

Richard Meier Architect

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For my present and former collaborators

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*Essays by Kenneth Frampton
and Joseph Rykwert*

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Acknowledgments

I recently traveled extensively in Europe and America lecturing about architecture, and this gave me the opportunity to reflect on some of the ideas and aspirations that brought us to where we are today in my own practice, which began in December of 1963 in the small two-room apartment where I lived and worked.

Looking back now, thirty-five years later, I realize that the projects far outnumber the realized buildings. But I also see that the importance of the projects lies in the ideas they contain, that the process of making architecture is a continual one that must include one's entire body of work.

In the making of space, there is always a concern for the way in which the public nature of a place is defined in human terms, and this means that there must always be an emphasis on the character of the whole. In responding to society's needs, one must be concerned with constructing a physical fabric that is equally durable, rational, and architecturally vibrant.

Fourteen years have passed since volume one of my monograph was published, where the first discussion I had with my children, Joseph and Ana, regarding "what is white?" was included. This has been an ongoing dialogue with them that has taken on a life of its own. But now that they are in or about to be in college, it is time that they continue this discourse individually, in whatever way is best for them.

The work of the last eight years, since volume two was published, shows an evolution of ideas, and of a vocabulary in architecture, with the fourteen-year involvement in the design and construction of the Getty Center being the most absorbing project from both a professional and a personal point of view. This book is a reflection

of those ideas, which have evolved in both the built and unbuilt work. It is a reflection of the work of many talented and dedicated people who have worked with me for years in the most responsible and conscientious manner, their efforts being of consummate quality.

My appreciation goes to Lisa Green, who was the master organizer of this book; to Massimo Vignelli, the visionary director and chef du graphic design; to Abigail Sturges, the outstanding person responsible for the final layouts; and to Rizzoli's editors, who carefully corrected and oversaw this third volume. And finally, I wish to thank Kenneth Frampton, the most articulate architectural critic of our generation, and Joseph Rykwert, the peerless historian, architect, and teacher; and the ingenious architect Arata Isozaki, who understands as well as anyone I know the relationship between practice and theory. All of you, most importantly, are my very dear friends who share with me this eventful and fulfilling time in architectural discourse at the close of the millennium.

Richard Meier

New York

December 1998

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Preface

Architecture is a social art. It is concerned with the quality of life, and this concern must find form through the nature of our work. At best the architect possesses an innate ability to transcend function and accommodation, going beyond the superficial attributes of style to express our human concerns poetically through space and material form.

Subject to history and to the never-ending interplay between interpretation and innovation, architecture also remains an opportunity and a responsibility. If we are to create new and meaningful places within our cities, we need to have not only a sense of our common social and spiritual aspirations but also a feeling for the traditions from which our society stems. Our cities are in a constant state of evolution. All of us are part of changing urban patterns that affect our work, play, commerce, communication, and travel. That is why it is so essential for us to relate architecture and urban design to the urgent issues of our time; to the problems of economic and social deprivation, to inadequate housing, and to the concomitant loss of freedom in the broadest possible sense. The art of city building has never been so crucial to our future, yet an awareness of that need has all but disappeared from today's political arena. There is a discernible weakening of public mission in this regard, not only in the United States but elsewhere.

It is our responsibility as architects to attempt to deal with the neglected and squalid sections of our cities. We must find a way to reach out to these sectors, to enliven and enhance them, and to bestow new energy upon the form of the urban fabric. I think that there are many ways in which we may achieve this. Every situation offers its own potential, whether we are building in Paris, Los Angeles, or New York. Louis Kahn said the city should be "a place where a little child walking through the streets can imagine what he

or she would like to be some day." I think that this is the kind of city we should aspire to create. Imagine a city where schools, libraries and hospitals, workplaces, and recreational and cultural facilities are all capable of giving full expression to the human need for self-realization at the highest level. But for that to happen, we must create what Kahn called the *availabilities*. Such institutions must be seen as readily accessible. We know that cities are meeting places, which we value because of everything they offer us. To the degree that institutions remove themselves from the public, to the degree that they keep people at arm's length and make themselves inaccessible, the very concept of the *res publica* dies.

