

Richard Meier Architect

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For my immediate and extended family

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“Meier in Transition” © Kenneth Frampton
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and Joseph Rykwert*

2000/2004

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Preface

The completion of the compilation of the work documented in this book coincides with the fortieth anniversary of private practice. The passion with which I began in December 1963 is undiminished. Having worked in the office of Marcel Breuer for three years and, not inconsequentially, having passed the licensing examinations to practice architecture in New York, it seemed an opportune moment to launch out into the great adventure of working on one's own, that moment when one first exerts all powers of perseverance, knowledge, and conviction.

At the time, I lived in a two-room apartment in a brownstone building on East 91st Street. There I slept in one room and worked in the other. As with most young architects, teaching became a means of supplementing income while trying to find work for the first time. Sharing teaching responsibilities with John Hejduk and Bob Slutzky at the Cooper Union and with Michael Graves at Princeton was invigorating. It seemed to all of us that we were able to change the way architectural education is accomplished during a decade of upheaval and chaos in academic as well as social values. The work produced by the students at the Cooper Union was unique. There was an understanding and love for the process of building and a knowledge of the historical sources that nourish the spatial and plastic construct.

As far as I am concerned, John Hejduk was the first and only Dean of the Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture at the Cooper Union. He was a talented, totally committed, truly great innovator in educating architects. He taught through study. It is the love of study through which architecture emerges, and John perpetuated this through a combination of artifice and passionate reverence for the pursuit of knowledge.

During that early phase of my career so much was happening, much of which was related to personal friendships. Eventually Frank Stella could no longer provide space for me to work in a corner of his small studio on West Broadway, where Hollis Frampton and Carl Andre

had also found refuge. For a short time, Michael Graves and I shared a studio on Tenth Street, where we both had to face the reality of our desire for independent practice. My choice became crystal clear when I was asked to design my first new freestanding private residence. The opportunity to design and build this house clarified my ideas about the making of space, which were very tangible and real. I have never looked back. The conviction that has existed since that time is that every project is an open work—an open future—a source of human freedom and expression.

Volume I of this series of books published by Rizzoli in 1984 represented twenty years of architectural endeavor. I wrote in the Preface that my fundamental concerns are *...space, form, light and how to make them. I mean to accentuate that my goal is presence, not illusion. I pursue it with unrelenting vigor because I believe that today as in the past it is the heart and soul of architecture. Architecture is vital and enduring because it contains us; it substantiates the space we exist in, move through, and use. My work is an effort to redefine and refine this ongoing human order, to interpret the relationship between what has been and what can be, to extract from our culture both the timeless and the topical. This, to me, is the basis of style, of the decision to include or to exclude, to exercise individual will and intellect. In this sense, style is something born out of culture, yet profoundly connected with personal experience.* Twenty years later, this thought continues to inform the work.

Sitting on Saline Beach in St. Barth's on the first bright day of 2004, observing the white sailboats glistening on the deep blue Caribbean water, my thoughts returned to discussions with my children, Joseph and Ana, and lessons that I learned from them as they grew from childhood to adolescence and how much that meant to me. Now that they are talented adults, independent in mind and spirit, the analogy between being a parent and an architect, the creation of architecture that speaks to the soul with integrity, the love, the caring, and the devotion both demand becomes even more apparent. As difficult as it

is to let go, once mature, once built and occupied, the best course for both the child and the building is to grasp their own bent and find their true direction. It is a sad moment when the architect and the man is forced to confront this reality.

Some time ago, Massimo Vignelli sent me a note in which he wrote, "Thank you, Richard, you are fussy but it is all worth it. Love, Massimo." This book is a work of intense collaboration with the most brilliant graphic designer, who has an unsurpassed understanding and love of architecture, evident in all of his extraordinary works. Without Massimo, this book would not be possible. I am indeed grateful for our long history of working together and for our friendship.

