Critical Architecture

Between Culture and Form

That architecture, as activity and knowledge, is fundamentally a cultural enterprise may hardly seem a contentious proposition. And yet questions concerning the precise nature of the reciprocal influences between culture and architectural form bring opposing theories of architecture and its interpretation into forceful play.¹

In this essay I shall examine a critical architecture, one resistant to the self-confirming, conciliatory operations of a dominant culture and yet irreducible to a purely formal structure disengaged from the contingencies of place and time. A reinterpretation of a few projects by Mies van der Rohe will provide examples of a critical architecture that claims for itself a place between the efficient representation of preexisting cultural values and the wholly detached autonomy of an abstract formal system.

The proposition of a critical realm between culture and form is not so much an extension of received views of interpretation as it is a challenge to those views that claim to exhaust architectural meaning in considerations of only one side or the other. It will be helpful, therefore, to begin with a brief review of two prevalent interpretive perspectives that make just such a claim.
Architecture as an instrument of culture

The first position emphasizes culture as the cause and content of built form; the task of the interpreter, then, becomes the study of objects and environments as signs, symptoms, and instruments of cultural values. On this view architecture is essentially an epiphenomenon, dependent on socioeconomic, political, and technological processes for its various states and transformations. Moreover, as a functional support for human institutions and as a reification of a collective volition, architecture ennobles the culture that produces it; architecture reconfirms the hegemony of culture and helps to assure its continuity. Accordingly, the optimum relationship to be established between culture and form is one of correspondence, the latter efficiently representing the values of the former.

The temporal convention of interpretation is, on this view, retrospective. Architecture is seen as already completed; the critic or historian attempts to restore an architectural object to its original meaning. Misunderstanding is presumed to arise naturally because of the changes in architecture, language, and world view that have taken place in the time separating the architectural object from the interpreter; the meaning must therefore be recovered by a disciplined reconstruction of the cultural situation in which the object originated. Starting from the documents, recorded actions, and artifacts which are the base material of the historical world, understanding is seen as essentially a self-transposition or imaginative projection backward in time. When this historical method is of sufficient fidelity, an «objective and true» explanation of the object in question results. It is supposed that the only alternative to the strict methodological recovery of the cultural situation at the time of the object's origin is the denial of any historical objectivity and capitulation to the idea that all schemes of interpretation are hopelessly subjective.²

Architecture as autonomous form

The opposite position begins with the assumption that the only alternative to a strict, factual recovery of the originating situation is the renunciation of a single «truth,» and advocates a proliferation of interpretations based solely on form. Interpretations made from this second position are characterized by the comparative absence of historical concerns in favor of attention to the autonomous architectural object and its formal operations—how its parts have been put together, how it is a wholly integrated and equilibrated system that can be understood without external references, and as important, how it may be reused, how its constituent parts and processes may be recombined.

The temporal convention of interpretation here is that of an ideal moment in a purely conceptual space; architectural operations are imagined to be spontaneous, internalized—that is, outside circumstantial reality—and assimilable as pure idea. Architectural form is understood to be produced in a particular time and place, of course, but the origin of the object is not allowed to constrain its meaning. The intent is precisely to dismiss any of the worldly, circumstantial, or socially contaminated content of history, because such subject matter would necessarily impinge upon the intellectual liberty of criticism and the availability of the formal strategies for reuse. Architectural form can be read and interpreted, of course, yet misreadings and misunderstandings are understood to occur routinely, and with benefit. In any case, there is a conscious avoidance of any historical or material fact other than those of a dislodged formal system. The way in which a building as a cultural object in time is possessed, rejected, or achieved is not addressed.³
Such an approach has not been entirely unhealthy for architectural interpretation. It has done away with testimonies rhetorically proclaiming a work’s greatness and humanistic worth on the basis of its accurate representation of the dominant culture. It has developed a specialized vocabulary enabling critics to talk seriously, technically, and precisely about the architectural object as distinct from other kinds of objects. Furthermore, so long as we construe architecture as essentially dependent on or representative of something else, we cannot see what it does itself; so long as we expect to understand architecture in terms of some anterior process, we cannot see an architecture that is, paradoxically, both the end of representation and the beginning of something quite its own.

