



FIGURAL IDENTITY IN ADAPTIVE REUSE

PRESERVED, NEW, AND HYBRID

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Experimental Ambitions and Legacy – Architecture as Art in the Modern Period

Why is it useful to explore the apparently semantic discussion of art and its categorical difference from architecture? Architecture's aspirations to achieve 'artistic' merit are endemic to the discipline – appearing in recorded history as early as Vitruvius' first century BCE platform of 'firmitas,' 'utilitas,' and 'venustas' (strength, utility, and beauty). However, the 'beauty' of early architecture was a classical and symmetrical undertaking, and a majority of the work of architects during and since Vitruvius' time fell within a mode of 'fabric' buildings, structures with height, bulk, proportions, and detailing based in the existing construction and stylistic traditions of a given city, town, or rural region.

Departing from the 'fabric' building tradition, formal inventiveness in architecture flourished at the turn of the twentieth century in the horizontal and vertical expansiveness, volumetric drama, and sculptural freedom of residences for professors by Bernard Maybeck in the Berkeley Hills of California and in Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie School compositions for Chicago's elite. On the eve of the First World War, Henry van de Velde and Bruno Taut celebrated the excitement of the new spatial possibilities engendered by steel, reinforced concrete, and glass in temporary exposition buildings for the Werkbund Exhibition in Cologne. While regular in their symmetry, these buildings and Erich Mendelsohn's post-war Einstein Tower near Berlin are highly stylized, geometric formal departures from the metered vocabulary of the earlier regional and classical traditions. But in the post-

World War II building boom, the 'fabric' building returned, now taller. Chicago's first skyscrapers, quickly adopted in New York City and other dense cities, set the trend for the regular shape of urban buildings from the turn of the twentieth century.

In the past forty years, only the most virtuosic architects who created advertising value through formal distinctiveness – employing visually memorable silhouettes; dramatic use of sculptural relief and cladding color and texture; strongly contoured horizontals, verticals, and curves; and/or shapes with form references easily understood by reference to familiar objects (such as 'the washboard,' as the Boston Fed is known)¹ – managed to break the developers' pro-forma of maximum leasable space and achieve divergent artistic form in urban settings: Jorn Utzon with the Sydney Opera House (1973); Philip Johnson and John Burgee at Pennzoil Place in Houston (1975); Hugh Stubbins with the Boston Federal Reserve Bank (1977); Dominique Perrault at the National Library of France (1995); Frank Gehry with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (1997); OMA with the Beijing CCTV Headquarters (2012); and others – but few.

Building or Complex as *Object Trouvé* – 'Found Object'

Architects and artists seeking large-scale formal experimentation outside of this commercial setting looked to factory complexes as territory. Writing reflectively in 1990 on the prior two decades of industrial decline and prospectively on the continuing economic need to revitalize districts left vacant with offshoring, theorist Kevin Lynch envisioned vacant urban factories as places

¹An informal exterior composition in red, turquoise and white as a 'topographical artwork', 50 Moganshan Road, Shanghai.

of unbounded possibility.² The low economic value of these purpose-built structures and complexes at city edges made them ideal sites for low-risk experimentation within their large volumes. Upon their surfaces, and through additions, the architects or artists worked with the existing structure as a large-scale *object trouvé*. This term describes an artist incorporating a 'found' object with culturally-specific meaning into a new context wherein its meaning is transformed by the perception of the artist's work of art. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) – the display of a urinal as art – is the iconic example, though the descriptive term *object trouvé* came into use in 1937. Artists 'find' buildings designed for manufacturing, science, engineering, offices, and housing in districts that have been eclipsed by new developments fulfilling related needs. Upon securing access – through cooperative and/or governmentally-financed means, through direct arrangement with the owner, or, in unfortunate cases, illegally – artist occupants respond to the megalithic form with three overarching purposes: (1) to shelter themselves and their art-making; (2) to create at an unprecedented scale in terms of 'numerousness' or sheer size; and (3) to alter our understanding of the building's signification as a shelter. Developers and owners often encourage and facilitate artist occupancy and alteration of vacant industrial buildings and complexes, as their creative culture has been shown to precipitate district regeneration in cities around the world, including New York, Boston, San Francisco, Basel, and Copenhagen.