Our meeting places must embody the sense of inspiration that lies at the very heart of the urban idea. An institutional space must not only accommodate human activity but also contribute actively to the shaping of human action, thereby helping to transform it into something that we are able to recognize as meaningful and rewarding. These are the twin essentials of city life: *accessibility*, combined with the drive to give form to our ideals; that is, to create the *availabilities*. It is our task as architects to promote the growth of such values. One fundamental way to do this is through an *architecture of connection*, an architecture that weaves together the urban plazas, streets, and parks that still make up much of the urban fabric.

It is our responsibility to develop civic ideas in which there is a physical sense of sharing that permeates the urban space and the contingent architectural form. I look forward to seeing our profession reaffirm its traditional concern for the urban fabric as a matrix for gathering and energizing the essence of the public realm. We need to remind ourselves continually of our mission to recognize and improve upon those patterns of civic behavior that already exist but that need a certain formal definition. Our task may not always be to

invent a new sense of place from the ground up; sometimes it may be more important for us to modify, to alter, and to reconstruct within an existing fabric. In either case, the civic space in question must grow logically out of each particular situation, and out of its physical, historical, and social contextuality.

One way to achieve this goal is to adopt a collagist approach toward urban design. With such a strategy it is possible to differentiate clearly between public and private places, between interior and exterior volumes, and to mediate in a subtle way between these opposing elements. Such a mediation will have to deal with movement and passage, with components that cross the city and interconnect its various parts, sometimes bringing the old into direct confrontation with the new. Such an architecture of connective tissue cannot afford to be unduly concerned with fashion or style. It is an architecture that searches for clarity rather than surface effect, an architecture that is committed to civic culture rather than divorced from it, a *parti pris* that has the capacity to recompose our cities and to liberate our lives. All too often today, this potential is totally neglected. New buildings are perceived as little more than free-standing commodities, with little connection to either the community or the topography.

In recent years a new kind of public space has emerged spontaneously in our society. We may encounter this only too directly in the new shopping centers, sports arenas, office complexes, and government facilities that populate the megalopolis. Within such institutions we may find spaces that, while privately managed, still persist in combining private and public uses. They are of great social relevance to our everyday experience of urban life. One of the challenges that architecture now faces is to design these new public spaces in such a way as to convey a sense of collectivity, enabling

them to become an integral part of the urban experience. As always, the best way to achieve this may not necessarily be the cheapest.

In my experience, the quest for economy does not always spring from a drive toward elegance and simplicity. It arises just as often from the desire to create works that are capable of enduring across time. In this regard it may often be necessary to find additional money—and indeed to spend such funds on the finest possible material—in order to achieve a durable result. As advocates for the city, we should be prepared to argue in favor of achieving quality and durability over expediency. Today, we have access to extremely sophisticated technology as well as a desire to deal with problems that have not been tackled before. What we always need and often lack are sufficient funds to arrive at an appropriate and long-lasting solution to these problems. Our aim should be to demand the best and not just the cheapest, so that, through our art, we can render the civic realm as a democratic space of human appearance in every sense of the word.

Richard Meier

August 1998

Three Tropes in the Later Work of Richard Meier

*Palace of the Assembly,
Chandigarh, India. Le Corbusier,
1955. Sketch*

*Sydney Opera House, Sydney,
Australia. Jørn Utzon, 1957.
Section*

Kenneth Frampton

They (some friends) tell me that I do not have a theoretical framework or a method. That I give no clues about the direction to be taken. And that this is not being pedagogical. A kind of ship at the mercy of the waves, that inexplicably does not always sink (which is something else they tell me). I do not give our ships' planks a good try out on the open sea. Excesses break them up into pieces. I study the currents, eddies. I look for the heavens before taking risks. I can be seen walking alone up and down on the deck. But the entire crew and all the equipment is there, the captain is a ghost. Whenever the pole-star is only just visible, I do not dare take the helm. I cannot point to any clear way. The ways are not clear.