Others who have been especially important in the preparation of this book are Elizabeth White and Lisetta Koe, who have been indispensable in editing the manuscript and coordinating the entire project; and the photographers who have documented the buildings so beautifully, especially Scott Frances, who understands white.

I am especially grateful to my partner of over twenty years, Michael Palladino, who is the Partner in Charge of our Los Angeles office. His extraordinary commitment to the art of architecture is evident in all of those projects for which he has had exclusive responsibility. My thanks also go to each of the talented and dedicated individuals who have worked in the New York and Los Angeles offices. The work illustrated here is a tribute to your passion, involvement, and efforts. My heartfelt gratitude, which is immeasurable, goes to you all.

Richard Meier
February 2004

Meier in Transition

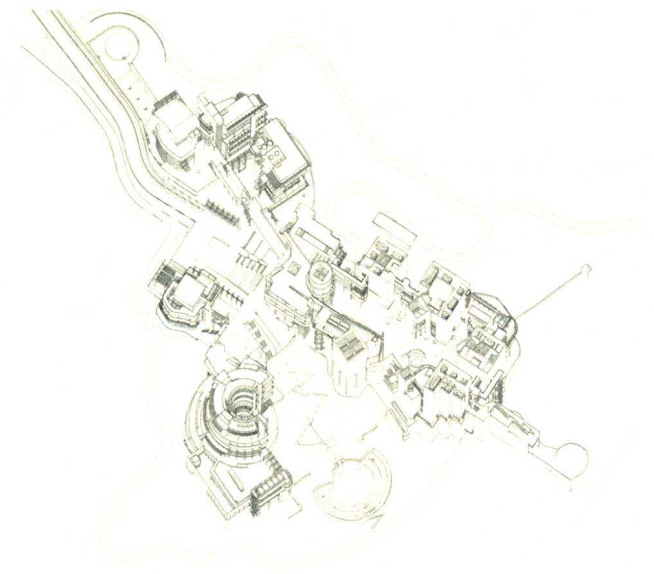
Kenneth Frampton

There aren't any recipes. It is better not even to look for them. It is better to practice one's craft with patience, care and attention, with passion. Better to endeavor to resolve every technical, constructional and functional problem. Better to indulge in the luxury of looking for, discarding, amending and modifying the desired solution until it truly fulfills its purpose. Then, and only then, if one is very gifted, and with a bit of luck will the design embody what seems, albeit in its ineffability, to be the best definition of what we are trying to find, that of Saint Augustine: "Beauty is the splendor of truth."

Vittorio Lampugnani
Vitruvius Revisited, 2002

Although the Getty Center, completed in 1997, may be seen as the apotheosis of Meier's career to date, its realization seems to have induced a certain syntactical ambiguity in the work of the office from the mid 1990s onwards. The nature of this schism in the "house style" may be readily discerned in the markedly different *parti* adopted for the two federal courthouses that entered the office at about the same time. These buildings, identical in program but in varying size and character, were realized for different climates and topographies. One is on the East Coast in Islip, New York; the other is inserted into the Arizona desert, in the very heart of downtown Phoenix. Each assumes a totally different form: one is a condensation of Meier's late, neo-Corbusian manner, the other an essay in high-tech, sustainable construction, shielding its capacious interior from the punishing heat of the Southwest. The Islip courthouse is an isolated slab-block, accompanied for its full height by a symbolic, windowless cone.

The result is an abstract composition totally disengaged from anonymous surroundings. The Phoenix courthouse, on the other hand, is a dematerialized ferro-vitreous shed that is deftly integrated into the urban matrix of the city. Notwithstanding the different circumstances attending each realization, these fundamentally distinct expressions cannot be attributed to climate and context alone.



