be a mistake to think that the instruments and objectives of architecture coincide with the very different and hazy ones of art.

Perhaps instead of "Against Art," I should have called this piece "Against the Dictatorship of Art," or "Against the Falsifications of Art," or even "Against the Art That Has Abandoned Us." Or perhaps more to the point, "Against the Superficial and Autistic Leadership of a Disoriented Art That, after Duchamp, Is Incapable of Reconstructing Itself."

Architecture's need for contact with an array of other fields of knowledge cannot be overstated. Such contact was demanded by the first authors of architectural treatises in the classical and Renaissance worlds. Until recently, such connections were so close and intimate that the precise limits of these fields were blurred. It would be impossible to find with certainty the location of architecture on the map of human knowledge, with its myriad overlapping territories. Architecture would be poorly charted indeed if it were placed as a humanist enclave in the great nation of engineering, or, even worse, as a small, barren island of technology in the misty ocean of the arts.

Luis Fernández-Galiano is the editor of *Arquitectura Viva* and *AV Monografías*, and writes regularly for the Spanish newspaper *El País*. He is the author of *El fuego y la memoria* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1992).



While an overemphasis on architecture's many connections can confuse what is specific to it, it is no less than the obsessive observation of boundaries that has closed architecture off from the rest of the world. In exile, it turns about itself, caught in a vicious circle, frantic and nimble as a dervish.

Paradoxically, architecture's retreat and defection to the realm of the plastic arts has resulted in the elevation of a handful of its practitioners to the category of media stars. I say "paradoxically" because such architecture's isolated state seems contrary to its simultaneous extreme exposure in a celebrity-centered (market-oriented) world. But it is precisely the inexplicable nature of creative activity that inspires the media to construct heroic identities around artists of space: their stature grows with their uniqueness or distance from the collective arena, with their careful cultivation of a personal language. The society of the spectacle normalizes the creative exceptions by constantly exhibiting the irrational, the unobtainable, the singular, the subjective.

Fame becomes imaginary compensation for a real loss of power: architecture gains popularity as the architect's capacity to intervene—to really make a difference in the physical form of the city or the territory—declines.

At the height of the avant-garde, architects' demiurgic manner led them to claim for themselves a surely exaggerated role in the material construction of future society. This inflated sense of self-importance has since imploded into a form of narcissism that enables today's architects to feel satisfied with their allocated fifteen minutes of fame. Such an ephemeral objective is out of step with not only the values and ideals of the profession (i.e., service to others), but the basic motivation of any individual who is part of a society: only the nihilistic cynicism of our postmodern condition can weaken the powerful social instinct we all have, reducing it to the arbitration of taste.

The culture of spectacle has been absorbed into universities, publishing houses, and journals, controlling communication at the scholarly, professional, and popular levels alike. The media-genic building might have a healthy, fleshy skin, but its formal perfection conceals an organism without viscera, deboned of purpose and deprived of moral fiber. This absence of essence, of intimacy contrasts scandalously with the abundance of talent and the dazzling technical means available to us. The fluctuations of taste ignite the consumption of images that burn in this bonfire of vanities—a luminous blaze that demands a continuous feeding of ideas and forms.

One can't help but feel irritated by the absurdity of this confused carnival. But more than irritation, one feels fatigue—fatigue before the lyric vacuity of professors who often reduce teaching to emphatic declarations about light, space, and materials; fatigue before the hermetic pedantry of critics who tend to elevate vulgar buildings with aesthetic and philosophical readings; and fatigue before the foolishness of so many architects who feign magisterial airs while lying in wait in a bramble of aphorisms and metaphors. If it is possible, the endless fatigue produced by these intoxicating fictions is worsened by three recent phenomena in architecture: the growing use of computers, the introduction of so-called theory, and the aestheticization of work.

My criticisms of computer technology should not be mistaken for the doubts of a technophobe. Computers have made our lives easier, there is no question—mechanizing dull administrative routines, simplifying structural and budgetary calculations, and making drawing faster. But such ease and simplicity have also promoted the creation of capricious and gratuitous forms, unprecedented free spaces that we still do not know how to use well. Paradoxically, the ease afforded by this tool has brought with it even greater challenges; the simplicity has yielded the possibility of representing forms of extraordinary complexity.