We look here at two spatial expressions of adaptive reuse within the *object trouvé* typology – *the complex as topographical artwork* and *the building as hybrid figure* – to describe those qualities that make them 'art.' Illustrating *the complex as topographical artwork* are two projects that create a morphological play between the existing complex and the new forms or surface treatments: Richard Meier's Westbeth Arts live-work housing in New York City and the informally-developed arts complex 50 Moganshan Road (M50) in Shanghai. Describing *the building as hybrid figure* are two projects separated by over nearly fifty years in time: a pair of Paris townhouses in Les Halles altered by artist Gordon Matta-Clark for the 1975 Biennale (now demolished) and Herzog & de Meuron's Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg. These are discreet singular structures changed by a significant addition or subtraction of form. Derelict or otherwise underutilized buildings have long been locations of expansive creativity for artists – and in fact, the four examples given are programs for artists and the arts.

Art's Critique of Architecture and the Built Environment

In the 1970s, art reacted to architecture, and the ensuing experiments in turn influenced architects. Sculptors

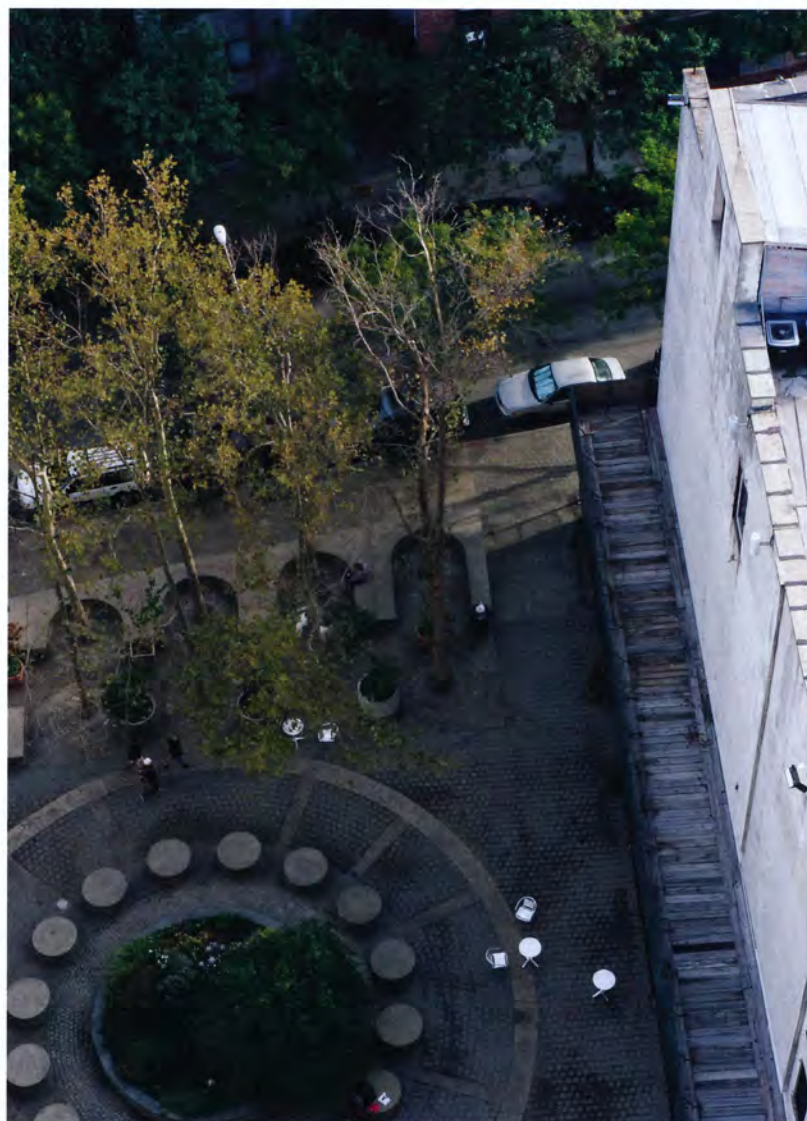
Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, Richard Long, Gordon Matta-Clark, and others carried art practice into the built environment. Robert Rauschenberg criticized the archetypal sterile white gallery by breaking the edge of the frame in mixed-media collages he called 'combines.' Smithson created *Spiral Jetty*, a large rock formation in the landscape; Richard Long documented long lines walked across desert territory and allowed only recordings of the ephemeral actions to be curated; and Donald Judd made geometric vertical and horizontal forms with deep voids breaking masses. The architecture world almost claims Judd – and he confirmed the presumed affinity with his purchase of a former army base in Marfa, Texas as *object trouvé*. These experiments, briefly mentioned here, have detailed histories beyond the scope of this analysis and impacted art in additional ways.