Nevertheless, the absolute autonomy of form and its superiority over historical and material contingencies is proclaimed, not by virtue of its power in the world, but by virtue of its admitted powerlessness. Reduced to pure form, architecture has disarmed itself from the start, maintaining its purity by acceding to social and political inefficacy.

Moreover, this formalist position risks collapsing into an interpretive scientism not unlike the one it seeks to criticize. If attempts to recover «history as it really happened» display a quite overt emulation of the positivist methodology of the natural sciences, the formalist attitude too often falls unwittingly into its own scientism as formal categories become more rigidly defined and entrenched. When priority is ascribed to formal categories and operations that claim to be free of history and circumstance, interpretive analysis risks simply reaffirming what its formal categories predict. The supposed universality of any one kind of formal analysis obscures the fact that critical methods are formed through examination of a necessarily limited set of exemplars, and that these paradigms emanate from a specific culture—they do not come to us untainted. It also obscures the fact that the methods of study of these objects are themselves part of a larger complex ensemble of relationships, are contaminated by their own worldliness, and are legitimized by some other cultural authority. A perhaps unforeseen consequence of this idealization of object and method is that architecture is denied its special status as a cultural object with a causation, presence, and duration of its own.

The worldliness of architecture

The two positions sketched above are symptomatic of a pervasive dichotomy in architectural theory and criticism. One side describes artifacts as instruments of the self-justifying, self-perpetuating hegemony of culture; the other side treats architectural objects in their most disinfected, pristine state, as containers of a privileged principle of internal coherence. An alternative interpretive position which cuts across this dichotomy would bear not only a more robust description of the artifacts, but also the more intricate analysis demanded by artifacts situated explicitly and critically in the world—in culture, in theories of culture, in theories of interpretation itself.

A discussion of a few projects by Mies van der Rohe will draw attention to the fact that an architectural object, by virtue of its situation in the world, is an object whose interpretation has already commenced but is never complete. Historical contingency and circumstantiality, as well as the artifact’s persisting sensuous particularity, must all be considered as incorporated in the architectural object; they saturate the very essence of the work. Each architectural object places itself in a specific situation in the world, so to speak, and its manner of doing this constrains what can be done with it in interpretation. The particular works by Mies to be examined are those I would describe as critical. They might also be called resistant and oppositional. This is an architecture that cannot be reduced either to a conciliatory representation of external forces or to a dogmatic, reproducible formal system. If a critical architecture is to be worldly and self-aware simultaneously, its definition is in its difference from other cultural manifestations and from a priori categories or methods.

K. Michael Hayes
The critical architecture of Mies van der Rohe

Among the principal problems the intellectual faced in the first half of the twentieth century was the acute anxiety that derived from the chaotic metropolitan experience. In the essay «The Metropolis and Mental Life,» the sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel described this condition as «the intensification of nervous stimulation» resulting from the «the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions. These are the psychological conditions which the metropolis creates.» The typical consequence of this nervenleben, according to Simmel, is a blase attitude—a blunting of discrimination, an indifference to value, a languid collectivity. «In this phenomenon the nerves find in the refusal to react to their stimulation the last possibility of accommodating to the contents and forms of metropolitan life. The self-preservation of certain personalities is bought at the price of devaluing the whole objective world, a devaluation which in the end unavoidablyDrag one's own personality down into a feeling of the same worthlessness.»