Perhaps, as happened during the Renaissance with the discovery of perspective, a new method of drawing will provoke different ways of designing. But the sculptural, exotic forms that are the greatest freedom afforded by the computer stand in complete contradiction to the mathematical and aesthetic ideals of beauty achieved by an economy of means. The struggle

with the limitations of geometry and construction has been an inexhaustible source for material logic and architectural language. But this is not the first period of history that seeks satisfaction in the arbitrary. Today, fractured spaces, exploded volumes, warped or whirling surfaces, and gravity-defying structures are like winter roses—unexpected flowers that cause as much pleasure as anxiety.

Regarding theory, I first want to note that, in relation to architecture, the term has nothing in common with what it traditionally meant. Traditional theory was little more than a few commonly held beliefs mixed with the solidly pragmatic casuistry of treatises, to which the editors of scholarly anthologies added the manifestos and declarations of this century. Today's architectural theory, by contrast, is a goulash of French poststructuralism and North American "political correctness," which has been cooked up in universities and museums and digested by many young architects and critics on both sides of the Atlantic. This brand of theory tries to make architecture a primarily intellectual activity, focusing on social criticism and well supplied with rhetorical instruments.

Unfortunately, the worthy objectives of much of today's architectural theory conflict with the training of architects (technical and graphic) and the real conditions of their practice. The result is an astonishing production of abstruse texts whose poetic and philosophical intentions are not only remote from any utility, but stranded by conceptual inconsistency, linguistic limitations, and even grammatical mistakes.

Curiously, the critical intentions of these young theoreticians elide the utilitarian dimension of architecture—a dimension that, today, seems of interest only to architects with ecological concerns or those who are working in the developing world. Instead, contemporary theory centers on architecture's aesthetic and plastic components, which, of course, allows the territory of architecture to coincide with that of art. It is on this imprecise field where the venial battles of portable theory are waged.

It is troubling when architecture's aesthetic objectives are reduced to its surface. Still, the cosmetic does not always deserve its negative connotation: makeup itself is not bad, but it can never substitute for a beautiful face and healthy body. This misconception that architecture must seek refuge in its container grows continually. Architects feel increasingly compelled to make a building's wrapping desirable and unique, like the packaging of luxury merchandise.

But what is the role of architects at a time when developers and clients determine the interior spatial organization of buildings, when ordinances and codes define their footprints and envelopes, and when politicians and transportation engineers make large-scale urban decisions? Is it any wonder that many architects, and not only the most cynical, regard their roles as limited to the thin skin of construction? This opinion is, of course, far from original: Beaux-Arts architects acted with almost the same skepticism, and most of eclectic architecture is nothing but permutations and variations on the façade. But the modern break with "façade-ism" greatly expanded architects' responsibility. For those who are unwilling to abandon the broadened limits of their profession, who want to be recognized as architects in the sense expanded during this century, designing exquisite skins may not be enough.

Computer technology, theory, and cosmetics are only symptoms of the artistic affliction that architecture suffers. Computing has, in effect, devastated the Vitruvian *firmitas* and extended architecture's formal liberty; theory has supplanted *utilitas* and in so doing has confined the debate to an aesthetic arena; and cosmetics has become the contemporary equivalent of *venustas*, translating the classical and modern ambitions of "beauty as truth" to "beauty as appearance or fiction." It is this word-fiction that perhaps best expresses the present condition of architecture and culture.

We live in a universe of facsimiles that not only blur the limits of the authentic, but also deprive it of transcendence. Surrounded by copies, we lose interest in distinguishing them from the originals. In the end, the multiplication of identities muddles the singularity of the original; the real and fake become confused in an inextricable amalgam.

We construct fictions without pause or thought, copying buildings, mimicking environments, and staging narratives. We construct fictions in historic centers, in theme parks, in museums. We construct fictions in our own lives, in our imaginations, in our memories. The symbolic universe feeds on these fictions; culture has become a vast landscape of simulacra.

All this is framed by the formidable global expansion of information, which extends technological advances and financial flows throughout the world while flattening traditional knowledge and local identity. Such a world might be more efficient and accessible, but it is also more difficult to inhabit with our innate instincts and habits.

I write all this only to express my uneasiness in the face of changes so dizzying that I am without the mental tools or emotions to adapt to them. At the same time, this is a process that I have no alternative but to regard with hope. Surely every generation confronts the same dilemmas. The survival of the species is predicated on the fact that each new generation, increasingly free from the ballast of old physical and intellectual habits, adjusts to who we are becoming, as who we are and who we have been. It is more than likely that my criticism stems more from incomprehension than clairvoyance, and that much of the behavior I criticize—including my own—is the result of adaptive behavior.

