

A Journal for Ideas and  
Criticism in Architecture

Peter Eisenman  
Kenneth Frampton  
Mario Gandelsonas

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Architecture and Urban Studies

January 1974

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Physical Context/Cultural Context:  
Including it All

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Character and Composition; or Some  
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## **Theory**

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## Editorial Statement

As OPPOSITIONS advances from its first to its second issue it begins to define itself, irrespective of what the editors may attempt to establish as their joint editorial line. While this may immediately render any editorial statement superfluous, we nonetheless remain conscious of the need to situate OPPOSITIONS within a critical context.

It must have occurred to the readers of our first issue that OPPOSITIONS presents itself in a similar vein as the so-called "little magazines" of the twenties and thirties, and this is scarcely an accident since the editors continue to be admirers of such polemical journals as *De Stijl* and *L'Esprit Nouveau*. At the same time it is patently obvious that this is hardly an opportune moment for the spontaneous emergence of that kind of polemical magazine; the time for this kind of polemical discourse has passed and we have no interest in resurrecting it.

Nonetheless, as editors we have little desire to perpetuate the tenets of the liberal tradition; to publish texts simply because they are good examples of their kind or solely because they represent yet another idiosyncratic point of view. At the same time, it must be made clear that we are not concerned with presenting current issues in the same manner as the established architectural magazines, with their need to define and market the latest tendencies in built work. Rather, we are concerned with an aspect which must precede any built work — the ideas which inform any architecture.

In short, what we are striving for is the inducement of a number of specific discourses; namely, the critique of built work as a vehicle for ideas; the reassessment of the past as a means of determining the necessary relations existing between built form and social values; the establishment of a spectrum of theoretical discourses linking ideology and built form; the documentation of little known archival material as a means for advancing scholarship and thought in the field as a whole; and finally, the publication of reviews and letters that have a direct bearing on the discourses at hand. As to the last, they seem to us to be primarily twofold: firstly, an ongoing discourse on the place of physical form in architecture and planning today; and secondly, the indivisible ideological and socio-political implications of architectural production as a whole. For us the sum total of these efforts constitutes a new polemical form which is dialectical in nature rather than rhetorical.

This present issue continues our efforts to stimulate the presentation of arguments relevant to these discourses. Some of the pieces treat both the place of physical form and its socio-political relevance as one and the same issue: in the realm of contemporary issues, Stuart Cohen's unconsciously ideological critique of recent American housing and William Ellis' review of Reyner Banham's ecology of Los Angeles; in the realm of history, Colin Rowe's concern for the vicissitudes of such lost concepts as *character* and *composition* and by implication their relevance, if any, to our task today; in the area of re-

lated arts, Rosalind Krauss' enquiry into meaning in contemporary sculpture. Finally, in the documents section, we present Julia Bloomfield's annotated bibliography of the works and writings of Alison and Peter Smithson; reprints of three little known texts by Philip Johnson from the 1930's; and Rem Koolhaas' and Gerrit Oorthuys' commentary on a previously unavailable project by Ivan Leonidov.

Thus, whatever our differences, OPPOSITIONS continues in this issue to assert our belief in the importance of theory as the critical basis of significant practice. We deplore the subtle absorption of architecture into the cyclical processes of relevancy and obsolescence. In subsequent issues we shall surely give the realists their due, but not without exposing them to critical reaction. And finally we believe that, if culture cannot transform the relationships of production, it certainly can make one feel the necessity.

Peter Eisenman  
Kenneth Frampton  
Mario Gandelsonas

Stuart Cohen

Stuart Cohen's essay is of particular interest for the editors of OPPOSITIONS because it represents the ideas of an architect of a younger generation. While Cohen was a student of Colin Rowe's his essay seems to represent a break from any doctrinaire Rowe position, toward a possible synthetic viewpoint. Through the analysis of two pairs of buildings Cohen attempts to interrelate notions used by opposing architectural tendencies — *inclusivism* and *exclusivism* under the theoretical construct of *contextualism*. This analysis brings to light both the limitations and the overlapping involved in the former terms, and thus the need for a more elaborate construct for these notions.