The problem for the intellectual, then, was how to oppose this debilitating dismay, but first how to reveal it—how to provide a cognitive mechanism with which to register the intense changes continually experienced in the modern city. Many of the century's early artistic experiments, from the woodcuts of Edvard Munch to the novels of Franz Kafka, may be seen as attempts to articulate the abject despair of the individual caught by impersonal and incomprehensible forces. The reklamearchitektur (advertising architecture) of Eric Mendelsohn and the factories of Hans Poelzig made manifest, as if to pin down and contemplate, the dynamism, the contradictions, and the disjunctures in the processes and reasoning of commerce and industry. On the other hand Dada's ferocious nihilism was an explicit attempt to demonstrate the futility of conventional modes of reasoning in the face of the chaotic city. As Jean Arp put it, «Dada wished to destroy the hoaxes of reason and to discover an unreasoned order.» And Mondrian named the city itself as the ultimate form toward which de Stijl tended. «The genuinely Modern artist sees the metropolis as Abstract living converted into form; it is nearer to him than nature.» It is against this metropolitan predicament that the early work of Mies van der Rohe should be seen.
The rather startling image of the 1922 skyscraper project, published in the second issue of G, comprises two architectural propositions. One, a result of experiments already begun in Mies's Friedrichstrasse project, is a building surface qualified no longer by patterns of shadow on an opaque material but by the reflections and refractions of light by glass. The other, a radical departure from even the earlier skyscraper studies, is a building form conceived not in terms of separate, articulated masses related to one another by a geometrically derived core, but as a complex unitary volume that does not permit itself to be read in terms of an internal formal logic. With these two related propositions Mies confronted the problem of physically and conceptually relating the architectural object to the city. The glass curtain wall—alternately transparent, reflective, or refractive depending on light conditions and viewing positions—absorbs, mirrors, or distorts the immediate images of city life. The convex, faceted surfaces are perceptually contorted by the invasion of circumstantial images, while the reflection each concavity receives on its surface is that of its own shadow, creating gaps which exacerbate the disarray.
These surface distortions accompany and accentuate the formal inscrutability of the volumetric configuration. In classically derived form, the viewer can grasp an antecedent logic of the object, deciphering the relationships between its parts and connecting every part to a coherent formal theme; the alternative posited by Mies is an object intractable to decoding by formal analysis. It is impossible, for example, to reduce the whole to a number of constituent parts related by some internal armature or transformed through some formal operation; indeed, no such compositional relationships exist. Neither is it possible to explicate the object as a deflection from some type; Mies has rejected the meanings that such classical design methods tend to promote. Instead he has invested meaning in the sense of surface and volume that the building assumes in a particular time and place, in a contextually qualified moment.

Mies insists that an order is immanent in the surface itself and that the order is continuous with and dependent upon the world in which the viewer actually moves. This sense of surface and volume, severed from the knowledge of an internal order or a unifying logic, is enough to wrench the building from the atemporal, idealized realm of autonomous form and install it in a specific situation in the real world of experienced time, open to the chance and uncertainty of life in the metropolis. Mies here shares with Dada an antagonism against a priori and reasoned order; he plunges into the chaos of the new city and seeks another order within it through a systematic use of the unexpected, the aleatory, the inexplicable.

This solicitation of experience is intrinsic to the meaning of the work; it serves to identify and individuate the work itself as an event having sensuous particularity and temporal duration, both of which are infrangible to its capacity for producing and conveying meaning. Nevertheless, Mies's skyscraper project is not conciliatory to the circumstances of its context. It is a critical interpretation of its worldly situation.
In the skyscraper project of 1922 Mies approached a radically new conception of reciprocity between the corporeality of the architectural object and the images of culture that surround it; by 1928—in projects like the Adam building on the Leipzigerstrasse in Berlin, the bank in Stuttgart, and the competition for the Alexanderplatz in Berlin—he seems to have diverted his efforts. These projects abstain from any dialogue with the physical particularities of their contexts; as peremptorily demonstrated in the drawings, the glass-walled blocks could be reproduced on any site with no significant manipulation of their form. Though each building unit has been adapted to the shape and size of its own lot (for example, the Alexanderplatz project), the relentless sameness of the units and their undifferentiated order tend to deny the possibility of attaching significance to the placement or arrangement of the forms. But the repudiation of a priori formal logic as the primary locus of meaning is precisely what is at issue; it is this repudiation that links the projects of 1928 to the research of 1922. Meaning is made a function of impersonal productive systems rather than of formal operations or of representational devices.
Both conceptions of the architectural object—as the efficient embodiment of a dominant system of values, and as the uncircumstanced existence of autonomous form—are seriously challenged, if not defeated, by the way in which this silent clearing claims a place in the world. First there is the recognition of the reciprocity between the culturally qualified, empirical conditions of building production and the practice of architecture. Mies's obdurate refusal to manipulate his objects to conform to any a priori formal logic has the effect of repudiating internal formal operations as a source of the objects' meaning. Second, though Mies succeeds in directing the architectural meaning to the outside—to what might be called cultural space—there is the insistence that architecture does not «honestly» represent the technical, social, or economic conditions that produced it. Indeed, Mies's architecture conceals the «real» origins of its formation by displacing them with a material substitute—an irreducibly architectural object. It effectively cancels the complex network of colliding forces in which architecture originates to present us with the silent fact of its existence. «Since the facts have the floor, let anyone who has anything to say come forward and keep his mouth shut,» wrote Karl Kraus. 10 Mies's silent architecture, following Kraus's dictum, comes forward to occupy its cultural space actively; it displaces what would have been in its place. Critical architecture pushes aside other kinds of discourse or communication in order to place before the world a culturally informed product, part of whose self-definition includes the implication of discontinuity and difference from other cultural activities.