In any case, I do believe that there exists a reasonable anatomical and physiognomic continuity in the human species, just as there must exist a stubborn nucleus of mental continuity that allows us to find common intellectual territory with our predecessors and successors alike, if only traceable for a handful of generations. It is from this conviction (or hope) that I dare to propose a code that establishes honorable and socially responsible limits for architecture, extending its territory to the indispensable arena of ethics, and perhaps of life.



I dare to call my proposition a Vitruvian code, for it has a remote analogy with the precepts of Hippocrates, and mirrors a classic Roman structure (three categories, with a preface and a colophon):

THE ARCHITECT CONSTRUCTS FOR OTHERS, NEVER FOR HIMSELF OR HERSELF; THE ARCHITECT SHOULD LOOK FOR SERVICE, NOT APPLAUSE. WHEREFORE THE ARCHITECT SHOULD ALWAYS PUT ARCHITECTURE AT THE SERVICE OF LIFE, AND NOT LIFE AT THE SERVICE OF ARCHITECTURE.

FIRST

I will build solid and durable buildings, conceived of thinking as much in today as tomorrow; I will use materials and energy judiciously, keeping in mind future generations; I will cautiously and economically employ the wealth of clients, whether public or private.

SECOND

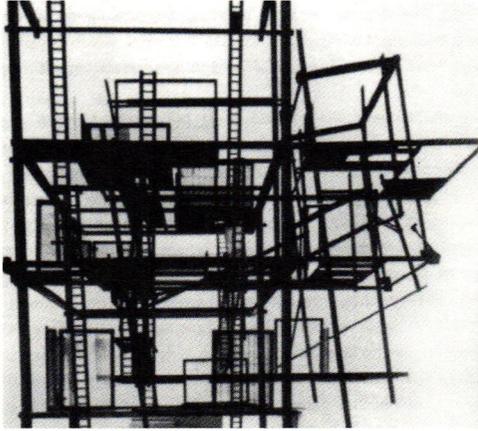
I will design from the close study of the needs and desires of the building's users; I will keep in mind the possible use of the building by the public; I will cautiously site the building in its urban or rural context.

THIRD

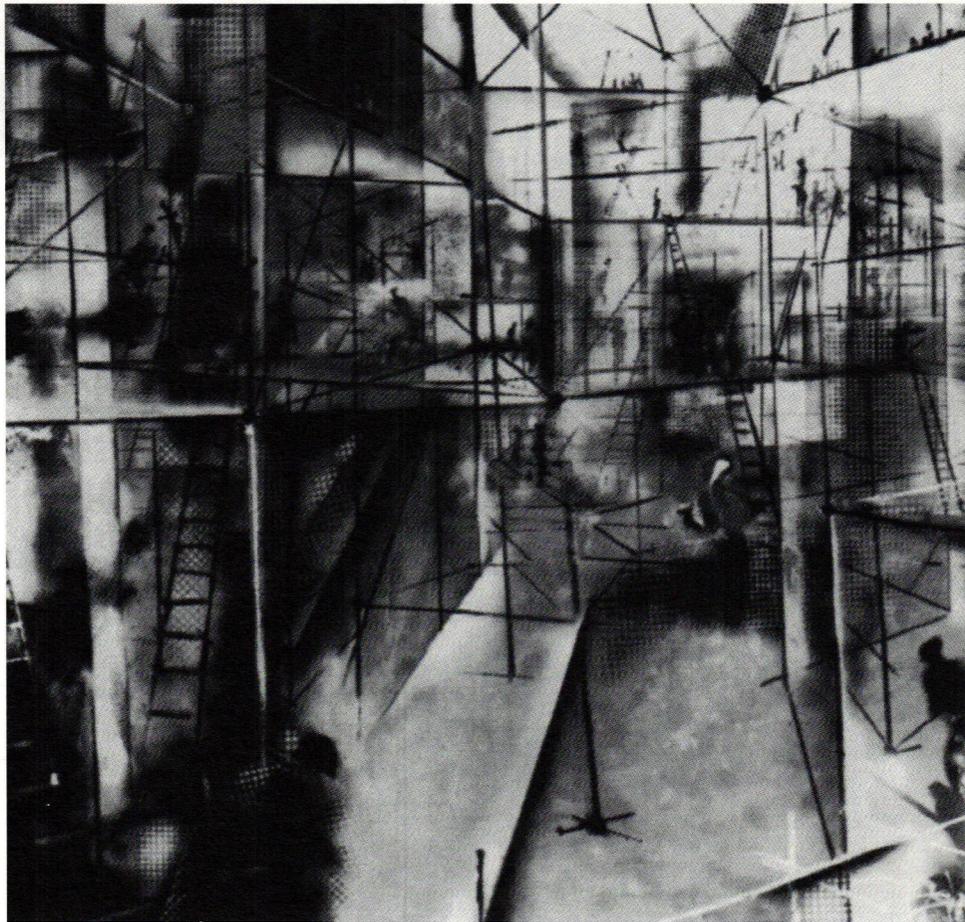
I will give pleasure to the building's users through beauty; I will respect the historic or ecological values that give personality to cities or communities; I will not impose my tastes on the users, clients, or public.

