

The Architect's Room

Terence Riley

AT THE CLOSE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY architecture not only enjoys a preeminence in contemporary culture but—as a subject of social, political, and cultural theory as well as philosophical and historical speculation—has proved to have a near-infinite capacity for analysis and interpretation. The purpose of *Fabrications* is to add to this discourse; to inquire as to what architecture may have to say about itself and how it might, in its own terms, speak of philosophy, history, culture, and other, broader issues.

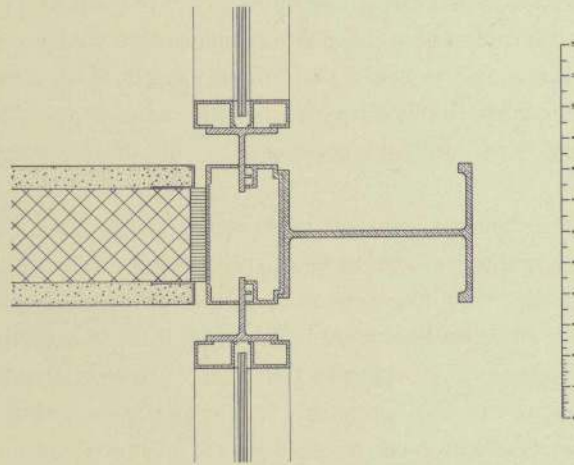
The term *tectonics* is derived from the Greek and refers literally to the “poetry of building.” That such a thing might exist may be surprising to some, as would the underlying supposition that something as pragmatic as construction might have any voice at all. In considering the source of this voice, it is interesting to note one of the more prevalent ways, in Western culture, of indicating the status of an architect. In Germany a professional is said to be a member of the *Architektenkammer*, the architects’ chamber. The same terminology, in various translations, is used in numerous other European societies. To be admitted to the architects’ chamber—or, more simply, the architects’ room—suggests an exclusive realm of the initiated, distinguished from outsiders by the specificity of their knowledge.

That architects, as a group, would develop a specific language to match the specificity of their work is unsurprising. More to the point, however, is how this language has come to absorb associated ideas with unexpectedly broad implications. The platonic circle twice bisected creates four ninety-degree angles, each known as a *right* angle. The rightness of the angle refers to a whole cluster of concepts more metaphysical than material: correctness, legitimacy, and so on. In the same linguistic vein the term *wright* refers to one who has mastered a skill, as in wainwright or wheelwright. In yet another instance, milled steel or lumber that is free from warping and other dimensional defects is referred to as *true*.

Despite the implications of these broader philosophical issues in the language of tectonics, a distinction must be made between these concepts and notions of tautologies or orthodoxies. Indeed, poetry in construction requires, as it would in any written language, a certain level of nuance and subjectivity. Evidence of such a conditional nature exists in yet another architectural term: *tolerance*, which refers to acceptable deviations in the form, dimensions, or surface qualities of a construction. A more slippery term might also be introduced here: *fabrication*, which jumps between the negative sense of a falsehood and the more neutral sense of the process, or product, of making.

Perhaps no architect in this century understood the conditional nature of correctness in building as did Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the son of a stonecutter without formal training in architecture. Mies’s application of I-beams to the exterior of the Seagram Building (see fig. 1) has been criticized as a mere formal gesture, with negligible structural or functional value. Yet the same could be said of metopes, the

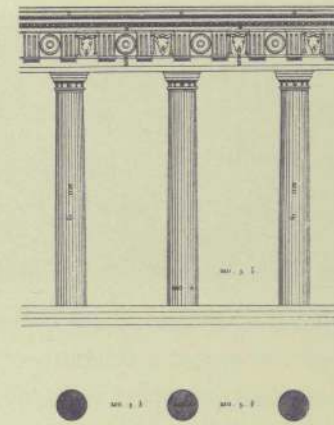
Figure 1: Mies van der Rohe, Seagram Building, New York City, 1958
Plan section through curtain wall and applied exterior I-beam
Mies van der Rohe Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, New York



sculpted rectangular elements placed rhythmically in the cornices of ancient Greek buildings (see fig. 2). Within the language of architecture they achieve the same goal: the fabric of the structure speaks poetically of itself. The metopes recall the unfinished, exposed butt ends of the timber roof rafters of older Greek architecture, and in a similar fashion the applied I-beams refer to the structural steel lattice wrapped behind the curtain wall.

