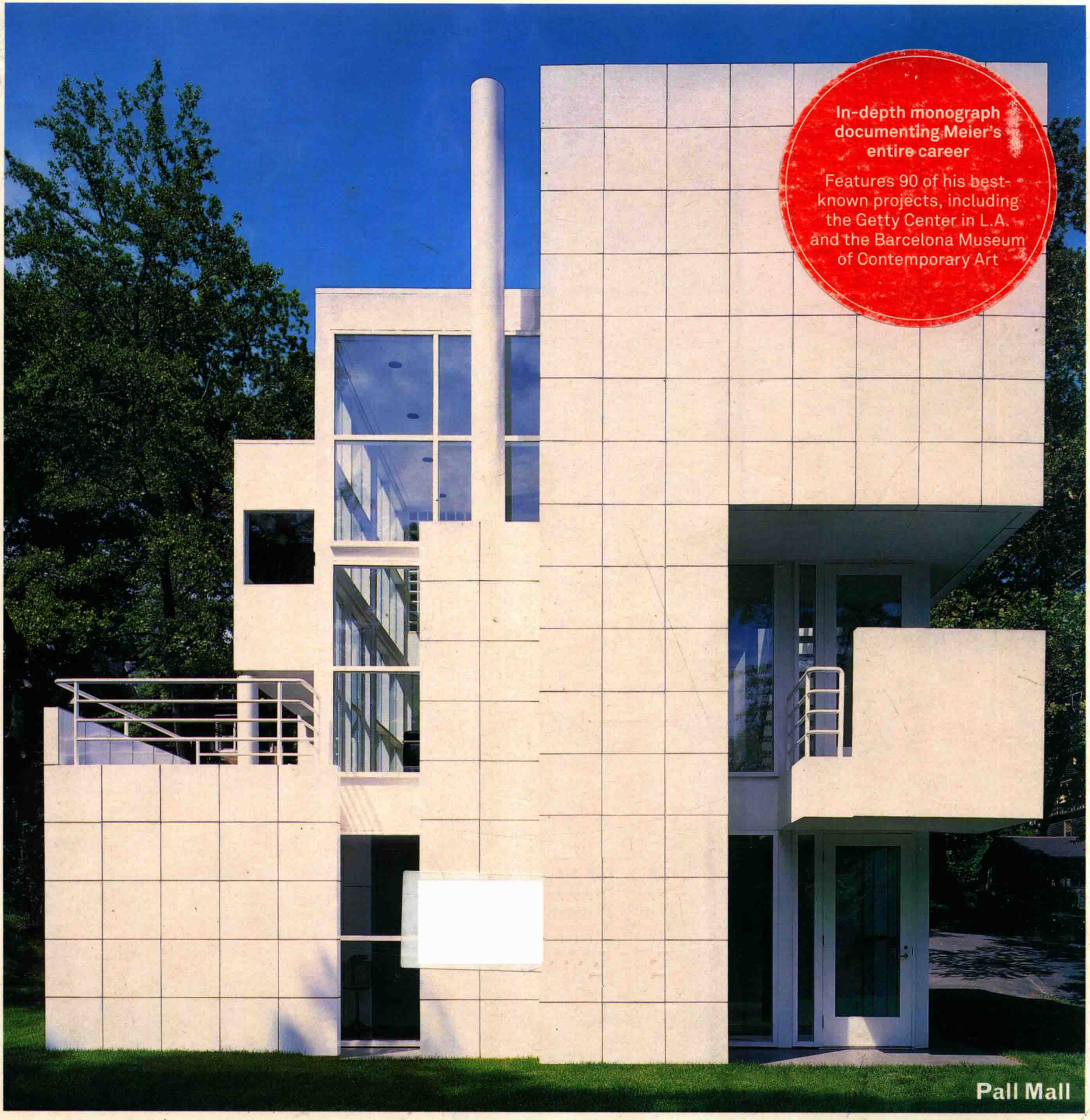
Richard Meier

Kenneth Frampton



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Meier's Style

Francesco Dal Co

In 1948 the Museum of Modern Art in New York embarked on a program of exhibitions dedicated to contemporary architecture. The idea behind the project was that each year an architect would be invited to build the prototype of a house in the garden of the museum, at that time accessible from the 53rd Street as well as from the museum, "demonstrating how much good living and good design can be purchased for how many dollars." After seeing it, visitors would be able to buy the design and build the house wherever they thought fit. Marcel Breuer was the architect chosen to inaugurate the series of exhibitions. His house (the roof had upside-down pitches; the front was generously glazed; the garden with well-cropped grass was bounded by low walls; the plan was organized around the fireside; the fireplace was built out of rough stone; and the internal surfaces were in wood and white plaster) was a well-made representation of the American dream, in an absolutely domestic key. The house was not, however, bought by a discerning family man: designed as a mirage for the middle class, it was transferred directly from MoMA to the garden of a property of the Rockefellers, in the vicinity of New York.

In 1961, Richard Meier, twenty-seven-years old at the time and with a short curriculum behind him after finishing his training at Cornell University, joined Breuer's studio, where he worked until 1963. The decision that brought the young architect into the studio of the man who had contributed more than most to shaping the domestic stereotypes of the American postwar dream was neither fortuitous nor devoid of consequences. In fact Lambert House, which Meier had just finished (1962) on Fire Island, New York, was the fruit of a curious mixture of ideas drawn from Breuer himself and from what architects active in California had been experimenting with in various ways.