IF THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE COMMISSION DO NOT ALLOW ME TO UPHOLD THIS CODE OF CONDUCT, I WILL ABSTAIN FROM BUILDING, BECAUSE INDIVIDUAL DIGNITY IS MORE HONORABLE THAN PROFESSIONAL OPPORTUNITY AND BECAUSE ARCHITECTURE IS NEVER AS IMPORTANT AS LIFE.





Constant Nieuwenhuys, *New Babylon*, 1967 (above) and *Ode à l'Odéon*, 1969 (right). Constant's utopian city of New Babylon was a mazelike environment that promised to unleash its citizens' creative powers. In New Babylon, individuals could experience the Nietzschean vision of labyrinthian wandering, as they would be free from all social restraint. (from Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity*)



I surely will be reproached that these deontological maxims are at once restrictive and trivial. They neither address the ambiguity of human conduct nor transcend tradition. They are, in effect, defining common ground. So familiar are these basic ideas that I considered the possibility of presenting them under the literary artifice of a found manuscript, so that they could draw authority from their supposed antiquity. Only by placing them at the infancy of architecture could such conventional, common, almost banal concepts regain authority.

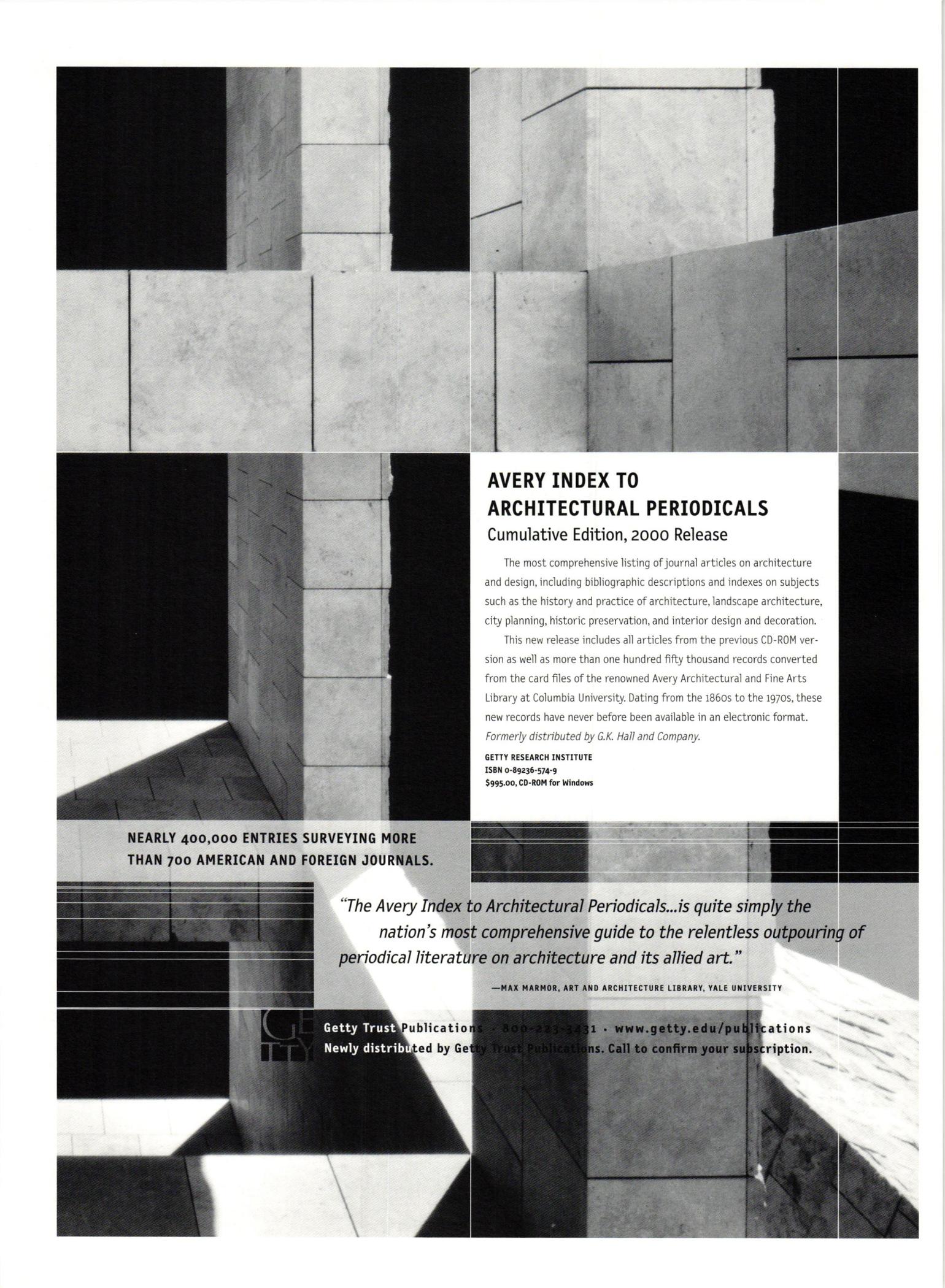
But, it happens that “highbrow” and commercial architecture both stake out their respective territories on the edges of this common ground. Consequently, this common ground begins to acquire the fate of an imaginary place, frequented by declarations and abandoned by actions. This common ground becomes utopian: a place that exists only in intention or hypothetical projects. In this light, it loses its pejorative connotation (for the term itself is a cliché): “common ground” is no longer considered a busy path unworthy of those with the spirit of the explorer, but is regarded instead as a meeting point for physical and social communities. It is thus converted into an intellectual place that does not originate in laziness or routine but in a deliberated proposition that constitutes the solid core of collective convictions: our shared or common ground.

