

The Building's  
Discursive Building  
José Aragüez

## THE BUILDING'S DISCURSIVE BUILDING

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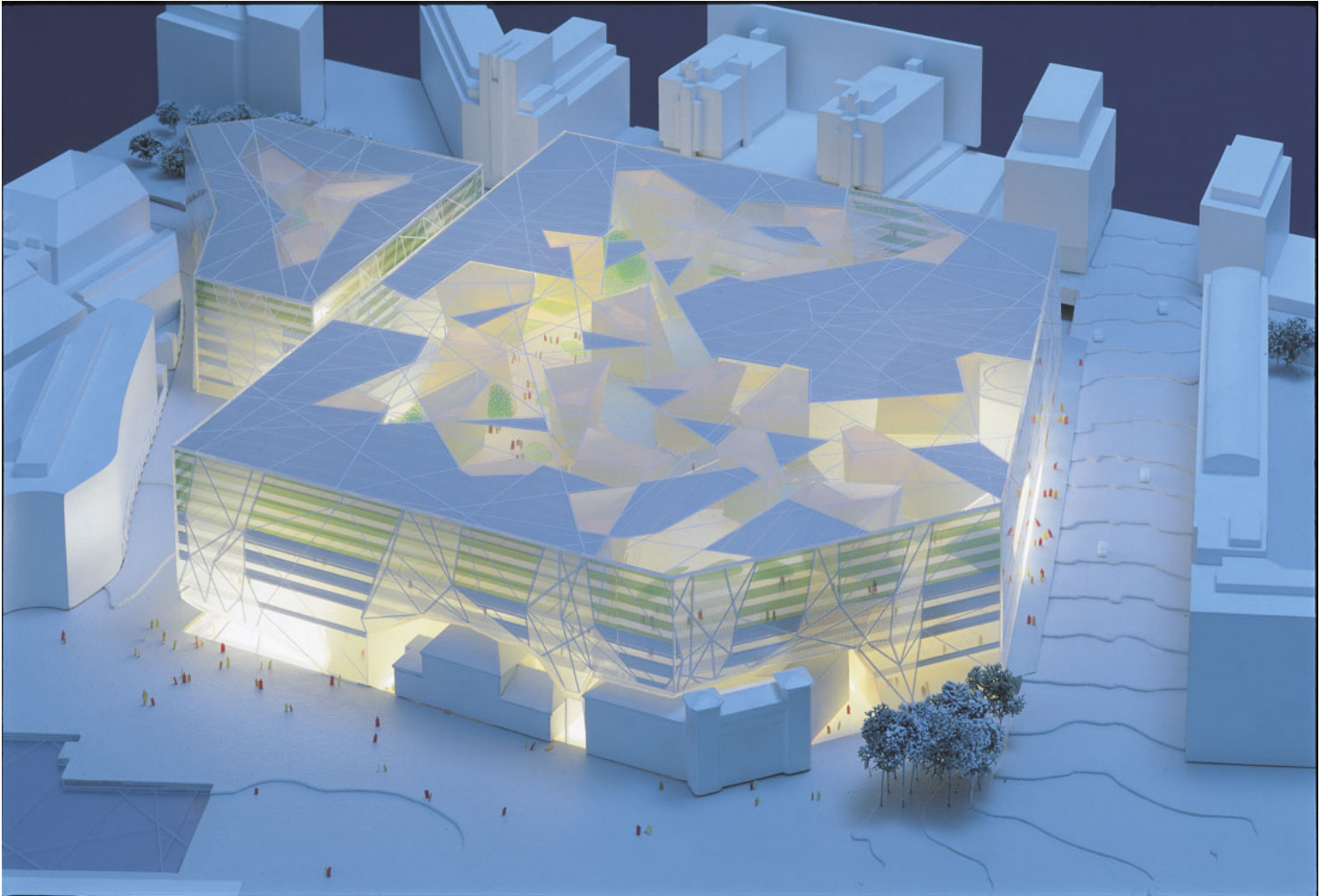
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Over the last few decades, architectural history and theory have done a remarkable and necessary job of expanding their limits and audiences. The flip side of this expansion, however, has been a marked displacement of the object, and with it ultimately a certain neglect of architectural thinking proper. On the other end of the spectrum, discussions centered firmly round design process and outcome have often proved self-referential (e.g. those around “autonomy”) or restricted to the spheres of practice and studio teaching alone. This project constructs a bridge between these two tendencies by mobilizing a topic—“the building”—that typically belongs in the latter while seeking the former's expansion. If the dominant approach driving architectural history and theory today concerns identifying novel subject matter, here instead the challenge involves taking up one of the discipline's oldest themes and reconfiguring it through the intellectual tools now at our disposal. By way of the building, this book illustrates the distinct capacity of architectural thinking to engender far-reaching concepts and, more generally, discourse—while the serendipitous encounters between diverse case studies from Europe, Asia, and the US unveil unexpected synergies and tensions that open up new research territories in design culture.