Shortly afterward, Meier opened his own studio in New York. One of the first projects he drew up was for the competition held for the construction of a monumental fountain on the Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia (the project also bore the signature of Frank Stella and marked the beginning of a partnership that was to continue to this day). From this moment on, Meier's career developed along enviably straightforward lines. Completing the Saltzman House at East Hampton and working on the ones at Pound Ridge and Old Westbury, again in New York State, between 1967 and 1971, Meier laid the foundations of the success that he was to enjoy in the following years, in the United States and Europe.

These constructions were also emblematic expressions of a renewed version of the American dream. Naturally, things had changed since 1948: the average American, which MoMA had set out to turn into a client for good architecture, available at a reasonable price, was the citizen of a nation that was emerging from the war and moving toward McCarthyism. Very different were the clients who permitted Meier, with these early experiences, to develop a style that he went on to cultivate tenaciously, suited to the invention of continually varied *mises-en-scène* of the aspirations that are summed up in the word refinement.

Meier's style, whose structure is revealed in the essay by Kenneth Frampton serving as an introduction to this volume, is the result of a procedure similar to the one adopted by Breuer, in the years of his maturity. If Breuer had been successful, it was because he had been able to graft the ingenuous stereotypes of American domesticity onto the worn-out stock of the avant-garde, and Meier has carried out a symmetrical operation. He adapted to totally American structural conceptions, modes of construction and typologies, a language that reduced to a manner what had been produced by the European avant-garde, which he had studied through the distorting lens represented by the historical and methodological popularizations of Colin Rowe. Fruit of a work of continual contamination, Meier's style has been created by sterilizing the materials that he blends, obsessively cleansing every form of any trace of depravity, assigning to each construction a reassuring, familiar and gratifying appearance, aimed at satisfying, with tried-and-tested professional efficiency, the expectations of the ever broader public that is unified by the cult of sophistication.