As Smithson and Long drew the art world's attention to the environment, historians JB Jackson and Dolores Hayden contemporaneously penned critiques of the new look of the American landscape: the sprawling cities, redeveloped downtowns, proliferating highway interchanges, and increasingly abandoned factories. Landscape photographers Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz – members of a group of large-format photographers referred to as *New Topographics* – photographed the dystopia of residential and industrial sprawl. In their images, clusters of dwellings read as topographical aberrations on scraped sites.

Complex as Topographical Artwork

This 'topographic' trend in art surely influenced architects such as Richard Meier, also based in New York City, a major center of the 1970s art world. Today, we know Meier as an architect of major commercial works of new construction – luxury apartment buildings, academic centers, and government offices with clean lines and bold white humanistically-scaled facades. But Meier's first large commission, completed in 1970s, was a renovation project for the J.D. Kaplan Fund and the National Council on the Arts: Westbeth Arts. This 384-unit complex in New York City's Greenwich Village was the first publicly-funded live-work housing project in the United States. The existing buildings, Bell Telephone Laboratories' late nineteenth and early twentieth-century office and research and development complex, were an agglomeration of robust brick structures assembled to utilitarian ends. The multiple structures on the large block had diverse footprints and heights, though several strong rectilinear axes brought drama and coherence to the assemblage.

Subtracting two existing timber-framed structures, selectively painting facades, and adding geometric elements like fire escapes, concrete park benches, and a fountain, Meier developed a new language of form to be read at an urban scale simultaneously with the existing historic volumes. The resulting Escher-esque composi-



tion of white on brick showcased new geometrically-defined gathering spaces while allowing the formal identity of the existing office and lab building complex to remain visually whole.

Today, the website of the architect, to whom Ada Louise Huxtable referred in 1969 as "...one of the city's more conspicuously talented and stylish younger architects,"³ lands on a sizable life sciences research building at Cornell University, clad in white. Headlines move along the website with the text of Meier's 1984 Pritzker Prize acceptance speech:

"White is the most wonderful color because within it you can see all the colors of the rainbow. The whiteness of white is never just white; it is almost always transformed by light and that which is changing; the sky, the clouds, the sun and the moon."⁴

Complex as Topographical Artwork – Richard Meier's 1970 topography of white paint on brick exteriors at New York City's Westbeth Arts can be understood as a megalithic artwork at the scale of an urban block.

Meier's use of white paint to alter the urban presence of the former Bell Labs complex is elemental to its resonance as a large-scale work of art. It brings the former office and test facility buildings into the modern spatial idiom of solid and void by amplifying the presence of certain facades. This use of white on such a large scale is the earliest expression of Meier's later oeuvre.

Westbeth's Executive Director, Steven Neil, understands the importance of the white paint to the historic significance of the modern period of this complex and the work of Meier. He is currently supervising the restoration of the complex as part of a \$7 million renovation project that includes deferred maintenance left off the project in 1970, like fixing roofs and other envelope issues. The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, which designated the complex in 2011, men-

Westbeth Arts, the first publicly-funded live-work artist loft project in the United States, is an Escher-esque composition of white on brick by Richard Meier, showcasing geometric additions like these park benches.

tions Meier's alteration work but attributes Westbeth's contemporary significance primarily to the building's social history as a community of significant artists.⁵ As early work by Meier and other members of the New York Five – an avant-garde group of architects featured in a 1969 exposition at the Museum of Modern Art – increasingly requires substantial renovation, preservation tides will surely shift. Docomomo, the international preservation organization for modern movement heritage, and *Metropolis Magazine*⁶ are at the head of this trend, building the case for the significance of noteworthy works of architecture built since 1970.