If these formal devices might be said to reveal certain aspects of the building not otherwise apparent, there exists a more direct relationship between the term *reveal*—referring to the slight gap that separates various elements of a construction—and the language of architecture. A reveal uncovers the processes and defines the materials of its own making. An elegant example of this idea of revelation in contemporary architecture might be seen in Peter Zumthor's recently completed Kunsthhaus in Bregenz, Austria. Eloquently demonstrating that fabrication can transcend the mundane, the museum is a complex interweaving of its inner concrete shell and outer glazed skin. The typical insulated-glass curtain wall is completely rethought and expanded into a visible expression of its various components: an external skin of translucent glass shingles, which acts as a light filter and heat shield (see flyleaf); a one-meter-deep interstitial space, which acts as a thermal barrier; and transparent clerestory glazing, which brings the filtered light into a plenum of space above each of the four levels of galleries. The carefully calculated shingling of the outer skin serves to reveal rather than conceal this complexity.

Figure 2: Plan and elevation illustrating the Doric order, plate 12 of *The Four Books of Andrea Palladio's Architecture*. (London: Isaac Ware, 1738); the metopes can be seen in the cornice above the columns between the alternating decorative disk and cow's skull motif.

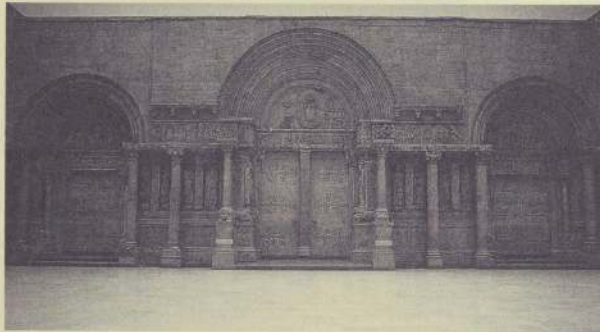


The four architectural installations in the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, were conceived by four individual architects or teams following mutual discussions and analysis of the site. As a group, the four installations reveal not only certain aspects of their materials and construction but also various aspects of the site and its specific context. Like the full-scale fragments in a Beaux-Arts museum (see fig. 3), the installations are seen as having an intrinsic aesthetic dimension as well as a didactic one: each of the pieces also engages broader issues, speaking to individual concerns.

Of all the activities in the repertoire of construction, glazing (the installation and fitting of a building's glass surfaces) is most closely associated with this century and the philosophical and architectural issues that have defined it. The installation by Henry Smith-Miller and Laurie Hawkinson (Smith-Miller + Hawkinson Architects) transforms the International Style façade of Philip Johnson's 1964 East Wing, with its clearly defined separation between structure and skin, by literally and philosophically "building upon it". The classical framed view that it creates—not so different from, say, peering out from between the columns of the Parthenon—suggests a universal perspective, an objective and unchanging view of the world.

In Smith-Miller and Hawkinson's construction, various aspects of the East Wing façade are reconsidered and reconfigured. The relationship between the black steel piers and the transparent glass panes is

Figure 3: Fragment of a medieval church (full-scale reproduction)
Hall of Architecture, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh



inverted; a new glass pier acts as a support, and the dark hue of the skeletal structure is extended into the building as a series of planar surfaces. Furthermore, the classical sense of spatial continuity is challenged by a series of folded plates that rise up from the floor of Johnson's East Wing and seemingly pass through the glass façade, becoming the installation's metaphorical, rather than universal, horizon. The relationship between vision and structure is also challenged: a dark panel obscures the view from one section of the Johnson façade, replacing it with a digital view of the site landscape projected into the building's interior.

