

Architecture

WILL ALSOP • PETER COOK

CONVERSATIONS

ODILE DECQ • HERNAN DIAZ ALONSO

WITH

FRANK O GEHRY • MARK GOULTHORPE

ARCHITECTS

ZAHA HADID • ZVI HECKER

ABOUT

KOL/MAC • GREG LYNN

A

THOM MAYNE • ERIC OWEN MOSS

TROUBLED

JIHANI PALLANAN DIAZ ALONSO

RELATIONSHIP

WOLF D PRIX • MARK GOULTHORPE

Yael Reisner with Fleur Watson

and Beauty

Architecture and Beauty



Architecture and Beauty

CONVERSATIONS WITH ARCHITECTS
ABOUT A TROUBLED RELATIONSHIP

Yael Reisner with Fleur Watson

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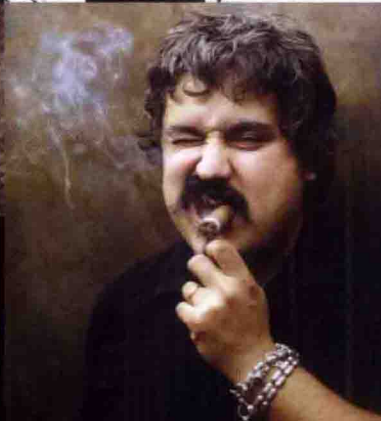
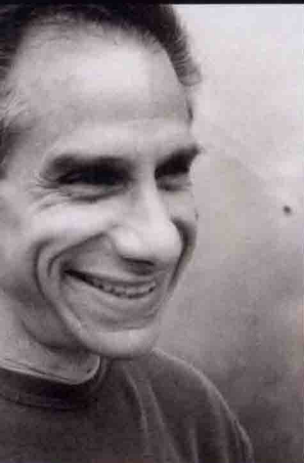
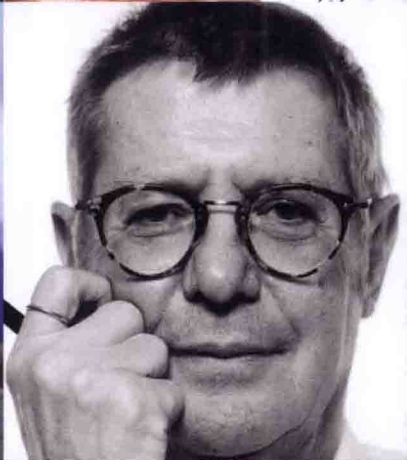
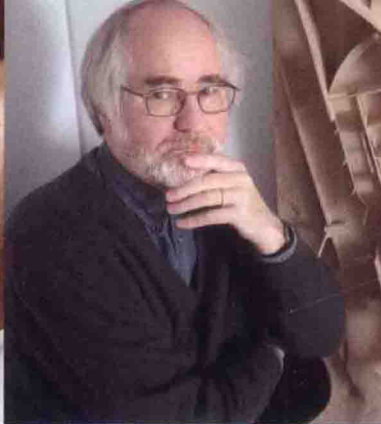
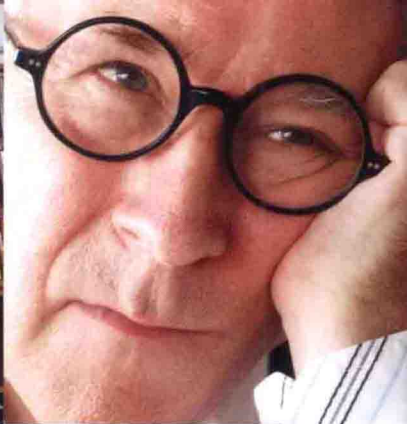
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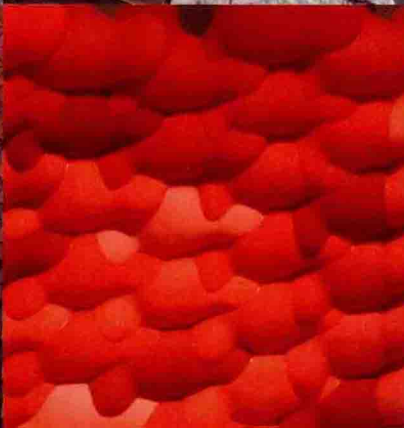
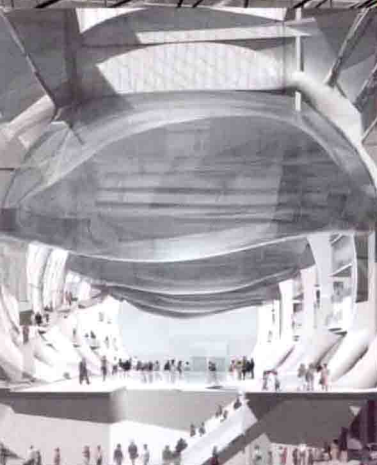
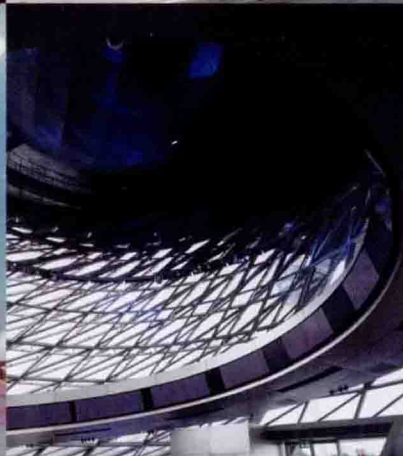
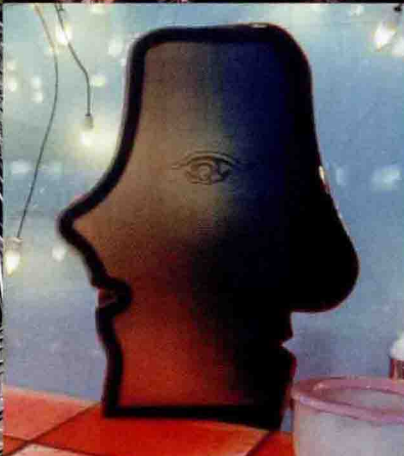
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SUGGESTED READING²⁵⁹ INDEX²⁶⁰
PICTURE CREDITS²⁶⁴

