

elements

architecture in detail

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photography by paul warchol

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introduction

by mark pasnik

Imagine a detail from one of the iconic works of twentieth century architecture: Louis Kahn's Exeter Library. The railing at the top of the grand stair doubles as a seat. Its form matches that of the stair's handrail, but its panel morphs into a continuous profile reflecting the human contour. This element is fashioned entirely from travertine, making no differentiation between the seatback and the banister [figure 1]; its form is simply an indivisible extrusion. Such material uniformity belies a functioning duality.

■ It was the compelling nature of this kind of duality that emerged as Oscar Riera Ojeda and I developed this book. When we initially conceived the *Architecture in Detail* series, our thematic interests centered on the detailed expression of architectural elements. Rooted in historical definitions of the term, we had perceived elements to be quantifiable and irreducible architectural forms, basic indivisible units, singular and unique pieces, functionally pure and recognizable parts of a building. This book, then, began as an attempt to produce a catalogue of various elements that would represent the way in which architects are practicing at the small scale today. Although from the outset we were aware of the impossibility of creating a comprehensive resource in a single book, we shared a naïve optimism that we could provide a general index of element types—doors, windows, walls, columns, stairs, railings, and so on—while representing the diversity and complexity of contemporary practice in a range of innovative forms. ■ Yet as we scoured the thousands of images in photographer Paul Warchol's archive—images taken

core vocabulary of the classical language. Vitruvius, for example, classified temple archetypes and described the three orders from which they are composed. He perceived the orders as "elementary forms" to be arranged according to specific customs and in a fashion in which "the separate parts and the whole design may harmonize in their proportions and symmetry."¹ Fundamentally, his writings emphasize the fixed and predetermined codification of elements as they relate to one another in definitions of classicism.

■ A millennium and a half later, Palladio began his four-part treatise with a book nearly dedicated to describing the components that comprise a building, from its foundation and walls, its columns (and this time the expanded five ancient orders), rooms, pavements and ceilings, vaults, doors and windows, chimneys, staircases [figure 10], and ending with roofs. The text follows the sequence in which a building might be physically assembled. In doing so, Palladio underscores the relationship of each element to the larger structure, where "every part or member stands in its due place...." He continues: "Beauty will result from the form and correspondence of the whole, with respect to the several parts, of the parts with regard to each other, and of these again to the whole...."² As with Vitruvius, the emphasis here is on the "agreement" of parts according to regulations and conventions, a condition in which it was necessary to relegate elements to the status of pure and predetermined components.

■ The premises of this tradition have long held firm in definitions of the element. Even today, in a variety of practices, we see the