Stuart E. Cohen was born in Chicago in 1942. He has Bachelors and Masters degrees in architecture from Cornell University. While working in New York his design for a low-income public housing project won the firm he was with a *Progressive Architecture* design citation. Mr. Cohen has been a visiting critic at Columbia University. He currently has his own architectural practice in Chicago and is a Lecturer in architecture at the University of Illinois at the Chicago Circle.

2 Either consciously or unconsciously, architecture comes to embody the most stable and persistent values of a culture, and through this institutions become symbolized by their buildings; their values become associated with architectural forms.<sup>1</sup> These forms represent the architect's judgments of the natural world and the built environment, and it is this judgmental aspect of architecture that is at issue in current architectural critiques. To understand these critiques it is necessary to understand what modern architecture was and what judgments it implied.

The Modern movement in architecture presented a pseudo-industrial style of building that was intended to replace the academic eclecticism of the Beaux Arts — a style no longer seen as evocative or symbolic of the times. To do this it employed imagery related to machinery rather than to previous building, thus symbolizing its belief in a social and a physical utopia to be created by technology. As an utopian architecture, it generalized and idealized even the most specific and particular requirements in relation to its millennial fantasies. Modern architecture was a revolution whose ideas succeeded and whose anticipated utopia never ensued, making it impossible, historically, to judge it as better than what it sought so insistently to replace. This revolution's accepted premises, its architectural ideas and anticipated utopia, are still with us, and they may rightfully be characterized as having been exclusive of visual and social values other than its own. This exclusive stance was reflected by an insistence on a cultural, symbolic, and physical detachment from aspects of an existing context. The architectural manifestations of this were geometric, involving a fixation on buildings as free standing objects and as abstract form. This purist and abstract use of geometry<sup>2</sup> implied a Platonic and idealized view of the world. As a detached object the modern building could stand for, and literally represent, a fragment of the "new order," the better world to come, which would be realized when everything old had been torn down and replaced. Thus Modern architecture as a set of strategies for the planning and siting of buildings seemed to condemn all existing architecture by implication and any adjacent building by direct confrontation. This stance, when described pejoratively, has been

called *exclusivism*, while an enlightened and unexclusive architecture would exhibit tendencies of *inclusivism*.

As a mode of critique, inclusivism is a point of view associated with the writing and the work of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Charles Moore, and Vincent Scully. They argue that contemporary architecture, the legacy of a "heroic age" of Modern architecture, is exclusive, that it excludes from consideration most aspects of reality not provided for in its received polemic. Inclusivism's most articulate spokesman, Robert Venturi, in a highly personal statement, which also indicates his dependence on "pop" in the other visual arts, describes the variety of realities that he feels an inclusive architecture should synthesize: "I like elements which are hybrid rather than 'pure,' compromising rather than 'clean,' distorted rather than 'straightforward,' ambiguous rather than 'articulated,' perverse as well as impersonal, boring as well as 'interesting,' conventional rather than 'designed,' accommodating rather than excluding, redundant rather than simple, vestigial as well as innovating, inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct and clear. I am for messy vitality over obvious unity."<sup>3</sup> This "messy vitality," according to Venturi, seems to be a "pop" interest in what Charles Moore has called "the vitality and vulgarity of real commerce."<sup>4</sup> Extrapolating from a reading of Venturi or Moore,<sup>5</sup> one can make a valid work of architecture out of anything that is at hand: commercial or arcane symbols and forms, the relationship of a building to a site or context, the explicit trappings of a culture, or a local vernacular style — all of which presume that architecture is, and is to be judged by the presence of architectural ideas, images and that it is as well a formal organization.