The United States Courthouse and Federal Building at Islip was set up as an a priori monument, almost as though it were something more than a regional courthouse. Evocative of the new ideology of law and order, Islip was rendered as though it were a representative institution standing at the very apex of national power. However fanciful the comparison may be, its rhetorical form recalls the freestanding monumental buildings realized by Le Corbusier half-a-century ago for the capital in Chandigarh. On the other hand, the more modest courthouse in Phoenix simply posits itself as a judicial building at the scale of a provincial city. While both structures are shielded by horizontal louvers, these expressive elements play a different role as one passes from one building to the next. In the first instance, the louvers constitute a textured fabric against which the dramatic figure of the cone may be read; in the second, they protect the glazed membrane with an even level of sunscreening covering the entire surface.

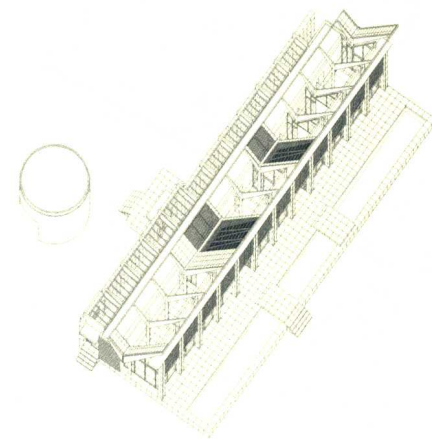
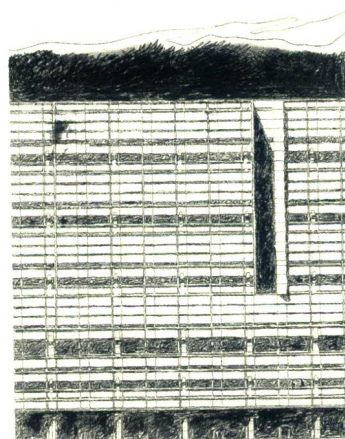
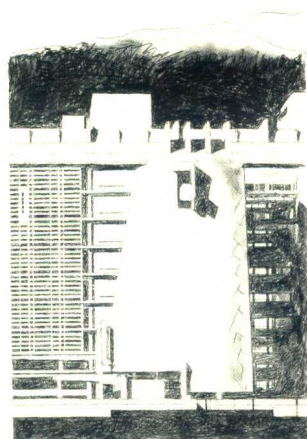
Of these buildings, we may say that where Islip is essentially an extroverted, compositional exercise, Phoenix is an introverted, minimalist prism. Within, each follows a distinct spatial strategy. In the first, a circular entry hall is the *raison d'être* for the conical form rising for the full height of the building. In the second, a freestanding cylinder of translucent glass is inserted within the atrium. Where the opaque cone at Islip spatially unifies the tiers of courtrooms, the glazed cylinder at Phoenix expresses the presence of the Special Proceedings Court within as a distinctly separate element. If Islip favors rhetorical plasticity, Phoenix tends towards its opposite, a distinction that is reflected in their respective podiums. Islip reinforces its monumental stature through elevated external terraces; Phoenix is raised only a few inches above the sidewalk. Similarly, the entrance at Islip is signaled by a giant cone, but in Phoenix, it is quietly announced by a cantilevered glass portico. In these works, we find a soon-to-be-characteristic opposition between the plasticity of sculptural form and the tessellated character of a dematerialized envelope, irrespective of whether the former is made

*The Getty Center
Los Angeles, California.
1984–1997. Axonometric*

*United States Courthouse and
Federal Building, Islip, New York.
1993–2000. Elevation sketch*

*Sandra Day O'Connor
United States Courthouse
Phoenix, Arizona. 1994–2000.
Elevation sketch*

*Neugebauer House
Naples, Florida. 1995–1998.
Axonometric*



of white enamel panels or the latter assumes the nature of a more complex, syncopated, louvered fenestration laid over an entirely crystalline exterior.