As confusing as this presentation of utopian clichés seems, I believe that, today, only shared convictions can define the imaginary space of the project of architecture. In a democratic society, dialogue defines a common denominator of intentions and beliefs, and on this small yet solid foundation, an approximation of the future will be built. Beyond the turbulent evaporation of polemics, the contemporary utopia will rise above the resistant residue of the cliché.

As I have already stated, the common ground today is uninhabited: it has been abandoned by highbrow architecture, which has adopted the value system of art, in which originality reigns supreme, and by commercial architecture, which is governed by profit and thus has no aversion to copies and multiplication (of buildings, of communities, of images, and so on). The most powerful architectural patrons of our day use artistic intention as an instrument of differentiation, rewarding the individual for his or her singularity. Meanwhile, the current vanguard embraces the market with an opportunistic nihilism that manifests itself like superrealism. I mention these two phenomena as if they are opposing realities, but, in fact, the absorption of architecture by art does not complicate its subordination to the market. On the contrary, architecture’s severing of ties with other disciplines has weakened its critical capacity; its simplification has abetted its easy digestion in the mighty stomach of the economy.

We have the urge to seize a solid mast of common convictions, yet we end up tied to it in disgust, prisoners of an anxiety that rules out melancholy or reproach. Orphaned, without identity, we would be well advised to search for architecture’s place on a common ground—a traveled one, worn from use, relieving us of the unbearable weight of indifference.

Gorged with information, we peruse knowledge in chips and bits and crumbs. It is possible that knowledge resides in the horizontal and impartial landscape of indifference. Devoid of desire, amnesiac from anxiety, blissfully oblivious to art’s ephemeral bonfires, we float impassively with the current of time, the rebellious and the timid among us alike, drifting together toward our common destiny, our common ground. ■



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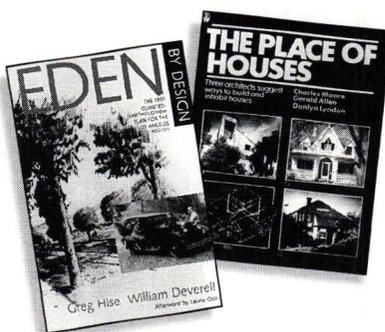
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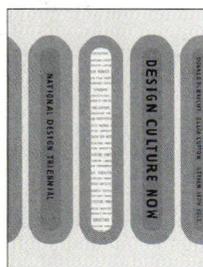
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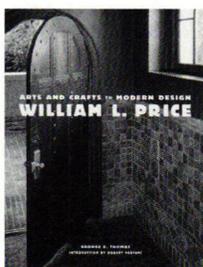