Distinguishing architecture from the forces that influence architecture—the conditions established by the market and by taste, the personal aspirations of its author, its technical origins, even its purpose as defined by its own tradition—became the objective of Mies. To achieve this, he placed his architecture in a critical position between culture as a massive body of self-perpetuating ideas and form supposedly free of circumstance. Our observations can be verified against the masterwork of Mies's early career, the 1929 German Pavilion in Barcelona. With respect to our analysis thus far, this project initially appears polemical and self-critical. The Pavilion has been widely regarded as the most immaculate transcription of the modern spatial conception: a synthesis of Wright's horizontal planes and the abstract compositions of the Suprematist-Elementarists; with honorific nods to the walls of Berlage («let alone from floor to cornice»), the materials of Loos, and the podium and columns of Schinkel; all processed through the spatial conceptions of de Stijl. This seems to claim for the Pavilion a rarefied spatial order that presents itself as an a priori mental construct rather than a palpable worldly object.

However, this is precisely not the order of Mies: «The idealistic principle of order . . . with its over-emphasis on the ideal and formal, satisfies neither our interest in simple reality nor our practical commonsense.» 11

The Barcelona Pavilion begins with a horizontally extended space which is described by the uninterrupted roof slab, its relation to the columns and walls, and the corresponding constancy of section and volume implied by the floor plane. Space is, quite literally, continuous between the Pavilion and the plaza in front of the Palace Alfonso XIII. The Pavilion more specifically engages its site through the careful contrast between the long travertine walls, the roof slab, and the unbroken palace wall. All this solicits the viewer to walk through the building, but the limpid harmony of the exterior is confounded in the experience of the spatial succession of the interior.
Mies van der Rohe
German Pavilion
in Barcelona
1929

German Pavilion
in Barcelona
interior

German Pavilion
in Barcelona
interior
There is no prescribed logic of passage; the composition is neither a relational hierarchy of component parts nor a series of identical units repeated in a potentially endless chain. What is presented instead is an assemblage of different parts of disparate materials: the travertine pavement and walls surrounding the large pool, the marble walls facing the court, tinted glass diaphragms, the onyx slab and light wall, the chromium columns and glazing bars. The relationships among these parts are in constant flux as one moves through the building. Because there is no conceptual center to organize the parts or transcend our perception of them, the particular quality of each material is registered as a kind of absolute; space itself becomes a function of the specificities of the materials.

The normal system of expectations about materials, however, is quickly shattered as materials begin to contradict their own nature. Supporting columns dissolve in an invasion of light on their surfaces; the highly polished green Tinian marble reflects the highlights of the chromium glazing bars and seems to become transparent, as does the onyx slab; the green-tinted glass, in turn, becomes an insuperable mirrored screen; the pool in the small court—shielded from the wind and lined in black glass—is a perfect mirror, in which stands George Kolbe’s “Dancer.” The fragmentation and distortion of the space is total. Any transcendent order of space and time that would confer an overarching unity onto this assemblage is systematically and utterly dispersed. Mies has constructed a labyrinth that denies us access to the ideal moment of organization lying beyond the actual experience of this montage of contradictory, perceptual facts. The work itself is an event with temporal duration, whose actual existence is continually being produced.
What should strike us forcibly, then, is that the artifact is nothing less than a *winning of reality*. Though it exists to a considerable extent by virtue of its own formal structures, it cannot be apprehended only formally. Nor does it simply represent a preexisting reality. The architectural reality takes its place alongside the real world, explicitly sharing temporal and spatial conditions of that world, but obstructing their absolute authority with an alternative of material, technical, and theoretical precision. A participant in the world and yet disjunctive with it, the Barcelona Pavilion tears a cleft in the continuous surface of reality.

a. Mies van der Rohe
German Pavilion
in Barcelona
1929
drawing of
interior

b. George Kolbe
"Dancer"
German Pavilion
in Barcelona
1929

c. d.