In many respects, the Neugebauer house, completed in Naples, Florida, in 1998, epitomizes more incisively than any other Meier work the neo-minimalist spirit that has emanated from the office in recent years. This is surely evident from its single-minded assertiveness; one is immediately impressed by the monumentality of a house that posits itself as a five-bedroom, single-story dwelling in a single bar, 180 feet in length, facing the water. Of comparable audacity is the steel-framed butterfly roof that is born aloft on a colonnade of coupled stanchions and elevated on a granite plinth.

More of a giant cornice than an effective sunshade, this canopy bestows on the house the air of an oriental pavilion that is at odds with the white-washed domesticity of the prestigious residential neighborhood. The paired, hollow-steel stanchions that run down the oceanfront, like the echo of a neoclassical colonnade, emphasize the grandeur of the initial gesture, which is more than matched by the formality of a virtually windowless entry facade broken only by a portico. This horizontal limestone plane is well matched by two other equally minimalist gestures: a virtual cube of twenty-five royal palms and a cylindrical drum, faced in the same limestone, housing the garage.

The Neugebauer house is one of most explicitly tectonic works to come from Meier's hand to date, not only in terms of its structural articulation but also with regard to the expression of an explicit opposition between earthwork and roofwork. The latter attains a particularly subtle articulation through the way in which the paired stanchions of the principal frontage extend up over the doors to be trimmed by the roof framing and fused into a single stanchion under the canopy.

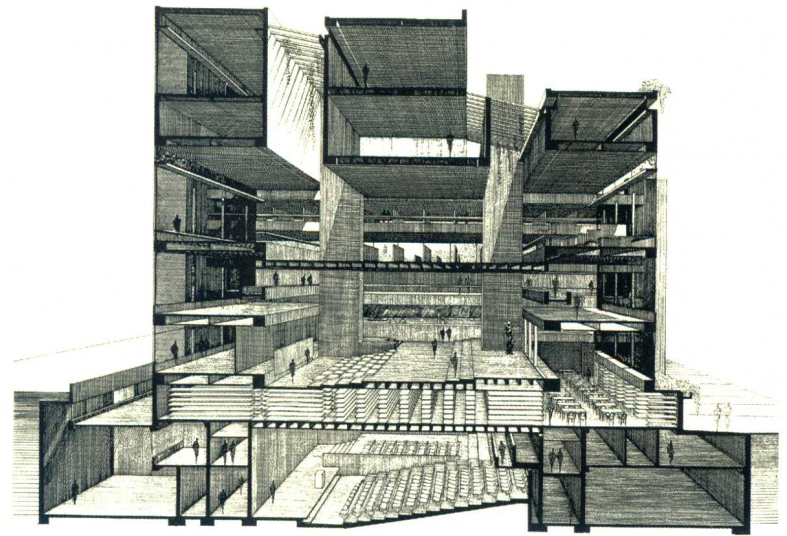
In a country house designed for a site north of New York, a totally different principle obtains. Here a smooth tessellated membrane of glass encapsulates the house. The primary image is captured by the main elevation facing the terrace, where a seven-bay, alternating modular grid in stainless steel runs across the entire facade. In this syncopated display, the wide bays are striated with horizontal louvers of sun-resistant glass, while the narrow bays are filled with translucent panels or alternatively with screens made of stainless-steel rods, as in the Neugebauer house. These screens are also employed on the east and west elevations where they are framed by lightweight mullions held clear of the ground. Uninflected by the louvers or screens, the glazed north elevation echoes the syncopated rhythm of the south wall by breaking up the larger bay of the south front into two equal parts. The resultant overall cage is composed of four transparent planes and established in strong contrast to the interior of the house. There a three-story living volume is animated by a monumental spiral stair, rising from the ground floor to the gallery at the top of the volume.

In Meier's recent architecture, a tessellated, translucent membrane is increasingly handled as the primary image, gradually assuming greater consequence than the plastic disposition of the internal space. This is at once evident in the Rickmers residence in Hamburg, where a perforated screen is disengaged from the main body of the building. Partially anchored by the oversailing roof, it floats in front of the house like a diaphanous veil.