Dedication

To Yehudit and Joseph Yoshko Reisner
and

To Peter and Alexander
Yael Reisner

For Finn and Hope
Fleur Watson

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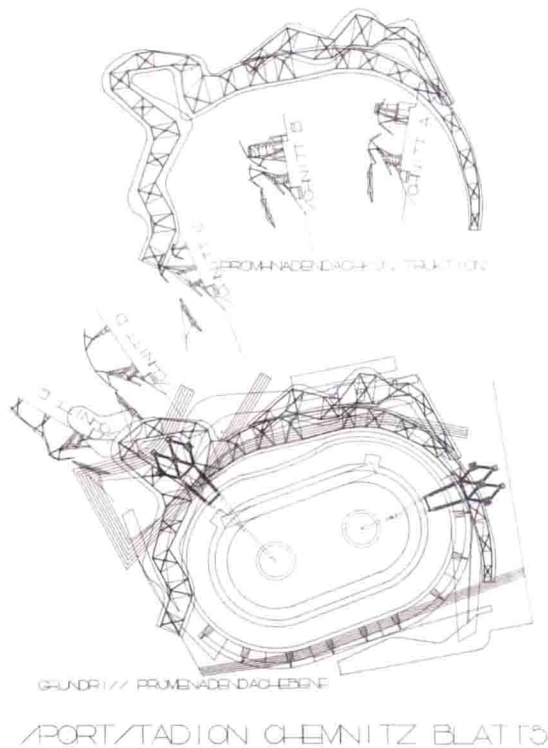
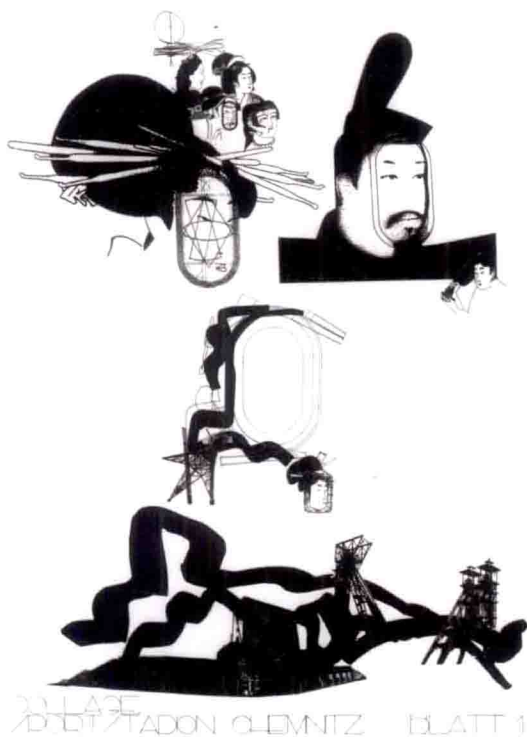
Architecture and Beauty