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## **Oslo Vestbanen Project, Norway (2002) Toyo Ito & Associates**

Regardless of how many other agents, layers of discourse, and multiple aspects we bring into focus, the building remains the necessary condition for a contribution to knowledge in architecture. It is in this sense that the building defines its basis: algae may be relevant to architecture, but only if they are nested on a façade that happens to be the component of a building; an investor may be pertinent to the field, but only if he is involved in the development of a series of buildings; bills and rental agreements may be germane to architecture, but only inasmuch as they relate to buildings; drawings are an essential part of architectural discussions, but only because they constitute the

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medium through which to generate and represent an external reality (the building); the study of a certain community may fall within architectural discourse, but only insofar as it lives or otherwise interacts with a building of some kind; and so on. The same necessity is not true of those agents, layers of discourse, and other aspects when considered by themselves—again, as long as what is at stake is architecture, and not biology, sociology, politics, economics, media studies, etc. The necessary condition would be other if the target were urbanism; product, furniture, or exhibition design; etc. This distinction among fields—either within or beyond design—is a prerequisite for establishing any rapport between them, since relationships will only be possible if the *relata* are different to begin with. Moreover, interactions and overlaps can be productive only if those differences are comprehensively accounted for; otherwise, it will not be possible to reach an accurate understanding of such interdisciplinary processes and their results.

*How strange it is to hold a series of conferences, and to work with such fervor to produce an ambitious book . . . on buildings. In architecture. We do not think of folks in biology saying, "Whoa, let's do a book on living organisms," or journalists getting together for a conference about whether or not we should have newspapers. What odd turn of events brought us to this moment? What disciplinary weirdness must have transpired to force the center to snap back into our attention, and require (of all things) weighty discussion?*

By "center," Dora Epstein Jones seems to refer in this quote precisely to that necessary condition the building constitutes around which everything else gravitates—in other words, to the fact that, within architecture, the building has *ontological primacy*. So, as she asks, "what odd turn of events brought us to this moment?" The production of knowledge—mainly in the most advanced segment of architecture, but also elsewhere—started to undergo a major transformation during the 1960s, spurred by an unprecedented awareness of theory's role in constructing architecture's disciplinary culture. That transformation occurred in an opening up to various other systems of thought (such as semiotics, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and structuralism) and a consequent rewriting of some of those systems' key concepts (e.g. "reification," "signifier/signified," "deconstruction," "rhizome," and "ideology") into architecture's idiolect. Architectural history and theory established relationships with non-disciplinary structures and social realms (philosophy, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, etc.) through the use of those *mediatory concepts*. Importing thus became a pattern, one still dominant today. The rapport of transference is set between two codes from two different fields in such a way that one of them—architecture—borrows from the other. This unidirectionality, fundamentally at

odds with related discursive operations such as Fredric Jameson's *transcoding*, is called into question here.