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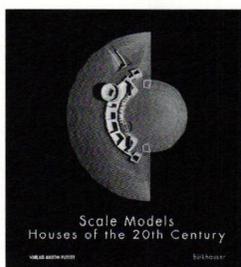


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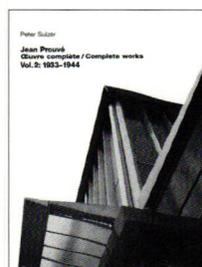


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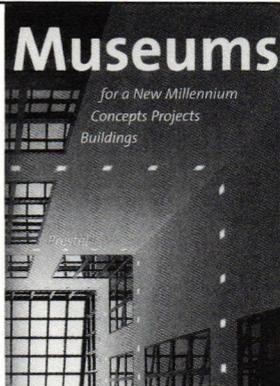
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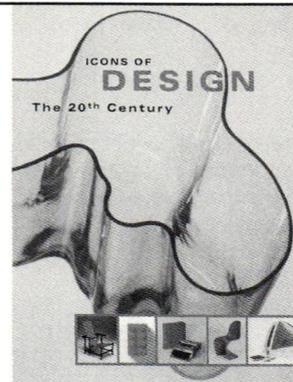
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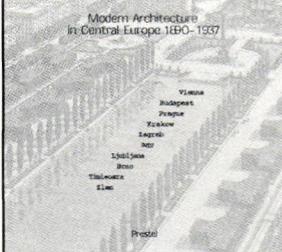