Recently, inclusivism, as represented by Venturi's work, seems to have abandoned analysis of formal organization as a part of the critique.<sup>6</sup> In *Learning from Las Vegas* by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, Modern architecture is criticized entirely on issues of symbolism. Buildings are "ducks" or "decorated sheds." Modern architecture, the argument goes, by abandoning the use of applied decoration, began to decorate its buildings by articulating building elements such as structure



Figure 1. Long Island Duckling, from Peter Blake's God's Own Junkyard.

1.

and mechanical systems. This has resulted in the tendency to grossly deform simple buildings to serve the purpose of decoration, thus turning the buildings themselves into decoration.<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of Venturi's argument, it seems that decoration equals symbolism, for we are offered the Long Island Duckling (fig. 1), a roadside building deformed into a symbol — the “duck” — where *building equals symbol*. What is suggested as an alternative is the simple, straightforward building, the shed to which decoration is applied — the “decorated shed” — or *building plus symbol*. Through the continued citing of examples that only illustrate this issue, inclusivism now seems to deal almost entirely with architectural imagery, suggesting that this is to be taken as the sole dimension for evaluation. This is unfortunate. The chosen forms and their sources may now be clearer,<sup>8</sup> but what is the intended relationship of these forms to formal structure and of formal structure to meaning? Up to now it has been clear what inclusive architecture was *not*, but now, with its emphasis even further removed from formal analysis, as in *Complexity and Contradiction*, it is unclear what the organizational strategies for the forms of an inclusive architecture might be.

The idea of including by recognition or replication the defining aspects of a local physical environment is an empirical theory, or rather a set of design strategies, derived from the urban theories of Colin Rowe and presently being called *contextualism*.<sup>9</sup> These strategies, since they deal largely with urban models, are relatively detached from references to specific architectural imagery. For example, issues of site planning dealing with the relationship of one building to another are not seen as prescribing a building's architectural vocabulary, that is, its style. Contextual strategies and the general critique they imply began with the recognition of the inadequacy of Modern architectural design theory to deal with the traditional city as well as it dealt with the suburban site, its presumed ideal. This involved certain assumptions. The traditional city was seen as a solid with corridor streets, squares, and parks as intentional voids rather than as residual space. These were considered as being organized by grid, radial, linear, or composite propositions. Overlaid on the tradi-

tional city was the idea, if not always the fact, of the twentieth century city: free-standing buildings in a park-like setting. This was taken to represent our cities as they are to be found today. Urban formal typologies were to be treated as transcultural, that is to say, applicable without need for functionalist rationales (for if Americans won't promenade in urban plazas perhaps they will ice skate in them). Since an exemplar used was not a literal model for solving problems but an illustration of various modes of organizing and structuring urban form, one could compare plans at widely differing scales and buildings of widely differing use.<sup>10</sup> Further, it was assumed that one could morally operate in this way, making decisions that did not directly relate to many of our urban problems because Modern architecture had already amply illustrated the inability of built form alone to solve problems of largely social or economic origin.<sup>11</sup> These assumptions were not seen as an argument against the need for social relevancy in urban planning and architecture; rather it was felt that other values were also important. These values, largely visual and spatial, were, like a specific design solution, to be intuited from an accepted local context, a site and its surroundings. The design process was always to be empirical in its recognition of exigencies and irregularities. It was to produce a physical continuity of urban form that, if not literally an extension of the style of the adjacent architecture and urban fabric, would suggest the process of accretion by which the traditional city had developed. Design strategies would be largely those of infilling, completion, and occasionally subtraction or replacement as seen appropriate to a particular site. Ultimately these strategies were akin to renovations, the successful renovation belying its newness to appear locked into and dependent on its specific physical context, seeming to be that which it replaced. Two modes for accomplishing this were suggested. They dealt with either local or previously identified urban forms. These were the strategies of *response* and the *deformation of ideal types*. Without elaborating on these,<sup>12</sup> they might be simply illustrated by several building projects. Examples of modern buildings of *response*, or buildings made from the *outside in* would be Aalto's Pension Institute in Helsinki (1952) (fig. 2), which is the terminus of a terraced park; 3