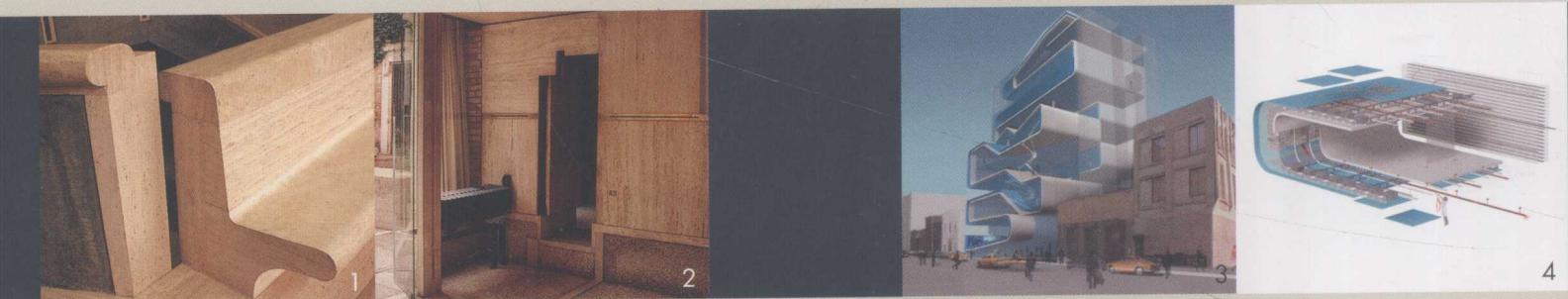
consuming hybrids

over the past three decades—we quickly noted that many of the contemporary elements we admired most would simply not fit comfortably into neat categories. We discovered among the images that a stair might double as a light shaft, a wall and floor might be continuous and inseparable, in general that elements today are less likely to be pure, irreducible, or even identifiable. As attractive as the idea of a catalogue was for us, it became all too apparent that this book would more accurately portray today's preoccupations in architectural practice by emphasizing those elements that *deny* the very structure of the catalogue we had set out to create. ■ Somehow, we still could not ignore the pressures of history. The very idea of the element as a foundational and irreducible architectural component has evolved from the history of publications on the principles of architectural expression, first in written treatises, later in illustrated ones. The most widely influential of these—*The Ten Books on Architecture* by Vitruvius and *The Four Books of Architecture* by Andrea Palladio—are catalogues of the elements that form the

remnants of the classical understanding of elements, evoked to even stricter codification. Perhaps the most vivid illustrations of this condition are in two disparate ideological camps of the profession. On the one hand, elements are treated as repeatable forms in the global modern vocabularies of corporate firms, where identical details are carried from project to project to project. On the other hand, New Urbanists promote stringent and prescriptive guidelines in which architectural codes are advanced to the level of legally binding zoning ordinances and developmental guidelines. An even more widespread American phenomenon is the industry-wide dependence on resources such as Sweet's Catalog and the Home Depot, leading to a crass standardization of details. ■ At their most extreme, these positions promote strategies for practice in which the whole is extrapolated from a fixed language of elements by combining them in new ways. This kit of parts ultimately limits the potential for invention to that of the relationships among predetermined elements, while stifling the possibility of rethinking the ways in

which elements behave or the nature of the elements themselves. Such an approach recalls a department store chain's television jingle: "The right choices...make all the difference." The message: so long as you have a good selection, you'll make good choices. ■ But is this enough? ■ Above all, we hope this book will be a provocative and challenging springboard to thinking creatively about elements. So where the eighteenth-century French essayist Marc-Antoine Laugier described the classical tradition as a search for "fixed and unchangeable laws,"³ we have aimed to investigate a very different ideology present in today's work, specifically a tendency within contemporary thinking to explore the conflicts, inconsistencies, and tensions that exist within architectural culture. We have thus assembled elements that often contradict the associations of purity or indivisibility traditionally ascribed to typological forms. In these cases, the elements are often defined in grayer terms. ■ In addressing this philosophical shift in the element, is it important to recognize the modern movement's involvement. As various strains of modernism developed in the early twentieth century, elements remained at the expressive center of what Le Corbusier termed "a new epoch" and its search for new forms. Yet the emergence of new modernist sensibilities recast the definition of elements as malleable pieces of the part-to-whole equation. New conceptions of space and representation appeared early on, visualized in the Cubist still-life paintings of Braque or Picasso, in which the objects represented were described through the expression of

the frame between wall and door panel, forming an element with conjoined attributes. The wall is an extension of the door and the door is continuous with the surface of the wall. Yet the door has none of the characteristics of a secret panel, because it was never meant to disguise itself as something other than what it is (the treatment of the floor panel below it precludes any misconceptions). This modernist vision creates an architectural equivalent to the mythical Minotaur's crossing of human and animal form: elements come together to form a new whole, but one in which the origins—the parts—are still visible. They are unified amalgamations, even if their identifies are not yet entirely seamless. ■ What is unique about details in the last decade's resurgent modern movement is a shift from elements that are conjoined to those that are hybrids. The hybrid yet again fuses several elements, but jettisons the identity of component pieces in favor of the inseparability—both conceptual and visual—of the larger whole. Tension and conflicts remain in the visual relationships of the functional elements, which are evidenced in the whole, but now seamlessly intertwined. They form an Escher-like illusion of mysterious overlaps, confusions of pieces, and the blurred layering that is far more complex than classicism's basic type-forms and relationships of parts to whole. Thus, the very definition of elements is loosened in a manner that enriches the creative potential for architects to make new forms, to propose and express new ideas about program, and ultimately to invent new intersections in the way people occupy and use spaces. ■ In part because



multiple vantage points simultaneously. Such developments enabled architects to change the way in which elements operated. With the maturing of modernism, it became possible to create elements composed of an amalgamation of parts—a sheet of glass that doubled as a door, or a roof that was also a garden. In such instances, functionally pure elements could be assembled into simultaneous compositions that form a larger conjoined unit.