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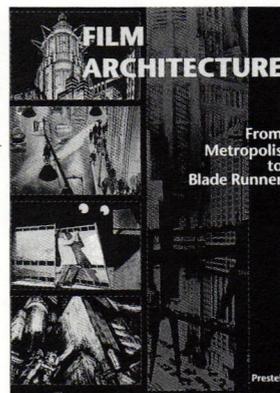
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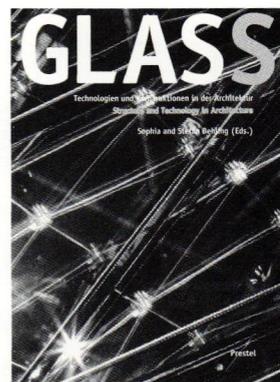
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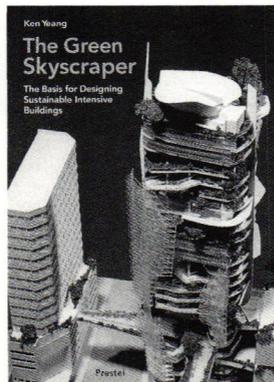
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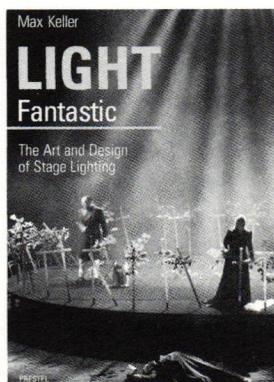
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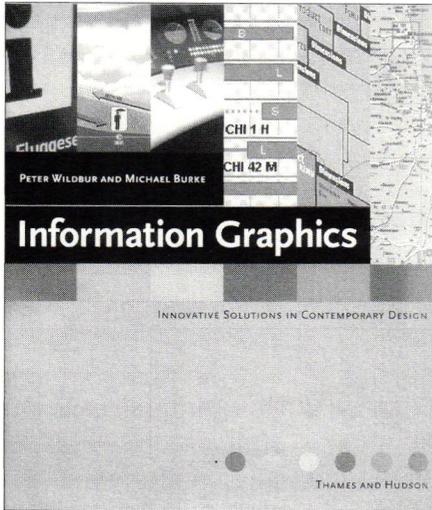
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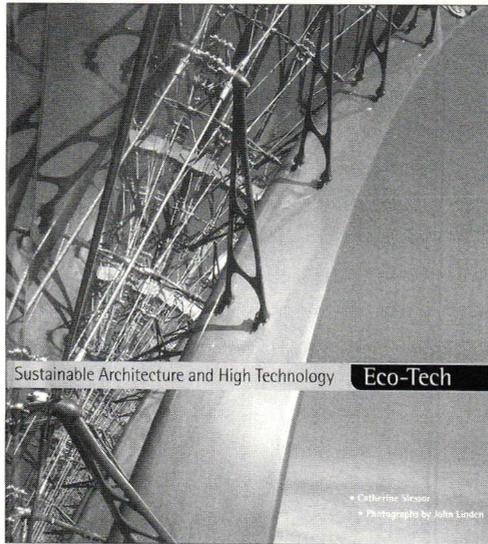
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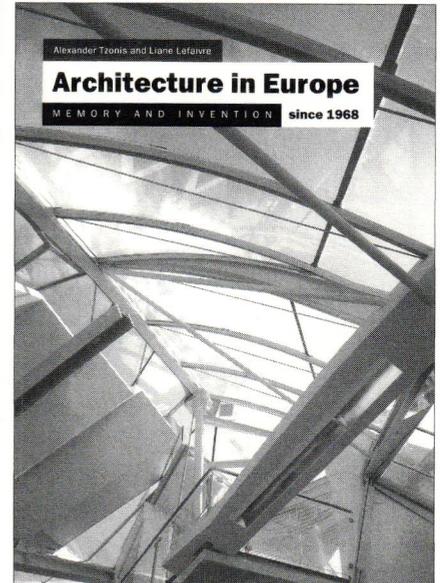
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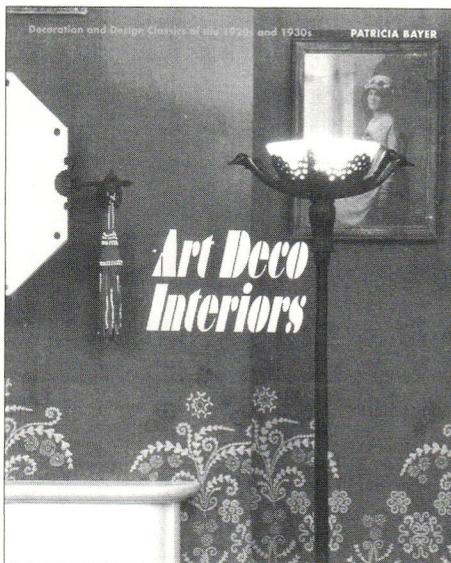
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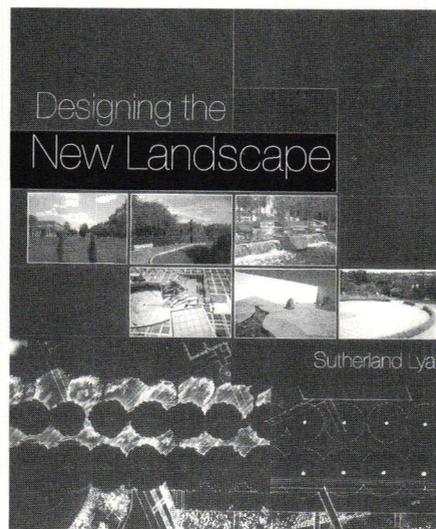
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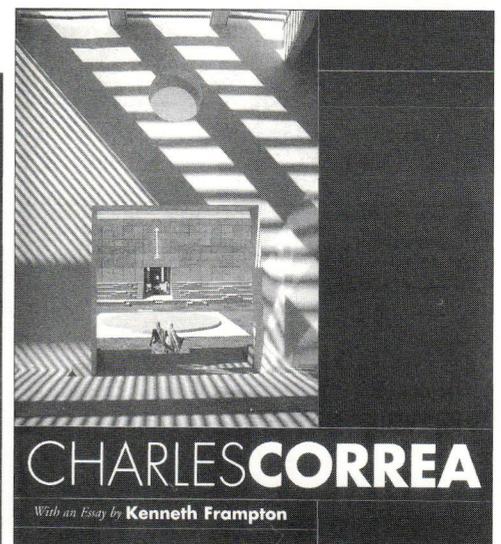
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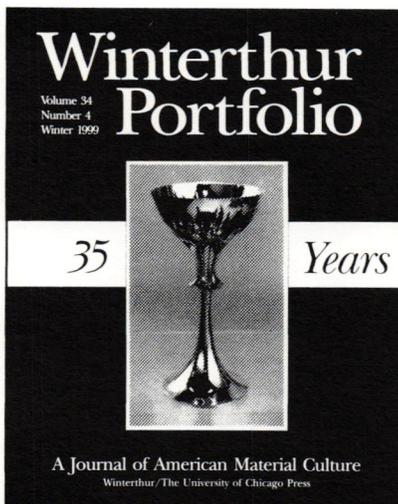
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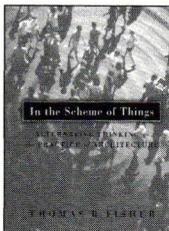
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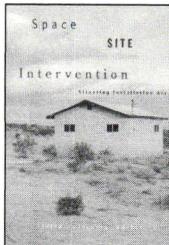