GENESIS OF A TROUBLED RELATIONSHIP

Yael Reisner

THE ARTIST'S ROLE IN SOCIETY has fluctuated significantly over time and across different cultures – from Rembrandt and Vermeer's indulgent portraits for the Dutch aristocracy in the 17th century, through to Dada and Marcel Duchamp challenging the very question of what art might be in the early 20th century. Regardless of their position, an artist's embracement or rejection of 'artistic beauty' is often at the core of their work. In recent times artists have been pressured to justify the creation of their work and forced to offer evaluations of its contribution to society; the resulting commentary usually returns to questions of aesthetics. For example, the recent controversy over British artist Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God* (2007) – a diamond-encrusted skull valued at £50 million – revolved around the beauty of the diamond and its value in direct comparison to the 'value' or content of the object as an artwork; arguably a deliberate ploy by the artist, despite the ongoing vigorous debate.

The visual artist may feel an obligation to communicate the intent of his or her work beyond the sublime and add qualitative value through exegesis, providing critical explanation, personally or through others, in exhibition catalogues, art magazines and the general media in an attempt to locate the work in its cultural and historical context. The composer, on the other hand, may look to an appreciation of his or her work as quantified by the recording, the performance and market exposure, all of which reinforce an acceptance of the quality of the music. The practice of architecture shares many of these concerns, yet the pressure for architects to quantify their work through non-emotive evaluation and justification has tended to fluctuate through history. Yet, since the wide dissemination of the values of Modernism, many of the vanguard architects of the past 70 years have deliberately generated their architecture without a primary consideration



ABOVE ENRIC MIRALLES AND BENEDETTA TAGLIABUE (EMBT), CHEMNITZ SPORTS STADIUM COMPETITION ENTRY, CHEMNITZ, GERMANY, 1995

The early montages of the Chemnitz Sports Stadium are imbued with the confidence of Enric Miralles and Benedetta Tagliabue's unique freethinking process and use of associative metaphors. Miralles died tragically in 2000 at the age of 45. Many of the projects designed between 1995 and 2000 were realised by 2008 with Tagliabue leading the EMBT office.

for its appearance.¹ Indeed, architectural discourse is dominated by the commentary of almost every aspect of the architectural process except aesthetics² – a fact that has driven the architect's intention to a point of mystique and, increasingly, alienation from public understanding.

The genesis of this book's subject matter came as a consequence of a long preoccupation with what I refer to as the 'troubled relationship' between architects and the content of their architecture, as well as its relationship with form and aesthetics.³ Good architecture and brilliant buildings are mostly judged by their capacity to produce an aesthetic experience, yet many outside the architectural profession are surprised to discover that architectural design is neither led by, nor generated through, a process that is engaged with aesthetical issues or visual thinking. Indeed, the diversity of response among the interviewees in this book reveals, in itself, the complexity of this inherently troubled relationship. For many, beauty is a concept that does not hold any value within architecture, while for others it has regained its importance and relevance through the framework of a new definition. For example, Frank Gehry sees 'beauty' as something