As at Westbeth, exterior paint is the primary element of change in the adaptive reuse of 50 Moganshan Road (M50), a studio, dwelling, and gallery complex developed in the late 1990s in a multi-structure 1930s-era former textile mill complex owned by Shangtex, the state textile company, in the Putuo District of Shanghai, China. Over 100 artists' studios are located here and merge with the adjacent residential and industrial neighborhoods. The underutilized factory buildings in this area are quickly being converted to residential, office, and artist studios such as the nearby Creek Art Center. Located near the downtown of the Jing'an District, the area is a part of Shanghai's Suzhou Creek Renewal District and has been improved through public park amenities and infrastructure replacement over the last decade.

The M50 buildings are an assortment of tile-roofed one to four-story concrete, brick, and stucco structures with dark gray, white, and red brick weathered exteriors, alternately advancing and receding at irregular intervals. The varied topography of façades and roofs is connected on the ground plane by broken asphalt access drives from which furniture-scale water, sewage, and fire protection piping access points protrude and cluster, and large pipes occasionally pass overhead from building to building, making informal thresholds.

Within this discordant setting – reminiscent of the dystopic 1979 Russian film *Stalker* by Andrei Tarkovsky that initiated the 'landscape urbanism' trend, in which abandoned industrial landscapes are reclaimed as parks – the artists have built empathy with their surroundings by framing doorways, installing studio signs, and graphically altering entire sections of the exterior as informal site-specific artworks. One of these works, in red, white, and iridescent blue paint, colonizes a metal stairwell, a grouping of human-scale pipes, and the adjoining two building exterior walls.

Art enacted on the existing structures is an empathy-generating design mode, setting in play a new formal way of looking at the building forms and the experience of the space within. While the episodic alterations of M50's exteriors are small-scale topographic interventions, the interiors are claimed and altered in their entirety by the artists whose gear, workbenches, and framed works occupy the lower third to half of the

fifteen to thirty-foot high spaces. The upper two-thirds of the walls, the figurally-expressive rectangular columns with four-sided trapezoid-faced capitals, and the flat and saw-tooth ceilings are a topographic artwork of whitewashed planes. Within one of these radiant white volumes stands a twenty-foot high plaster figure of Mao Tse-tung with sculptures of children prostrate at his feet. As at Westbeth, the *complex as topographical artwork* is created through the amplification of latent spatial geometries.

Building as Hybrid Figure

In the 1970s, art reacted to architecture not only at the scale of the complex, but also in disputing the culturally prescribed meanings of individual structures. Artist Gordon Matta-Clark is arguably the initiator of the *building as hybrid figure* mode of adaptive re-use within the *object trouvé* typology – in which existing buildings are dramatically transformed through the addition or subtraction of large-scale elements with distinct figural identities.

Splitting (1974) and *Conical Intersect* (1975), two of Gordon Matta-Clark's works of 'anarchitecture,' exemplify the alteration of a 'found' building whose signification as a sheltering structure is dramatically ruptured by a counter-posing figural gesture. Bruce Jenkins, biographer of Matta-Clark, chronicles the emotional impact of Matta-Clark's first building-scale works. He describes the New Jersey tract house that Matta-Clark split by making two vertical cuts one inch apart with power hand tools and by chiseling the foundation to cause its settlement to one side of the house. Matta-Clark had invited a group of friends to come see the work, but even right before the intended exhibit, Matta-Clark told interviewer Liza Bear, "there was a terrific suspense, not really knowing what would hold or shift." In the end, the cut building's two halves settled outwardly, creating a wedge of light that destabilized the solidity of the structure and carried the social commentary of that rupture with it.⁷

The geometric play of *Splitting* relies partly on an equivalency between the rectangular proportions of the original house and that of the two halves, which are proportionally identical to the house. *Conical Intersect* is a temporary work that Matta-Clark constructed in two Les Halles townhouses on the edge of the Pompidou Center construction site during the 1974 Paris Biennale. Matta-Clark's geometric dialogue with the existing structures similarly destabilizes their original meaning, in this case through the cutting away of a telescope-shaped form on the third, fourth, and fifth floors of the structure, its roughly 10-15-foot diameter opening, and several additional circular cuts beyond visible to passers-by below. The drama of *Conical Section* is clear in Marc Petitjean's photographs taken inside the structure during the construction of the artwork, in which the brick, timber, and

plaster of the floor and wall construction make a rough contour for the conical volume of intersecting circular cuts.