Sometimes the ephemeral image is simply activated by the frame and its glazing, as seen in the Perry Street towers facing the Hudson River in New York. Here, the floor-to-ceiling curtain-walled envelope is plastically articulated on the river frontage by outrigger frames made out of hollow welded aluminum sections. These glide past the fenestration so as to inflect the trapezoidal plan forms towards the corner balconies at the southern apex of each tower. This dynamic orientation is enhanced by subtly syncopated glazing

*Art and Architecture Building
Yale University, New Haven,
Connecticut. Paul Rudolph, 1963.
Cross section in perspective*

*Yale University Art Gallery
New Haven, Connecticut.
Louis I. Kahn, 1953.
Reflected ceiling plan*



patterns on the side facades. The other operative play is the major versus minor inflection of the composition that derives from the fact that the two blocks are of significantly different dimensions. The footprint of the larger is almost twice that of the smaller. A similar inflection applies to the disparity between the two frontages facing the river, which, ironically, appear from certain vantages to be the same size.

A comparable declension makes itself felt in the internal volume of the towers, which in each case provides one apartment per floor. While the primary sitting area is always adjacent to the corner terrace, the dining space invariably gravitates towards the northwest corner in the smaller apartments and towards the south in the larger units. Although the spatial standards adopted in each apartment are extremely generous, they are correspondingly more luxurious within the larger floor plate. The fair-faced concrete vertical circulation “bustles” at the eastern end of the towers are similarly inflected, with the larger tower commanding two elevators as opposed to the single elevator of the smaller tower.

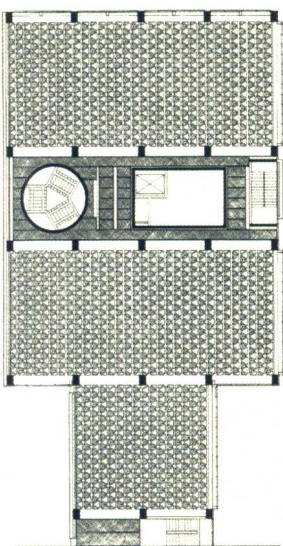
The potential for varying the layout of the Perry Street interiors is evident from Meier’s scheme for the Kojaian apartment, where he was able to divide and furnish the space to create a modulated sequence appropriate to the lifestyle of a part-time resident. An equally pliant approach characterizes Meier’s design for the Joy apartment in the larger of the two towers. This triplex unit yields an exceptionally generous four-bedroom living space of 11,000 square feet. Luxury here is entirely determined by the amplitude of the space and it is this, rather than finishes or fittings, that imparts the ultimate status to this extravagant dwelling.

A similar dematerialized character, with regard to the membrane, serves to bridge between the Perry Street design and Meier’s project for the faculty of the History of Art at Yale University, which is now in the final phase of design development. In both cases, there is

no correspondence between the modulation of the membrane and the articulation of the internal space. At Perry Street, this is facilitated by the fact that there is only a single apartment on every floor. At Yale, the articulation of the space, both new and reconstructed, follows the orthogonal, “loose-fit” character of the original Rudolph building—even if Meier has resisted, as it were, the “pin-wheel” organization of the Rudolph *parti*.

At this juncture, one has to acknowledge the transfer of the “servant versus served” paradigm across time, from Frank Lloyd Wright’s Larkin Building of 1906 to Rudolph’s Art and Architecture Building of 1963 and Louis Kahn’s University Art Gallery, realized immediately across the street a decade earlier. Meier, for his part, responds to this legacy by being particularly sympathetic to the expansion that Rudolph envisaged, above all his proposition that the rhetorical grand stairway to the street should eventually open onto a courtyard separating the existing structure from any extension to the north. To this end, Meier fulfills Rudolph’s vision with a reading room lit from above and extending for the full height of the building. In this arrangement, the Rudolph stair will deliver the visitor to a second-floor landing between the existing building and Meier’s addition that overlooks the reading room below.