■ Given their well-known preoccupation with details, it is perhaps no surprise that we see such explorations in the architecture of Louis Kahn and Carlo Scarpa. Revealing his own preoccupations, Kahn admired Scarpa's "sense of the wholeness of inseparable parts."⁴ In contrast to classical systems, here the parts themselves have become grounds for creative exploration. In a manner similar to Kahn's aforementioned bench-handrail at Exeter, Carlo Scarpa's Palazzo Querini Stampalia in Venice includes a door leading from the main exhibition hall to a side chamber [figure 2]. The door is nothing more than a pivoting travertine panel set within the larger stone panels of the wall. Scarpa has eliminated

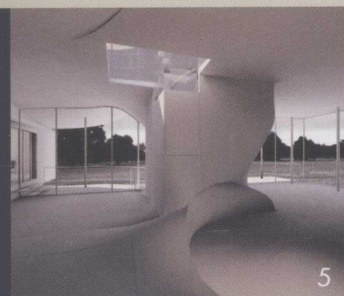
of the types of experimentation enabled by advances in computer modeling, we see this redefinition of elements most clearly in the unbuilt experimental projects of today's avant-garde practices. As examples, I wish to mention two recent projects described in computer renderings, both of which give conceptual prominence to an often-uncelebrated element of a building—its core.

■ The first is a proposal by Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio. As designers who are known for art and architecture projects that fuse often opposed media, Diller + Scofidio employ similar tactics of fusion in their competition-winning entry for the Eyebeam Building in New York [figures 3–4]. The entire building is formed from a continuous, two-ply ribbon, which dissolves walls and floors into an unbroken undulating surface containing the building's support systems between its two layers. Functionally this is little more than a cleverly planned chase for wires. Yet conceptually, the core is reconfigured as an element that expresses the interaction of art and media, while creating spaces that encourage the producers (students, artists,

and staff) to intermingle with the observers (museum visitors and theater-goers). In doing so, the architects have underscored the element's capacity to assert social and programmatic effects in architecture. ■ The second example is at a smaller scale. In his Torus House, Preston Scott Cohen has devised an equally complex element that serves as a building core [figure 5]. Obeying convention, this core is positioned at the center of the house, partitioning the mid-level living spaces and connecting a lower-level carport to a roof terrace. Yet it contains unconventionally indeterminate functional attributes: is it a staircase, a courtyard, a light well, an impluvium—or all of these things? This sophisticated layering of simultaneous functions adds complexity to our first reading of the core as a singular piece. And while we still may see it as an identifiable object within the space, it merges at its seams with the ceiling and floor, becoming a part of the larger continuity of surface around it. Contradictions indeed: an object that is not; a connector, centerpiece, and divider; an indeterminate purpose. The fragments of this object are no longer identifiable, but subsumed within the new, larger element, that itself begins to dissolve into the building which contains it. In the architect's words, the core's many guises are "rendered indivisible from the whole."⁵ ■ Such indivisibility is by no means the end-all of some progressive search. It is merely evidence of one strain of the active experimentation in today's architectural practices, wherein architects are challenging the stale conventions that defined elemental forms, casting doubts as to the purity of

meaning? Likewise, can Donald Judd's works in Marfa, Texas, be understood as individual pieces without the presence of the rest of the collection or the building site around them [figures 7–8]? Such contextual factors are not simply spatial, but equally can be material, ethereal, social, or otherwise. Light, reflections, human behavior, production methods can all contribute to the ultimate consideration of an element's power to express ideas. In such cases, the artistry is as much *outside* the element as within it.