Translation by Christopher Evans

Forty Years of Practice

Kenneth Frampton

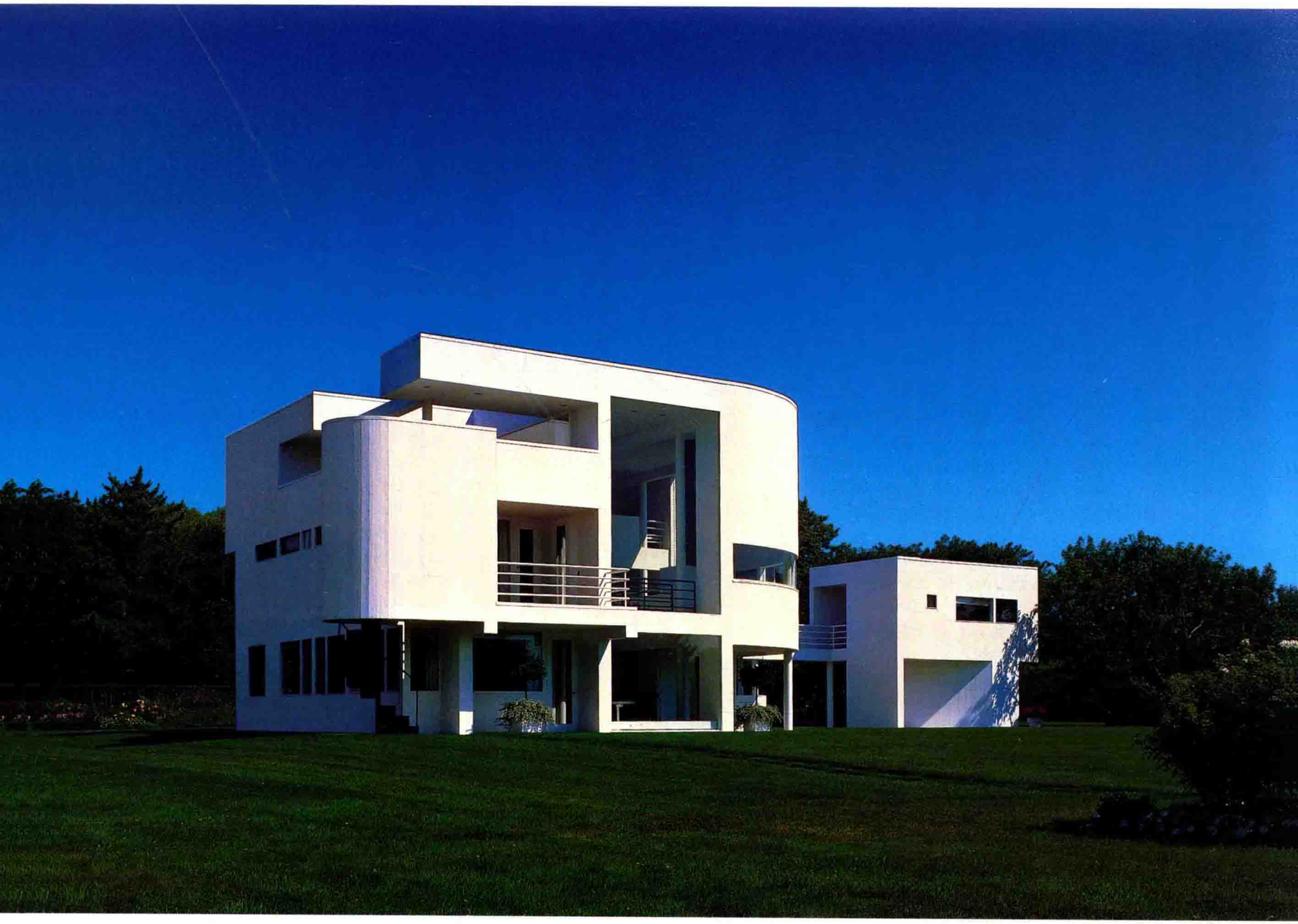
As much time has elapsed in Richard Meier's forty years of practice as that which now separates the formulation of a purist architecture in Le Corbusier's Maison Cook of 1926, from the completion of Meier's neopurist Smith House, at Darien, Connecticut in 1967.

Thirty years later we may ask, what was it that was transferred from one to the other in the course of four decades? While an overall cubic mass was a trope that they shared in common, it is evident that the *free plan* of the Smith House did not correspond to the *free plan* of the Maison Cook. The Meier plan was open, rather free in its fundamental character, a quality that suggests its partial derivation from the American domestic tradition (cf. Vincent Scully's account of the evolution of Prairie Style from Bruce Price to Frank Lloyd Wright)[1] rather than from the Le Corbusier's latent neo-Palladianism as this determines the frontalized format of the Maison Cook. Although one encounters dramatic spatial displacements in both houses, the space-form of the Maison Cook is spiraling in its development as opposed to the layered spaces of the Smith House. Needless to say, the respective context of the two works was also totally different, for where the Maison Cook presented its discreet front to a verdant street in Boulogne-sur-Seine, the Darien dwelling was posited as a panoramic belvedere overlooking the rocky shoreline of the Long Island Sound.