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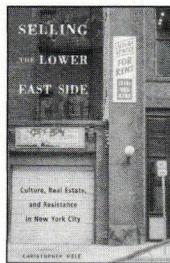


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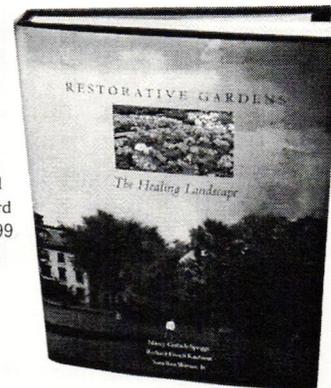
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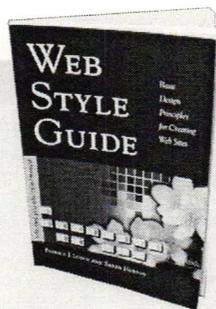
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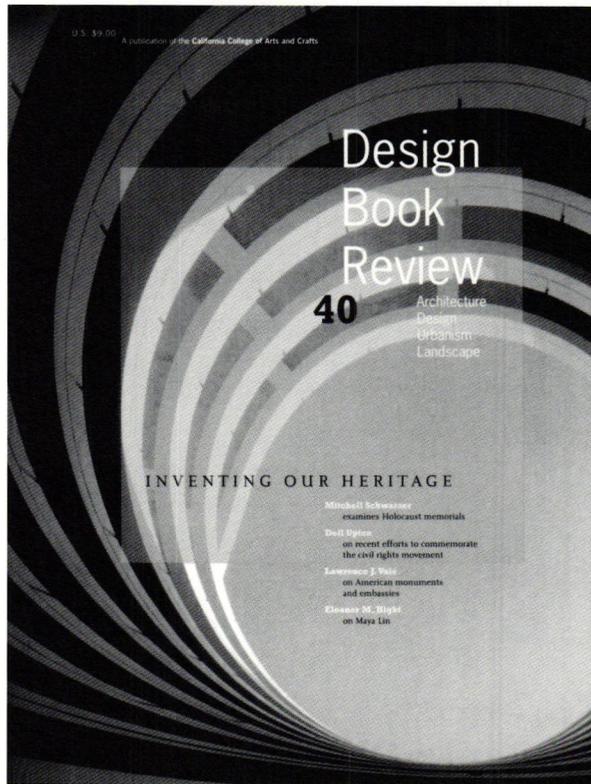
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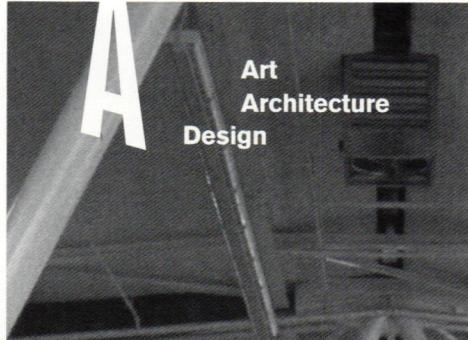
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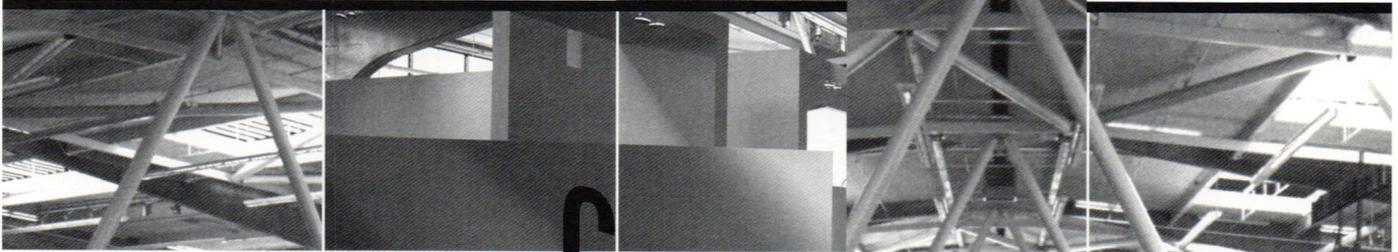


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a multimedia work presented to visitors at the Philips
Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels world's fair.
(from Marc Treib, *Space Calculated in Seconds*)

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fall/2000

Coming up



Jill Pearlman
on why only a few architects achieve fame

Andrew Blauvelt
on Tibor Kalman

Tim Culvahouse
on the state of architectural theory

Sandy Isenstadt
on visual culture studies