■ All of these considerations play out in the works presented across these pages, projects that challenge the terms of elements. Thus, a skylight in the Vancouver House by Patkau Architects doubles as a pool [figure 11, pages 94–97]; the superimposition allows each function to visually enrich its partner. For a house on the beach in Loveladies, New Jersey by Brian Healy, a metal column intertwines with a slatted wooden bench [pages 74–75]; the folded plane of the seatback both shelters the occupant and visually expresses the structural weight of the house's cantilevering volume. A display of polygonal shelves at Max Mara SoHo by Duccio Grassi Architects is formed from protruding drawers that can be slid back to create a solid wall of dark wood [pages 182–183]; their infinite oscillations produce a shopping experience in which the detail can change perpetually over time. The wooden clothing cases at Helmut Lang SoHo by Richard Gluckman are stripped of functional references and reconstituted through abstraction [pages 4–5]; the elements appear more like minimalist Donald Judd pieces than containers for retail



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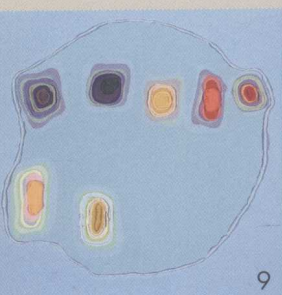
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architectural elements as singular or irreducible forms. This climate of innovation opens new paths of thinking about elements as points of experimentation, contention, or surprise—and often in opposition to restrictive definitions of type-forms.

■ To this equation we might add one additional term of evolution. As much as elements shape the perception of the architecture around them, our perception of elements likewise is shaped by factors outside their surfaces. Elements often communicate with one another across a space, becoming moments of expression that together form a more complete argument. Although a similar process is certainly at work in the classical orders or the narrative of elements common to Scarpa's work, contemporary discourse has expanded the influence of such external factors on our conceptions of elements in unexpected ways. For instance, Gordon Matta-Clark's "Four Corners" recontextualizes generic fragments of a house's roof and walls [figure 6] to present the question: does the element itself carry meaning, or does its context dictate its

display. The entrance to Steven Hall's Chapel of St. Ignatius contains a pair of doors that are continuous components of the façade's wooden wall panel [pages 20–23]; a shotgunning of oval windows describes a pattern attuned not to the dimension of the doors, but to that of the larger wall surface. These skylight-pools, these bench-columns, these wall-shelves, these sculpture-displays, these window-door-walls intoxicate us, brewing a delirium of detail that enriches, and often controls, our experiences of each architectural environment. ■ As with many of the details in this book, these elements are small pieces of a building, yet they carry enormous conceptual weight; although they may serve commonplace functions, they are often infused with transcendent beauty, poetry, subversion, contradiction, narrative, or tension. Such elements create rewards in the small moments, discovering art in architecture's everyday components. Sylvia Plath observes a similar phenomenon in her poem "Black Rook in Rainy Weather." She writes: "Certain minor light may still lean incandescent out of kitchen table or chair, as if a celestial burning

took possession of the most obtuse objects now and then—thus hallowing an interval otherwise inconsequent." She recalls that such moments have the power to "seize my senses" with "tricks of radiance"—yet the poem makes apparent that the radiance and tricks and celestial burnings are secondary to the singular word "my".⁶ Nothing short of the presence of the observer gives such moments meaning. In much the same way, elements, at their most powerful, are signs of the architect's authorship, and they form the basis of a direct conversation between the designer and the observer. In doing so, they are meant to awaken something sensual in us. And the work to follow is presented with much the same thinking. These elements are objects to be consumed or studied, pieces for our sight and touch to devour. ■ In this manner, I am reminded of the work of an emerging artist, Mimi Moncier. Her paintings are catalogues of the various things around her, her immediate environment, her personal world, her persona. She creates documents—"scrapbooks" to use her term—that record her belongings with titles such as "My Lunch," "My Books," "My Library," "My Lingerie," "My Universe" [figure 9]. Each painting abstracts and distills the elements of her life, creating ringed figures of intense colors that float on fields of various shapes. In her words, these figures "act as focusing devices, like targets drawing the eyes irresistibly to the center, inviting them to gaze upon colors as objects of desire."⁷ Such is our hope with this book: that you become *subject* to these objects. ■ All of this returns us to the idea of the catalogue.