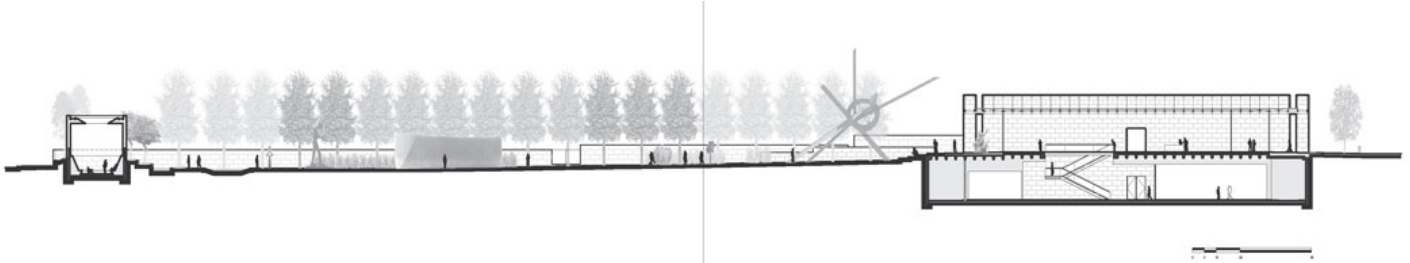
A tendency to apply external paradigms inevitably recalls the view generally held in the domain of theory—now more generally construed—about the generation following that of the so-called “age of high theory.” Unable to produce a comparable body of work, the group of authors that came to prominence around the early- to mid-1990s displayed an inclination to reutilize the ideas of the preceding generation—of figures like Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, Derrida, Said, Kristeva, Foucault, and Jameson himself:

*Those who can, think up feminism or structuralism; those who can't, apply such insights to Moby-Dick or The Cat in the Hat.*

To what extent has architecture been able to think up systems of thought specific to itself? In fact, to what extent has architecture been able to think up systems of thought at all? Out of an investigation into the linguistic sign—an object of study pertaining specifically to linguistics—arose structuralism, a broader epistemological apparatus that became relevant across the humanities and social sciences. Other examples include Freudian psychoanalysis, Frankfurt School dialectics, or deconstruction. What are the architectural equivalents of these systems of thought capable of exerting a major influence beyond their original disciplinary boundaries?

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Longitudinal section. The gallery becomes an other space between the exterior city and the interiorized *hortus conclusus*.  
Gallery construction. The middle scale of the assemblage is momentarily exposed.



Gallery. Sculptures stand forth within a receding container.

## **Nasher Sculpture Garden and Art Museum Dallas, USA (1999–2003) Renzo Piano Building Workshop**

In parallel to the dynamic outlined above, and especially since the mid-1970s, the status of the architectural object grew more and more unstable as it appeared in more and more guises—whether as the hypostatization of power structures, a facilitator of participatory processes, the locus of phenomenological content, a vehicle to reflect upon unmediated practices, a catalyst for investigating the psychology of perception, or a construct amenable to mirroring processes in the natural world, to name a few examples. While this diversification is an index for the increasing