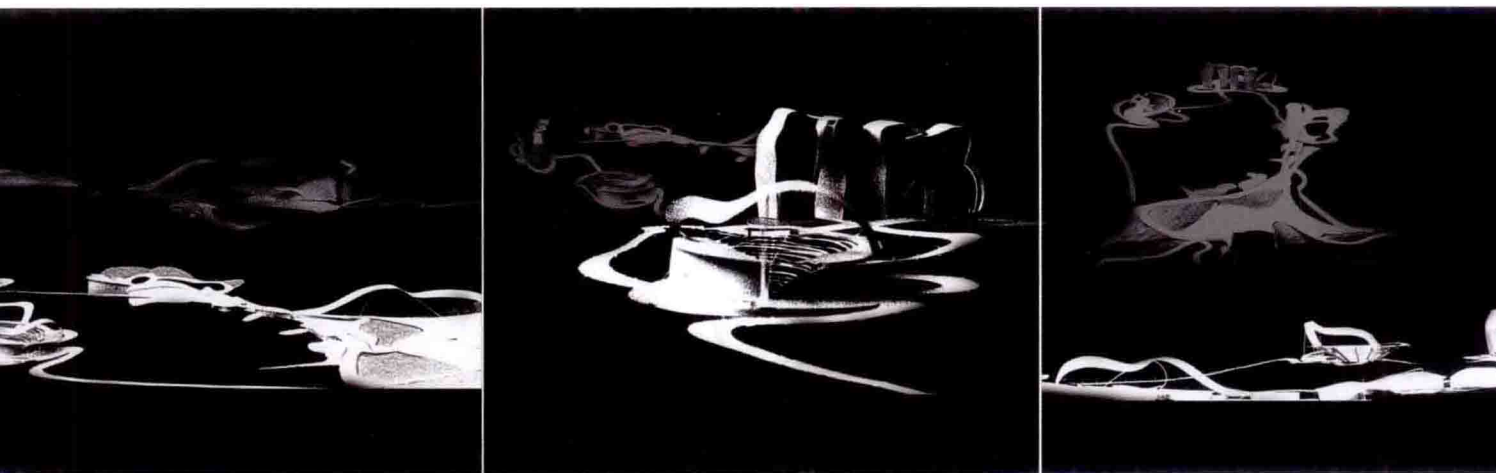
'pretty and soft' and unconnected with buildings, while Thom Mayne finds the term difficult within itself though he defines it as being 'compelled' to a particular type of architecture. For Gaetano Pesce, beauty is simply perfection, a notion he views as outdated and out of step with the fallible nature of human existence. Paradoxically, beauty can also be the very *raison d'être* of architecture: for Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa it provides the promise of a better human world, while for Odile Decq, to be in denial of the importance of beauty is the rejection of a basic human right. The concluding interviewee, the young Argentinean architect Hernan Diaz Alonso, provides a starkly contemporary viewpoint: for him beauty is integrally embedded within a playful exploration of the grotesque and horrific.

This poignant struggle is also encapsulated in the classic dyad of 'content and form' and how, as a principle, it is understood or perceived by architects of our time. As Juhani Pallasmaa eloquently describes in his interview: 'The discipline of architecture is "impure" in the sense that it fuses utility and poetics, function and image, rationality and metaphysics, technology and art, economy and symbolisation. Architecture is a muddle of irreconcilable things and categories.'⁴ Thus, it seems that the cultural and artistic facet of architecture is often undermined in favour of the more rational,⁵ pragmatic⁶ requirements of the discipline⁷ and, as such, drives this rarely confronted 'troubled relationship'.

RIGHT TEL AVIV, ISRAEL, EARLY 1980s

The beauty of the Modernist white city of Tel Aviv was an unexpected cultural statement that shocked many visitors from the 1930s through to the 1960s. Yet many of the city's socialists chose to turn a blind eye to its visual qualities, resulting in a lack of care for, and dilution of, the city's aesthetic nature in favour of practical, utilitarian, socioeconomic and political issues.





ABOVE Yael Reisner, *Silhouettes on Sea*; Tel Aviv Promenade Extended into the Sea, Ami Steinitz Gallery for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1991

Personal expression is a valid and important way of reflecting one's culture and, eventually, commenting on a broader collective cultural spectrum. At times architects draw strong impressions absorbed earlier in their life to inform their work. As a result, these visions have the power to engage people that may share similar memories. As can be seen in the Family House proposal (see image on page 16), cultural themes can manifest themselves differently in new projects.