Alfred Munkenbeck and Stephen Marshall's (Munkenbeck + Marshall Architects) minimal shelter consists of a canopy supported by three slender columns with an infill of woven steel mats on two sides. The canopy hovers over the bridge that spans the eastern reflecting pool of the Sculpture Garden, creating an assemblage of new and preexisting parts. In its spare, essential form, the structure recalls the underlying Miesian influences on Johnson's design of the garden. Yet, upon closer inspection, other influences can be noted. The nineteenth-century German theorist Gottfried Semper suggested a model of the primitive hut as an early source of architecture. Semper's hut consisted of a base of stone, which rooted the structure and provided a suitable surface for the hearth. Atop the stone base, Semper imagined, rose the timber frame structure of the walls and roof, which were then infilled by woven materials, unifying masonry, carpentry, and weaving, each used in the most effective way.

In Munkenbeck and Marshall's shelter the stone hearth has given way to a stone bridge, and the household fire is replaced by the image of water. Semper's structure suggested a kind of cosmic connection between the earthbound masonry below, the lighter framework above, and the skyward trail of the smoke from the hearth through the peak of the roof. While there remains a dialogue between the frame structure and the woven infill material, there is a definite shift from the vertical "axis mundi." As the water below

and the canopy above are both reflective, the space between becomes a slice between the celestial and the mundane, with light coming from above and below simultaneously.

The proposal by Enrique Norten and Guy Nordenson (TEN Arquitectos) consists of a glass structure situated in a paved, open area of the garden. Beneath the structure's glass canopy the garden's two-by-four-foot marble paving slabs have been removed, revealing the rubble of the townhouses that formerly occupied the site. Distinctly recalling the architecture of an archaeological site, the installation restores the memory of the previous construction to the current condition. Standing below the canopy and upon the rubble, the viewer experiences a shift in physical, as well as historical, point of view. As if to confirm the notions of relative permanence and transience previously mentioned, the bricks of the Beaux-Arts townhouse have been transformed into a subsurface sedimentary layer.

This installation also reminds us that a new fabrication might be made by the removal or displacement, rather than the addition, of material. As evidenced by such projects as Michael Heizer's earthworks or Gordon Matta-Clark's excisions of architectural fragments, such operations can have profound effects on the natural landscape. In a densely built environment, the effects are no less profound. As this type of environment will characterize the twenty-first century, perhaps more than any other, Norten's installation speaks of the future as much as the past.

The installation by Monica Ponce de Leon and Nader Tehrani (Office dA) is a lightweight, transient structure with multiple references, made entirely of sheet steel. The material was subjected to a number of transformative operations traditionally associated with metalworking, each calculated with the assistance of computer analysis: perforation, which reduced its weight; milling the surface to produce a texture; and bending and folding, which gave it a form and structural stability. In this instance the form resembles a cascading staircase, suggesting the amount of strength imparted to the otherwise relatively weak material. Folding and bending techniques were also used to assemble the various sections of the installation, interlocking them in the manner of large shingles.

While the installation suggests the form of a stair, it is also a self-supporting canopy that rests against the bulk of the eighteen-foot-high masonry wall that forms the northern edge of the sculpture garden. The metalwork here, unlike that in other types of canopies, is continuous and not divided into structural and nonstructural members; rather, a different type of contrast is suggested. The juxtaposition of the masonry and the metalwork underscores their fundamental differences and recalls the experimental house projects of the French architect Jean Prouvé, particularly the projects exhibited in the 1951 *Exposition des arts ménagers* in Paris. In that unbuilt scheme, a masonry wall was to be the spine of the house, and factory-produced curved metal sections were to rest against it, creating the interior space. In both

the Prouvé project and the Office dA installation, the qualities of the masonry—heavy, massive, site built, permanent—are played off the qualities of the metalwork—lightweight, perforated, factory built, transportable.

In each of these four “fabrications,” there is a revelation or, as Heidegger would have said, an “unconcealment.” The rightness or truthfulness of these works derives not from a conception of orthodoxy, but from the art of fabrication.