K. Michael Hays
Max Ernst
«Tous les vendredis, les Titans parcourront nos buanderies» from
La Femme 100 Têtes

A brief analogy will perhaps afford these points added clarity. In 1929 Max Ernst published his pictorial novel, La Femme 100 Têtes (The Hundred Headless Woman), a purely metropolitan inspiration comprising a series of collages made from scenes gathered from popular nineteenth-century illustrated books and magazines onto which Ernst grafted objects or occupants foreign to them. What results in such collages as «Tous les vendredis, les Titans parcourront nos buanderie» (Every Friday, the Titans will invade our laundry) is a laconic display of two incommensurable experiences interlocked across the surface of the work. Like Ernst, Mies was able to see his constructions as the place in which the motivated, the planned, and the rational are brought together with the contingent, the unpredictable, and the inexplicable. This vision persisted even in Mies's later works. The campus of IIT, for example, can be construed as a redistribution of some of the design strategies of the Alexanderplatz project and the Barcelona Pavilion—a subtle grafting of an alternative reality onto the chaos of Chicago's South Side.

Mies van der Rohe
Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT)
1939

K. Michael Hays
Authorship as a resistant authority

From the skyscraper project of 1922 to the Barcelona Pavilion, Mies's architectural program was a persistent rewriting of a few themes. Beginning with a set of arbitrary propositions, Mies rationalized his initial choice of themes by demonstrating the range of their applicability. He reused them in changing circumstances; he modified and refined them over time. This sort of repetition renders the issue of origins or first causes unproblematic, one arbitrary cantus firmus being imitated and repeated so many times as to lose its primacy.

Though the beginning of his authorship is arbitrary, repetition demonstrates the consistency of Mies's authorial motivation; it establishes the constancy of his intent. A persistently rearticulated intent accumulates knowledge—more specific and more precise—of the general architectural program and allows the growth of that knowledge according to its own special beginnings and conventions rather than according to those derived from some prior authority. Mies does not accept a preexistent frame of reference; he represents neither an authoritative culture nor an authoritative formal system.

Repetition thus demonstrates how architecture can resist, rather than reflect, an external cultural reality. In this way authorship achieves a resistant authority—an ability to initiate or develop cultural knowledge whose absolute authority is radically nil but whose contingent authority is a quite persuasive, if transitory, alternative to the dominant culture. Authorship can resist the authority of culture, stand against the generality of habit and the particularity of nostalgic memory, and still have a very precise intention.

Critical architecture and architectural criticism

One crucial issue remains unclear: what is the precise realm of theoretical interest in a critical architecture? How does one define or demarcate the spatial or temporal interval that is the focus of a critical examination of architecture?

This discussion of Mies suggests that the realm of interest is in the distance established between architecture and that which is other than architecture.

No single building—neither the most distinguished nor the most pedestrian—can reflect a preexistent cultural reality with perfect fidelity. To the extent that a work is architecture, it differs qualitatively both from a representation of reality and from a reduplication of other cultural activities. But the difference carries ideological motivation; it produces knowledge both about culture and about architecture. It should be possible to recognize both the means by which architecture maintains its distance from all that is outside architecture and the conditions that permit the existence of that distance.