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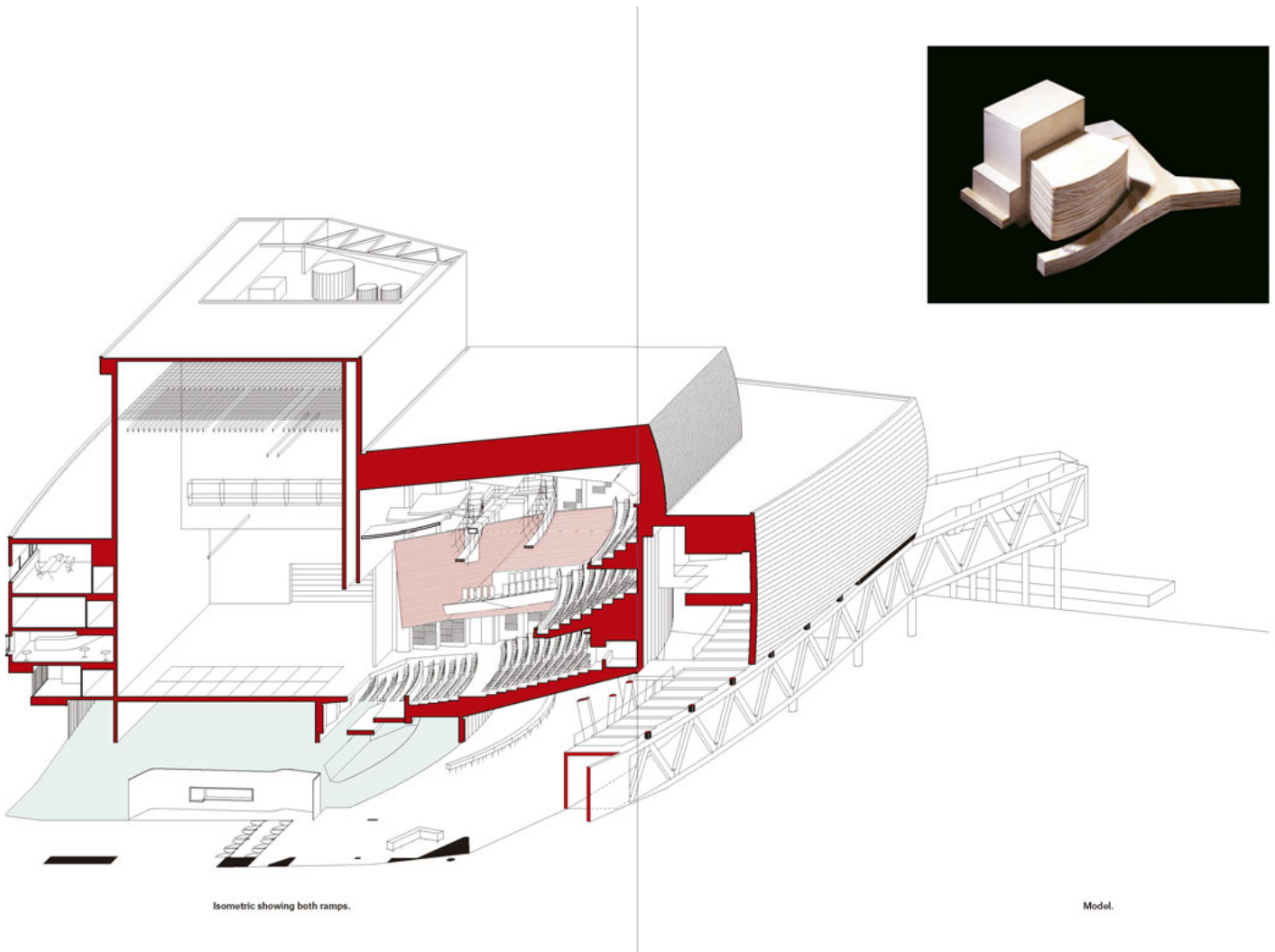
sophistication of architecture as a field, the object itself emerges as a medium through which to tap into another domain—if not as altogether absent—more often than as a realm of research in its own right. For a few decades now, therefore, the object has primarily been a means rather than an end in architectural history and theory.

By virtue of originating in another sphere of knowledge, those mediatory concepts that were pivotal to the theoretical turn carried with them a host of non-architectural associations. Inevitably, in demanding a working-through of their original regime of signification so they could be grasped from within architecture, the internalization of those concepts prompted an attention shift toward the fields from which they were imported. This realignment in focus contributed significantly to the object's displacement, which in turn caused a certain estrangement of the discipline, given the fundamental link between building and architecture. It can therefore be argued that the two dynamics outlined above converge into one, which we may refer to as *estranging internalization*. This logic has to a large degree defined the ways that architectural history and theory have engaged with other fields during the last five decades.