The historic struggle between architectural content and form – particularly within the second half of the 20th century – resonates with me at a distinctly personal level and has, over time, provided the provocation for my engagement with the difficult position that beauty holds within architecture. Since my youth I have always admired beautiful objects and adored the look of new things. I believe I was born with a sensitive eye which was developed during my childhood and adolescence⁸ despite growing up in the context of the socialist,⁹ Modernist and cosmopolitan culture of the provincial city of Tel Aviv in the 1960s. The Israeli collective identity of the time and sense of place lay in an idealisation of modernity and simplicity, where ideological debates were prevalent, and aesthetic 'indulgence' was absent, frowned upon and treated as reminiscent of the old habits of the European bourgeoisie. I suspect that the Modernist socialist attitude of the people of Tel Aviv was the major reason why their city's new beauty¹⁰ became diluted and has been badly treated. 'Content' was satisfying and more significant; as Tel Avivians often remark: 'We don't argue about taste and smell.'¹¹

Yet my persistent attitude towards the look of things was mostly triggered by my father,¹² who rarely missed an opportunity to tease his daughter¹³ for her appreciation of things simply because of their appearance. I was accused of adoring empty vessels rather than admiring 'content' produced by intellectual activity (which was, in my father's opinion, worth critically appraising). Our conflict was reinforced daily by a famous Hebrew saying – 'Don't look at the jar but at its content' – which finds its parallel in the English saying 'Don't judge a book by its cover', though it does not translate as directly.



ABOVE Yael Reisner (with Maro Kallimani, Andy Shaw, and Atelier One Engineers), Family House Proposal, Kfar Shmaryahu, Israel, 2004–05

Beauty – as a concept for our age, a product of the individual for other individuals, and as an authentic product for a pluralistic global culture – is not a singular idea. The beautiful is many and by many, and therefore an ‘uncontrollable beauty’.

Projecting from my paternal influence was my observation that most intellectuals do not have a developed ‘eye’ with which to truly appreciate the range of values that can be captured within the ‘look of things’ – an observation that seemed underwritten by the context of socialism. Indeed, there appeared to be no genuine interest in looking; instead a deliberate setting of a blind eye to a visual set of references, creating a lack of visual sensibilities over time. I, therefore, assumed that being an intellectual meant the application of the written word through literature and poetry, and even theatre, to develop a quite different set of sensibilities; it did not matter if any object was defined by its ugliness, its originality of form, its beauty or its reflection on culture as it would always be reduced to the status of a merely decorative phenomenon. As I began to question this attitude my growing frustration fed my conviction and, in turn, the need for this book. This dialectic informs my research and drives my distrust of the collective message of cultural theory – and, more specifically, in architectural discourse – that the ‘content’ of cultural and creative output is more important than its ‘appearance’, and that the notion of ‘beauty’ is often misinterpreted as being devoid of intellectual depth.

Living in London since the early 1990s¹⁴ I have been struck by the disappointing fact that architecture is predominantly discussed in terms of ethics, content or activity, and much less in terms of its imagery, look, visual values, composition or architectural language. While teaching at the Bartlett School of Architecture, I had the opportunity to listen to a large number of lectures given by internationally renowned architects¹⁵ and I could not help thinking that the architectural discourse of the time shared attitudes with the arguments I had heard in my youth; tragically it seemed to me that many architects had

lost their conviction of the cultural importance of aesthetics and its ties with individuality. I hoped to find satisfaction in the shift that 'digital architecture' brought to the international stage, with its focus on form and appearance rather than on content. Yet, disappointingly, the digital movement's famous protagonists elevated the status of conceptual objectivity and pursued a 'rational' design process via computational processes. The rise of computer-generated design valued 'automated', 'pseudo-scientific' and intellectualised characteristics where originality evolved from intrinsic procedures derived from mathematics and not from an individualistic, aesthetic approach.

From a historical perspective, the origins of this troubled relationship throughout the 20th century can be traced to the beginnings of Functionalism where the Modernist ethos was embedded in socialist ideologies.¹⁶ Since the 1930s architectural discourse has been dogged by the Modernist ambition to avoid being driven by aesthetics and, in turn, the desire not to involve the 'self' or 'subjectivity' during the design process.¹⁷ Resistance to an architecture generated through emotion and visual thinking was a result of pressure from the Modernist 'apologists' who succeeded in creating an architectural discourse that