— Alvaro Siza, *Professione poetica*¹

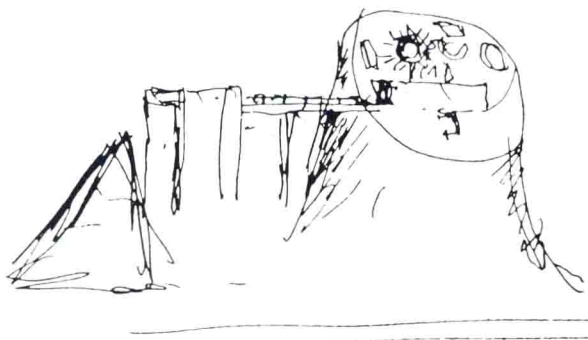
Atectonic

Although Richard Meier has long since acknowledged the neo-Corbusian character of his architecture, other tropes from the trajectory of the new have also emerged in his work. One may discern not only undulating forms drawn from the works of Alvar Aalto and Oscar Niemeyer but also the occasional plastic syncopation reminiscent of neoplasticism, not to mention a trace here and there of constructivism. One thinks of Jean Prouvé, whose characteristic window with rounded corners surfaced in the Bronx Development Center (1977), or of such obscure figures as Oscar Nitschke, whose *Maison de la Publicité* of 1936 seems latent in the dematerialized curtain walls of Meier's later work: for example, the horizontal fenestration of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona (1995) or the Canal+ television headquarters (1992) in Paris. In an interview with Charles Jencks, Meier openly conceded the influence of constructivism, prompting one to take particular note of such features as freestanding spiral stairs rising up into saw-toothed skylights or dog-leg stairs and flying ramps lined with wire-mesh balustrades. Elsewhere Meier's articulation of columns, beams, and panels

appears to be in a state of oscillation, while his white-enameled paneling often seems on the verge of dematerializing under light. Meanwhile, his habitual atectonic articulations of the surface of a building in terms of a square grid recall the work of Josef Hoffmann.

As with the architecture of Fumihiko Maki, to which Meier's work may be readily compared (one thinks in particular of Maki's Tepia Pavilion, Tokyo [1990], and his Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto [1986]), this approach to revetment seems simultaneously both to express the latent structure of the building and to deny it. Meier occasionally offsets this modulated ambivalence with a continuous plastic form made from homogenous material. In the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona a freestanding gallery, amoeba-shaped in plan, floats in front of the striated, lightweight, brise soleil facade. Like the conical cooling tower within (a trope borrowed from Le Corbusier's assembly building in Chandigarh), this form asserts itself as a foil to the rampway behind the curtain-wall front.

As Werner Blaser implied in his 1990 essay "Architectural Principles for a New Aesthetic in the Work of Richard Meier," a tectonic dimension has slowly come into being in Meier's recent work. This is particularly evident in three exceptional pieces: the Federal Building and United States Courthouse, Phoenix, Arizona, designed in 1995, the Neugebauer House, Naples, Florida, recently completed, and his winning entry in the competition for a Church of the Year 2000, dating from 1996 and scheduled to be completed for the millennium in a working-class district of Rome. In each instance, structural form comes to the fore as the main expressive element, a tectonic focus that in the courthouse is associated with one of the most rigorous pieces of modular planning of Meier's recent career. Here against an L-shaped armature of law courts and offices, Meier has set a lightweight, ferro-vitreous atrium of such elegance as to