The partially purist origin of Meier's architecture is possibly more apparent when we compare the Smith House to Le Corbusier's Villa Stein de Monzie completed at Garches in 1927, for in this instance, aside from the common freestanding cylindrical columns, we encounter a similar categoric differentiation between an approach façade, which is largely closed and a garden façade which is open; a gesture that is comprehensible in picturesque terms but rather hermetic from the point of view of representation; that is to say, the more expressive façade is situated to the rear of the building rather than the front. While making this observation one should note other differences, above all the fact that where the opaque façade of the Villa Stein de Monzie consists of a thin membrane cantilevered in front of a reinforced concrete skeleton, the entry elevation of the Smith House comprises a thick volume of balloon frame construction entirely divorced from the freestanding, tubular steel, Lally columns supporting the roof of the double height living volume overlooking the sea. The full height, panoramic glass wall of this last could hardly be more removed from Le Corbusier's steel-framed "free façade" held tight against the outer limits of the Villa Stein de Monzie. By way of contrast the plate-glass fenestration at Darien is articulated through the thickness and the rebates of the timber frame that holds it in place while simultaneously serving to sustain cantilevered glazing at the corners. The glass returns at the ends of the living volume in order to ensure a panoramic prospect over the Sound. The fact that a void adjacent to the entry runs as a vertical space through the three floors of the house, linking the dining on the lower ground floor, to the entry level and the sleeping level above, only serves to reinforce an incipient pinwheeling character which is implied by the freestanding chimney set in front of the ocean façade. Asymmetrically placed in respect of the mass, this feature is balanced by a dogleg stair leading from the first floor dining room to a narrow greensward running along the shore. Although this stair may be compared as a sculptural element to the straight-flight garden stair in the Villa Stein de Monzie, it performs a different spatial function. At Garches it corresponds to the layering of the internal space, while at Darien it serves as a rotational addendum to the relatively static focus of the living volume. This alternating shift from frontality to rotation seems to have exerted a strong influence over the way in which Le Corbusier's purist syntax was received by the American neo-avant-garde of the mid-sixties, not only in the work of Meier but also in the early houses of Michael Graves and Charles Gwathmey dating from the same period.

Meier's next house of consequence, his Saltzman House completed in East Hampton in 1969, partially derives its composition from the "head vs. tail" format of the Anglo-Saxon, Arts and Crafts house of the last quarter of the nineteenth

Saltzman House, East Hampton,
New York, 1967-69.



century, wherein a double-height living volume serves as the *head* while the *tail* comprises a series of lower, ancillary volumes. Although truncated in the Saltzman House, this *head/tail* syndrome still constitutes the basic configuration of the plan.

The spatial character of this house has perhaps never been better characterized than by Stan Allen, when he wrote: "Curves in Meier's other early works often appear as incidents or quotations in an otherwise regular fabric, while this curve is fully integral and distorts the fabric itself. However, it does not undermine the essentially cubic form of the house: the massing reads as a cube with rounded corners rather than a quarter circle joining two arms. The plan is compact, not an aggregation of parts. Finally in the handling of the base, which is eroded in layers, he achieved an effect of weightlessness without relying on the more obvious, or referential, strategy of pilotis ... The interior space of the house reads at once as a dense plastic mass, swelling the walls outward but at the same time it is allowed to flow continuously out into the translucent air and space of the site itself. Meier has created this effect in part through his arrangement and detailing of the exterior openings. Looking at the south elevation, the first element on the left is the rounded planar enclosure of the spiral staircase, floating above the base and pressing slightly forward. To its immediate right is the recessive void of the terrace/balcony, more or less solid above and open below. Next to this, an enormous glass pane runs the full three-story height. In this sequence of solid/void/plane, Meier has taken full advantage of the changeable character of glass as a material. By detailing the glass without intermediate mullions, and by framing it very close to the enclosing skin he has created a shifting scrim. Charged to near opacity by reflection of the sky, it continues the stretched surface of the enclosing skin, but at other times it nearly disappears, creating the visual effect of dissolving large chunks of the exterior skin, leaving the interior vulnerable and exposed."[2]