Equally dramatic is Herzog and De Meuron's alteration of Werner Kallmorgen's 1966 Kaispeicher A in Hamburg into a hybrid form with a brick base and soaring glass crown for the Elbphilharmonie symphony, hotel, and condominium complex (completion expected in 2017). As in *Splitting and Conical Intersect*, the historic form, the new form, and the compositional whole are uniquely identifiable. The distinctiveness of the historic form within the architects' hybrid composition stems from both its unique appearance and the geometric parity set up by the adaptation.

Kaispeicher A, rising 98 feet above a 25-foot high pier in the Elbe River, appears like a fortification, with three roughly 80-foot wide brick piers interspersed with the dark slots of vertical loading bays.⁸ Small, square, regularly-spaced openings evoke gun emplacements in a castle wall and have a similar aspect to the now classic postmodern façade of Michael Graves' 1980 Portland Building.

Above the brick base, trapezoidal in plan and used now for parking, a one-story high recess, perhaps fifteen feet in height, separates the brick volume from a soaring glass crown above that the architects refer to as a 'crystal.' This joint is the structure's main circulation node, the arrival point from the sweeping grand escalator and the entrance lobby to the two symphony halls. With the exception of the sky-reaching fore and aft portions of the 'crystal,' the heights of the brick volume and the glass volume are identical. The proportional balance strengthens the identity of the historic structure.

Herzog and de Meuron intended the glass addition to look like "...an immense crystal, whose appearance keeps changing as it captures and combines reflections from the sky, the water and the city..." and also "like a tent," bringing a vertical "accent" to the formerly planar pier.⁹ The operable apertures in the building's skin – precision-formed and coated slumped-glass panels of variable profile roughly eleven feet high and sixteen feet wide on standard floors¹⁰ – might be interpreted as a riff on the small regular openings of the warehouse façade, whose "abstract" beauty the architects admired.¹¹

The Elbphilharmonie's *hybrid figure* resonates as a compositional whole through proportional equivalency, the language of its apertures, and through the dramatic and abstract deployment of classical forms. In the glass crown, these forms resonate with the traditional language of the brick base: both the vaulted openings at lobby level and the arched forms of the 'crystal' play on the Gothic arch.

Experimental Ambitions – Formal Distinctiveness in Urban Settings

The successful and coherent transformation of com-

plexes and buildings into *topographical artworks* and *hybrid figures* argues for acceptance of the progressive approach outlined here, in which added elements have voice, historic works maintain material and formal integrity, and the resulting hybrid building or complex is itself a new work of art. These strategies are not simple or proscriptive, and any proposed development aspiring to artistic merit should be held to strict standards of review. But formal distinctiveness is a value we have neglected in the design of urban buildings, and we can and should use adaptive reuse as a vehicle of experimental ambitions.

ENDNOTES:

1 Katherine Solomonson. *Design for Advertising from The Chicago Tribune Tower Competition*. University of Chicago Press, 2003.

2 Kevin Lynch. *Wasting Away*. Sierra Club Books, 1990.

3 These words were included in the National Register of Historic Places Nomination for the former Bell Laboratories complex, penned shortly after the alteration work in 1975 (though, unfortunately, perhaps due to the stigmatization of modernism in some preservation circles, not in its *Statement of Significance*). James Sheire. *National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form for Bell Telephone Laboratories (common name Westbeth)*. March 5, 1975.

4 Richard Meier & Partners Architects LLP, www.richardmeier.com, accessed October 16, 2015.

5 Jay Schockley. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Designation List 449 LP-2391. October 25, 2011.

6 Paul Makovsky and Michael Gotkin. *The Postmodern Watchlist*. November 2014.

7 Bruce Jenkins. *Gordon Matta-Clark Conical Intersect*. MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2011. 54, 59, 63.

8 "A Crystal in the Harbour – The Glass Façade of the Elbphilharmonie." *Detail*. 2010-5. 498-508.

9 Herzog & de Meuron, www.herzogdemeuron.com/index/projects/complete-works/226-250/230-elbphilharmonie-hamburg.html, accessed October 16, 2015.

10 *Detail*. 498-508.

11 Herzog & de Meuron, www.herzogdemeuron.com/index/projects/complete-works/226-250/230-elbphilharmonie-hamburg.html, accessed October 16, 2015.