Despite its departure from Rudolph’s in-situ “corrugated” concrete syntax, the new arts complex nonetheless terminates the rhythmical mass-form of the original with a four-square, seven-story tower. Within this tower is a stack of semi-public spaces, including a small lecture hall, an exhibition space, a cafeteria, a student lounge, faculty offices, and various seminar rooms. The extension also provides a circulating library, a periodical room, and a reference space, all within the depth of the second and third floors; two new lecture halls will be constructed below grade, forming a new auditorium complex with Hastings Hall in the original building. In addition to the existing stairway and entrance, a separate entry from the street will be provided for the art history faculty.



Syntactically, the new Art History and Arts Library Building is a tour de force in glass construction, from the louvered zenithal lighting over the atrium to the glazing of the tower and the syncopated fenestration of the entry foyer opening off the street. This luminous membrane will culminate in the four-story, vertically louvered glass wall to the north of the atrium, visually screening the faculty offices and the resource library from the architectural studios arrayed on the opposing face.

No work of the office to date has been more committed to the display of glass than the Meier/Isozaki proposal for a new Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center in New York. This institution, despite its civic prominence, has been plagued throughout its existence by problematic acoustics. The brief for the new hall was written not only with the goal of correcting this fault but also with the aim of providing optimal orchestral space and improving public access. Insertion of a smaller hall for chamber music and rehearsals was also part of the program. The main auditorium was designed by Isozaki in his typical theatrical manner, but the unique feature of the proposal is a continuously curving, transparent foyer that captures additional space to the north and east of the existing building. Braced by a cable-tied, tubular frame, this faceted glass enclosure is conceived as a reflective cage, held in place by an all but invisible structure.

Over the last five years, Meier has once again found himself in Germany working on the theme of the provincial museum, first with a design for the Frieder Burda Collection at Baden-Baden and then with another reworking of the Hans Arp Museum scheduled to be built at Rolandseck on the Rhine. The Burda Collection Museum is a small civic building on a diminutive verdant site surrounded by mature trees and connected by a bridge to the existing neoclassical Kunsthalle of approximately the same size. Meier has dealt with this theme before, above all in his Museum for Applied Art in Frankfurt-am-Main, completed in 1984.

The incipient movement towards a new kind of diffused crystalline light assumes a particular character in the Burda Museum, where the triple-height foyer is shielded from the morning light by lightweight screens of sun-resistant, translucent glass. These taut panes miraculously suspended in front of the surface of the building are offset by typical enameled white panels applied to the overall cubist form. On the south face, a large, horizontally louvered screen comes down to the ground where it stands against the clear glazing of the ramp hall. The triple-height exhibition space is an ingenious invention, which is divided into an interlocking lower and upper gallery. The latter takes the form of a top-lit tray of space flanked on all sides by freestanding, full-height walls. These walls open at their corners and at the point of entry to permit views down into the lower gallery, which is illuminated by the same zenithal light washing down its walls.

Other recent German works of consequence include designs for Peek & Cloppenburg, with two department stores to date, one in Düsseldorf and another nearing completion in Mannheim. The reinterpretation of a nineteenth-century type as a viable marketing institution within the context of the provincial city is of interest in itself, particularly given the way the office has approached the problem. Meier has resisted the late-modern compulsion to render the form as a windowless prism in order to optimize the stacking of merchandise around the inner perimeter of the volume. Instead, the public frontage has been largely faced in glass, transforming each store into a multi-story display window. In Düsseldorf, the five-story frontage is continuously curved following the street line, in a manner that tentatively recalls the sweeping dynamism of Erich Mendelsohn's Schocken department stores of in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In contrast to the Mendelsohnian panache, however, Meier's frontages are checked in their movement by episodic vertical elements. In both instances, central atria bring zenithal light deep into the heart of the building, and "scissor" escalators afford easy access to open shopping space on all sides of the central core.