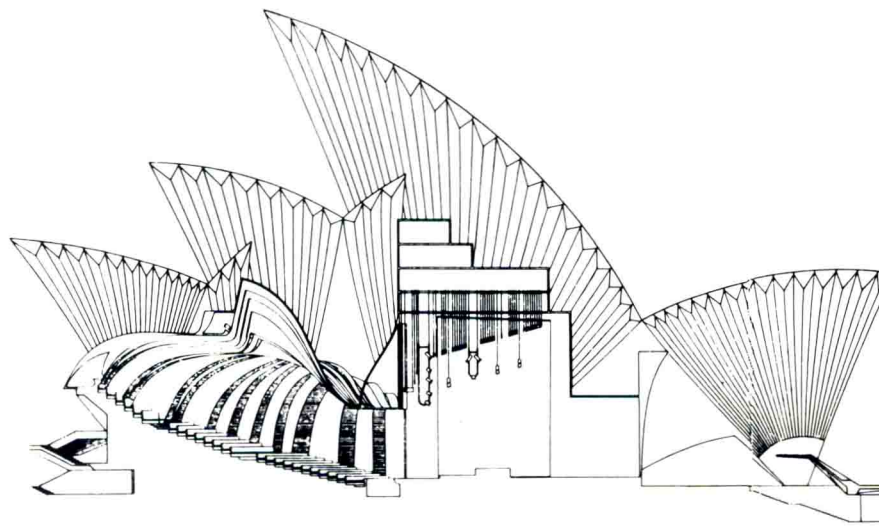


rival the finest works of the British high-tech school. As in the courthouse, so in the Neugebauer residence, where a butterfly roof cantilevers off a series of double columns to form a monumental canopy over the modular department of a single-story house, set before an inland waterway. Earthwork, roofwork, and infill are clearly articulated in this last work, and something similar appears in the parti for the church, where three concentric, monolithic concrete shells cantilever out of the ground to embody the nave. Aside from symbolizing the Holy Trinity, these decisive structural forms, as in Jørn Utzon's Sydney Opera House, establish the image of the work. It is telling, given Meier's current penchant for the tectonic, that these shells should be capped by a suspended, steel-framed skylight displaying a high level of technological ingenuity and elegance.

Res Publica

One of the largest enclosed public spaces in Europe, Meier's City Hall and Central Library in The Hague is a seminal work indebted not only to Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Building but also to Giuseppe Mengoni's famous Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Milan, built in 1877. While exceeding the Galleria in overall scale, Meier's building resembles it in that it is a microcosmic public realm built at the scale of the surrounding urban fabric. Moreover, both works possess parallel political connotations, with the former proclaiming the triumph of the Risorgimento and the latter consolidating the self-conscious awakening of the Dutch capital from its genteel era, as it tries to rival, in high-tech construction, the booming skyline of Rotterdam.

Meier's urban mandate, although never stated as such, was to unify and consolidate the city's new megalopolitan character. Thus the city hall is a megaform of sufficient height, length, and horizontal continuity to hold its own against the random, mediocre high-rise



office slabs that have been loosely superimposed on the preexisting urban grain. Yet, as with most of Meier's interventions in historic urban cores, contextuality is a moot point, for while on the one hand it would be difficult to imagine a building more alien to the Dutch tradition than this large structure, clad in a tessellated enameled skin, on the other, this new municipality seems to be uncannily sympathetic to Dutch culture—which may be explained in part by the Dutch assistants who worked on the project throughout. Thus, the Dutch new objectivity was somehow implicit in this building from the beginning. Who could deny its reference to the Van Nelle factory of 1929, even if its structural rhythm and its tapering, 10.5-degree format derive from the urban fabric? The fenestration provides, in accordance with Dutch law, a specific number of operable windows both within the atrium and without. However, these opening lights do not simply meet the legal requirement: their detailing recalls in terms of scale and profile the proportions of the work of neoplastic cabinetmaker Gerrit Rietveld. Aside from this subtle reference, Meier's design conforms to Dutch domestic tradition as a whole, with its constant attempt to optimize natural light. His use of tubular-steel and wire-mesh balustrades seems thus equally native, evoking the early work of Herman Hertzberger. Last but not least, the aerial *passerelles* that traverse the atrium to provide convenient access from one side of the office complex to the other are reminiscent of the glazed conveyor belts of the Van Nelle factory. This reference is reinforced by the freestanding glazed elevator shafts that recall the constructivist space-time ethos of the late 1920s.

Historical contextuality is evident in the galleria itself, which, given the perennially grey Dutch climate, makes one think of Hermann Boerhaave, who formed the greenhouse principle at the beginning of the seventeenth century. However, one of the ultimate local references arises from the sense of collective consensus that pervades