9

In his preface to *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault offers a cautionary word on the subject. He recounts discovering a passage in Borges that quoted a "certain Chinese encyclopedia" of animal taxonomy, in which beasts were organized into exotic and absurd categories ranging from "embalmed" to "fabulous" and from "belonging to the Emperor" to "having just broken the water pitcher." For Foucault, the refreshing initial charm of this unusual system of classification faded quickly. It was replaced by concern for the specificity of the system and what it refused to imagine: "The possibility of dangerous mixtures had been exorcized...no inconceivable amphibious maidens, no clawed wings..." and so on.⁸ In this, there is an echo of our own approach. ■ Despite the futility of our initial inclination to classify, we have treated this book as a catalogue of sorts—one that perhaps has more the opportunistic and pluralistic qualities of a scrapbook, and less the rigid insistence on consistency and absolutism. We have organized the projects into categories that we view as

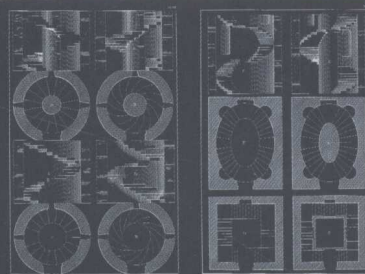
gauges against which to measure the innovation, creativity, and complexity of the elements presented here. Where elements stray from this system, where they express their differences and uniqueness, where they resist categorization or show signs of "dangerous mixtures"—this is the defining moment that makes them worthy of our admiration.

Notes

1. Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 75. ■ 2. Andrea Palladio, *The Four Books of Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1965), 1. ■ 3. Marc-Antoine Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture* (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1977), 3. ■ 4. Cited in *Carlo Scarpa Architect: Intervening with History* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1992), 39; and originally quoted in *Carlo Scarpa* (Venezia: Accademia Olimpica, 1974). ■ 5. Preston Scott Cohen, unpublished text provided by the architect. ■ 6. Sylvia Plath, "Black Rook in Rainy Weather," *The Collected Poems* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 56–57. ■ 7. Mimi Moncier, unpublished statement provided by the artist. ■ 8. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xv.