Apart from its Arts and Crafts affinities the Saltzman House is also the first of a series of houses by Meier to be influenced by the Cooper Union Nine Square exercise as developed by John Hejduk, who was Meier's close colleague at Cooper Union during the years 1962 to1973 when Meier was teaching there. As in Hejduk's houses, both the Saltzman and Meier's Pound Ridge house of 1969 will be partially based on a neo-Palladian nine square format.

Both the Saltzman House and the next canonical residence, the Douglas House—built on a spectacular, wooded site overlooking Lake Michigan in 1973—served to consolidate and enrich Meier's plastic repertoire. In reworking and extending the *parti* of the Smith House, the Douglas House took on a certain refinement through the rounding of its arises on the landward side of the house. The tubular steel balustrading of the Douglas House would serve to enrich the expressive repertoire of the Smith House, in part through an aerial *passerelle*, spanning between the upper part of a steeply sloping site and the entry level at the top of the house and in part through an exposed straight flight, linking this level with its bedrooms to the double-height living space below. This stair, ornamenting the large plate-glass fenestration of the house through the filigree of its handrails, is a trope that Meier will repeatedly apply in subsequent works, most immediately in The Atheneum built at New Harmony, Indiana in 1979, wherein tubular steel balustrading, at multiple levels, appears both to festoon and erode the dynamic mass of the building.

The baroque, cacophonic character of The Atheneum derives in part from the fact that it is generated by the superimposition of the two intersecting squares in plan, one of which is rotated 45 degrees. The other energizing figure is the central ramp, drawn as an essential element from Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye of 1929. Set against one side of a small auditorium, this last functions as the dynamic kernel of the entire composition. Cubist painting seems to be the direct formal inspiration behind this enterprise, particularly when it is viewed from the southwest, when the rupture between the rotated cube and the larger orthogonal volume is repaired, as it were, by a freely undulating wall. Here, the reference is to Juan Gris rather than to Le Corbusier. Meier will return to similar synthetic Cubist strategies in his Renault Administrative Headquarters projected for Boulogne-Billancourt in 1981.

A particularly significant but often underestimated work between the Saltzman House of 1969 and The Atheneum of 1979 is the Bronx Developmental Center New York (1970–77) wherein Meier was first commissioned to design at an institutional, quasi-urbanistic scale. Projected for some 380 physically and mentally handicapped children this facility challenged the technological capacity of the office and Meier's response was not only to project a rational plan but to clad the structure in metal paneling made out of rolled aluminum sheets. This system of gasketed panels, previously restricted to the facing of industrial structures was adapted by Meier as a form of generic revetment, the main virtue of which was not only its modular, prefabricated, character and its ease of erection but also the self-cleansing nature of its surface. Prefigured in two utilitarian projects of virtually the same date—the Fredonia Health and Physical Education Building and the Charles Evans factory prototype—this system would greatly augment the technical capacity of the office. Once the standard aluminum panel came to be replaced by bright white panels of enameled steel, the "signature style" of the architect was virtually crystallized. Meier's ubiquitous glistening membrane first shines forth with vibrant intensity in The Atheneum, but thereafter

it will become, along with a certain plastic repertoire, the touchstone of the office.

The Bronx Developmental Center remains a seminal piece in Meier's *oeuvre* for herein he tackles for the first time the theme of the "city in miniature" to which he will return in numerous projects and realizations throughout the eighties. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this complex are the four dormitory blocks, as these are arranged in staggered formation in front of the horizontal continuity of the gymnasium and the classroom/admin block, that enclose the central plaza on its northern face. Two modular tropes typical of the house style are also initiated with this work; the first of these turns on the use of gasketed, round-cornered "television" windows and air-conditioning grills. These impart to the metallic envelope a marine-cum-aeronautical character, much as we find this in Norman Foster's Sainsbury Center at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, England of 1978. The second stems from the semi-transparent *passerelles* that serve to both modulate and enclose the multi-level, planted space of the plaza.