The kind of theoretical study suggested here does not assume the prior existence of unchanging principles for interpreting architecture. Instead what is assumed is a specific situation from which came the decision to make architecture. This means that each architectural object places restraints upon interpretation, not because the situation is hidden within the object as a puzzle, but rather because contingent and worldly circumstances exist at the same level of surface particularity as the object itself. Interpretive inquiry lies in an irreducibly architectural realm between those conditions that seem to generate or enable the architect's intention to make architecture and those forms in which the intention is transcribed.15

But what, then, is the responsibility of architectural criticism or of critical historiography? Is it to teach and to disseminate information about the monuments of culture? Is it to deliver technical insights and opinions about the capabilities of the architect or the form of the building? Or is it, as has been suggested here, to concentrate on the intrinsic conditions through which architecture is made possible? In order to know all we can about architecture we must be able to understand each instance of architecture, not as a passive agent of culture in its dominant ideological, institutional, and historical forms, nor as a detached, disinfected object. Rather we must understand it as actively and continually occupying a cultural place—as an architectural intention with ascertainable political and intellectual consequences. Criticism delimits a field of values within which architecture can develop cultural knowledge.

Architectural criticism and critical historiography are activities continuous with architectural design; both criticism and design are forms of knowledge. If critical architectural design is resistant and oppositional, then architectural criticism—as activity and knowledge—should be openly contentious and oppositional, as well. We must seek alternatives to entrenched modes of operation and canonical forms. We must strive to invest critical discourse with something more than compensatory, appreciative reflections or methods of formal analysis for objects whose cultural meaning is thought to be undecided. It is precisely the responsibility of criticism that this cultural meaning be continually decided.
I have benefited from the questions and criticisms of RISD students who participated in my seminar, "Interpretations of Modern Architecture," where many of the ideas presented here were formulated; and from the responses of colleagues who read earlier versions of this paper. I especially wish to thank Stanford Anderson and Rudolph Machado for their continued support and encouragement.

K. M. H.

Mies van der Rohe
Minerals and Research Building, IIT
1939
By culture, as I shall use the term here, I understand a conceptual unity comprising, on the one hand, those theoretical and practical systems which authorize, promote, or constrain the production and use of ideas and objects and by which a society or a place differentiates itself and maintains its hegemony; and on the other hand, the artifacts and environments which endure as resourceful physical precedents or transmitters of culture.

Thus, it is in the present of culture that the production of architecture is overseen from above by a dominant system of values saturating downward, and generated or validated at its base by normative standards of practice and methodologies which may themselves become cultural agents.

Notes

1. By culture, as I shall use the term here, I understand a conceptual unity comprising, on the one hand, those theoretical and practical systems which authorize, promote, or constrain the production and use of ideas and objects and by which a society or a place differentiates itself and maintains its hegemony; and on the other hand, the artifacts and environments which endure as resourceful physical precedents or transmitters of culture.

2. The historicism of this position has been criticized by numerous authors, most notably Stanford Anderson, Colin Rowe, and David Watkin. Watkin uses a Popperian argument against historicism without noting Anderson's earlier study «Architecture and Tradition» in «The History, Theory, and Criticism of Architecture», Marcus Whiffen, ed. Cambridge, MIT Press 1965.


4. I shall not rehearse these criticisms here. For a recent discussion of interpretations that emphasize the object's origins see S. Anderson «A Presentness of Interpretation and of Artifacts: Toward a History for the Duration and Change of Artifacts» in «History in, of, and for Architecture», John E. Hancock, ed. Cincinnati University of Cincinnati 1981.

5. The unfortunate oversimplification, packaging, and consumption of Colin Rowe's «collage city» approach by various epigones is indicative of the prevalence of this attitude. Though Rowe could not be fitted easily into the architecture-as-autonomous-form mould, such statements as the following are often misleading to those inclined toward uncritical consumption of images of the past: «It should be obvious by this point that present arguments have little to do with history.»

6. History, so far as we are aware, relates to concatenation of events and their stylistic profile. In the framework of this discussion it can only interest us very little; and, if we are interested in the usefulness of particular morphologies, we are correspondingly unconcerned with the provenance of specific models. «History in, of, and for Architecture».


10. Piet Mondrian «De Stijl».

11. Rosalind Krauss makes a distinction between what she calls analytic or narrative time—in which the viewer can grasp the a priori transcendent structure of the object—and real time—in which the viewer encounters form open to change and circumstance. The development of each in modern sculpture is discussed in «Passages in Modern Sculpture» New York, Viking Press 1977.

12. Stanford Anderson uses the phrase «winning of reality» to emphasize the reciprocity between an object, its creation, and its interpretation. The phrase captures the notion that the understanding of a building unfolds and may change in time.