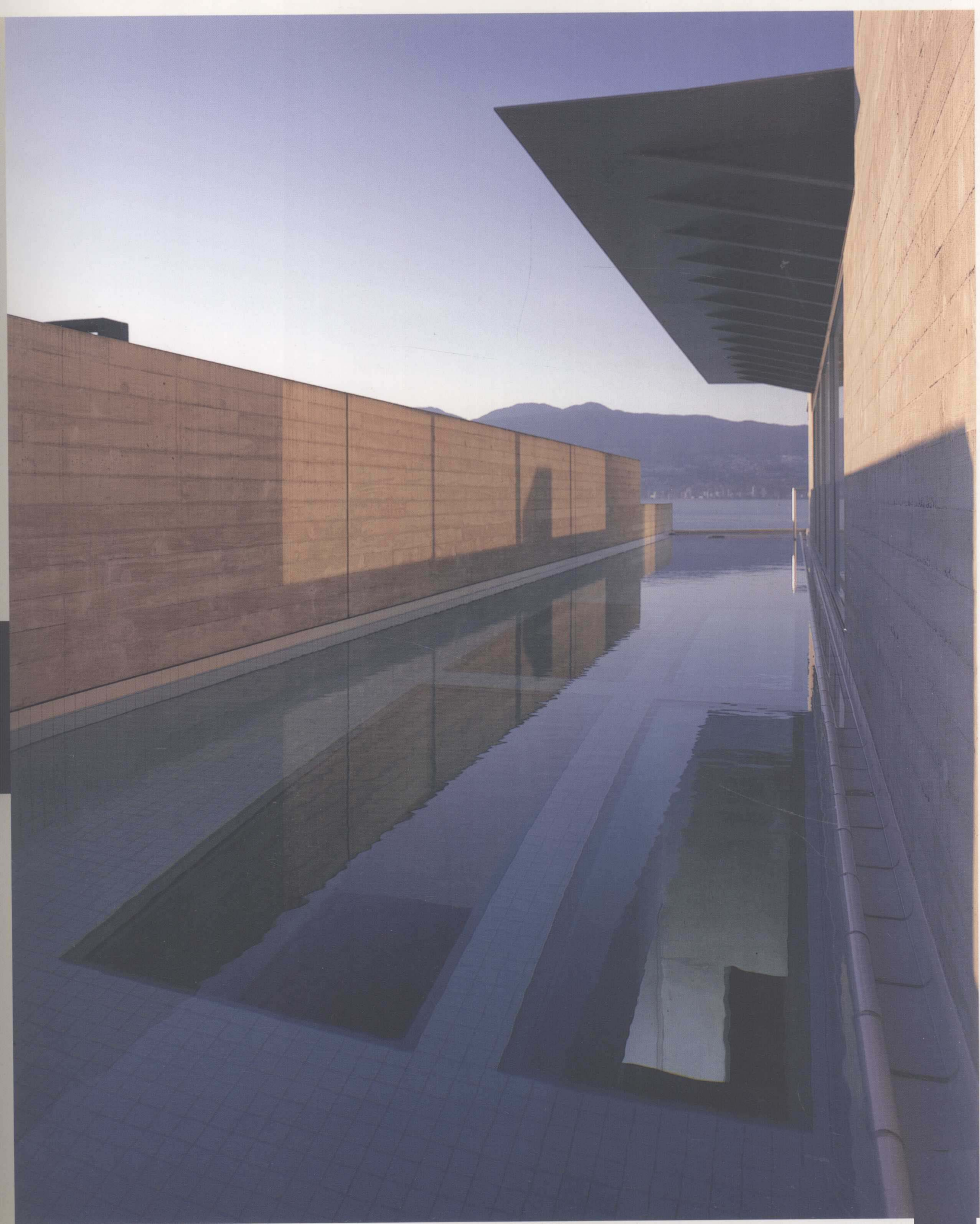
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Figure 1: Louis Kahn, Exeter Library, 1972; image courtesy Doug Dolezal. ■ Figure 2: Carlo Scarpa, Palazzo Querini



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Stampalia, 1963; image courtesy Eric Höweler. ■ Figures 3–4: Diller + Scofidio, Eyebeam Building, New York, 2002; images courtesy the architects. ■ Figure 5: Preston Scott Cohen, Torus House, 1999; image courtesy the architect. ■ Figure 6: Gordon Matta-Clark, "Four Corners," 1974; image © 2002 Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. ■ Figure 7: Donald Judd, 100 untitled works in mill aluminum, 1982–1986. Chinati Foundation permanent collection, Marfa, Texas. Photography by Florian Holzherr. Judd art © Judd Foundation. ■ Figure 8: Donald Judd, untitled work in concrete, 1980–1984. Chinati Foundation permanent collection, Marfa, Texas. Photography by Florian Holzherr. Judd art © Judd Foundation. ■ Figure 9: Mimi Moncier, "My Lunch," 2002; image courtesy the artist. ■ Figure 10: Andrea Palladio, *The Four Books of Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1965). ■ Figure 11: Patkau Architects, Vancouver House, 2002; image by Paul Warchol.



doors

"What should I turn to, lighting upon days like these? Every door is barr'd with gold, and opens but to golden keys," wrote Alfred, Lord Tennyson. ■ As an architectural element, the door suggests entry and opportunity, but also solidity and protection. ■ Today's architects are intent on exploring varied ideas of ingress and egress. ■ When or where is that gateway, that moment of entry, or exit? ■ Can or should the dichotomy between inside and outside be blurred, or even erased? ■ Robert Frost: "From the door I shall set forth for somewhere, I shall make the reckless choice."