The highly reflective ambience of this complex in the Bronx, particularly as this is embodied internally in the glass block wall of an indoor swimming pool, will afford the architect an occasion in which to set shining metal handrails and scintillating surfaces against the undulating turbulence of water and the luminescence of opaque glass.

Elsewhere, at this time, Meier's neo-Corbusianism gravitates towards loosely aggregated "cubistic" fragments as we find these in the house at the Old Westbury of 1971 which bears, however coincidentally, an uncanny resemblance to the Brewer House that Le Corbusier projected for Olivet College, near Chicago in 1935. This tendency towards disaggregation will be somewhat checked in the next three projects; the Maidman House (1976), the Palm Beach House (1977) and, above all, in the exceptionally ingenious Giovannitti House, realized outside Pittsburgh in 1983, of which he wrote: "The overall plan consists of an eroded double square, with one square elevated into a three-story cubic volume and containing most of the program, and the other square devoted to the service functions of garage and kitchen on the ground level and an open terrace above. The three-story volume is carved away on the ground level to provide a second terrace, this one shielded from view and partially roofed by the projecting volume of the third floor. Inside, the program is organized vertically, giving all the spaces of this small house an unexpected amplitude. The dining room and guest room, located on the first level, are accessible from the garage and kitchen. The living room and the formal entry to the house, on the second level, are contiguous to the parapeted terrace over the garage. The library and master bedroom are on the third level. A wood stair adjacent to the entry area connects all three floors. On the façades, porcelain-enameled steel panels and stucco protect the private spaces from view, while a delicate, steel-framed glass skin allows light to penetrate the public spaces. The openness of this skin permits views to the outside which are balanced and framed by more massive solid forms, as well as by the large existing trees on the property, which have been left intact. Throughout this small house there is a subtle dialogue between open and closed spaces, private and public realms with each element enhanced by the play of contrasts and transitions."[3]

This is Meier at his diminutive domestic best before the overall scale of his work shifts via the Hartford Seminary towards large scale civic structures, first with the Frankfurt am Main Museum für Kunsthandwerk of 1978–85 and then with the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia in 1980.

While Meier had enjoined the task of designing an urban intervention in contextual terms before, above all in his UDC Twin Parks Northeast Housing built in the Bronx in 1974, the Frankfurt Museum introduced two fundamental shifts in the substance of his architecture, for this is not only his first European commission of consequence but also his first work of an unequivocally civic character. It not only represents a fundamental paradigmatic shift but it also brings with it a fundamental change in terms of the conceptual and presentation methods adopted in bringing the work to fruition, although the syntax and the overall conceptual strategy had been hinted at previously, first in The Atheneum where the cruciform square window first appears and then in the Giovannitti House where a square grid determines every element. All of this is further inflected in Frankfurt through the use of an axial ramp and through the introduction of certain subtle alignments in the orientation of the four squares that make up the basic *parti*. Thus once again a square format is the operable motif both in terms of plan and the skin.

We are also witness to the way in which, as Jean Louis Cohen reminds us, the *promenade architectural* becomes the prime mover in all of Meier's public buildings from The Atheneum to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona, wherein, as he puts it, we are confronted with an inversion of Louis Kahn's hierarchy in which, as opposed to the work of Kahn, pride of place is reserved for the *servant* rather than the *served*.[4]

Circulation aside, everything stems in the Frankfurt Museum from four basic cubes of which the existing Villa Metzler facing onto the Schaumainkai is the aboriginal quadrant determining the dimensional order of the entire scheme, however much of this is also inflected by the topography of the site. Thus as an office description puts it: "The site is on the southern edge of the Main River, in proximity to several other museum buildings which together form the *museum-surfer*, a venerable embankment of buildings fronting the