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## **New Luxor Theater Rotterdam, The Netherlands (1996–2001) Bolles+Wilson**

This volume aspires to serve as an inflection point within that trend by suggesting that discussions taking the object as their primary concern can substantially extend the bounds of possibility for the production of discursive knowledge. In order to do so it invokes the architectural object par excellence—*the building*. The project's agenda is twofold: first, to discuss what it means for a building to embody a historically significant contribution in terms of a particular design aspect or concept relevant to the reading of buildings in general; and second, to venture ways in which

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buildings themselves can induce theoretical frameworks whose impact might extend beyond architecture into other domains of knowledge and practice.

In tackling the building itself as a realm of research in history and theory, this book probes *architectural thinking* as a central discursive category in its own right. Writings about buildings in the American tradition are frequently identified with the formalist genealogy of Rudolf Wittkower, Colin Rowe, and Peter Eisenman. Some readers versed in that lineage might therefore view this project as a return to "form." However, a building is not "form." Or rather, it is not only form. At the very least, it is a combination of "form" and "program"—one that yields a recognizable unity, the dismemberment of which can only be the effect of rhetoric. More comprehensively, a building is a material construct made up of a number of elements—and the relations between them—that houses a set of human activities through a permeable sequence of spaces. Central to its nature is also the spatial organization articulated within its boundaries, as well as the design processes—like construction, typological operations, and contextual conjectures—that give rise to it.

*Architectural thinking* is understood here as the practice of producing discursive knowledge through the analysis, discussion, and conceptualization of aspects of those two inextricably related regimes: that of *the building*, and that of *the design process* (which, as a subset of architectural thinking, we might refer to as *architectural design thinking*). It thus becomes clear that a critical attention to building is not to be equated with "formalism" or an aesthetic focus. Architectural thinking is a distinct domain of knowledge whose attributes reach well beyond form and aesthetics—many of them relatable to ontology, technology, and several modes of logic and phenomenology. It distinguishes itself from *urban thinking* in that its primary object is the building, and not the city.

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## **L'illa Diagonal Barcelona, Spain (1990–1993) Rafael Moneo and Manuel de Solà-Morales**

One other important distinction to make is that between *autonomy* and *specificity*, two terms that are often conflated. As is well known, the former has come to be understood principally through the projects that Peter Eisenman and Aldo Rossi developed between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s. Eisenman's undertaking consisted in recasting architectural language as an autonomous system, one where "meaning" became restricted to the intrinsic, syntactic relationships governing its constituents—i.e., to form itself. In other words, he sought to remove all external meaning from the

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piece of architecture in order to make its components refer only to themselves, thereby recalling early twentieth-century theories of non-objective art. In Michael Hays' words:

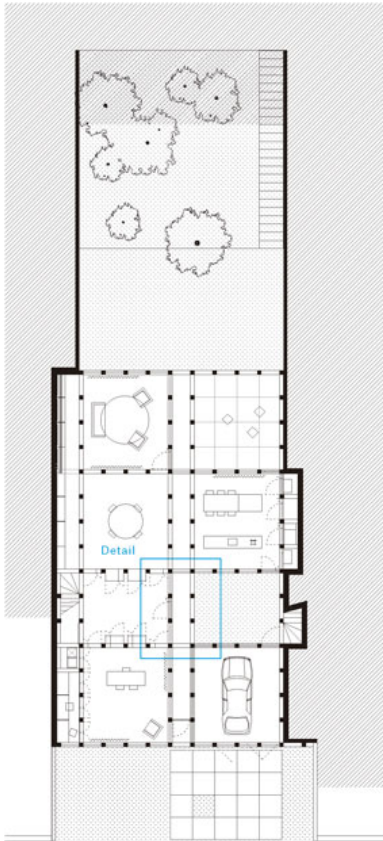
*Eisenman saw modernist forms not as simple derivatives of functional needs, but as delineations of the immanent, self-referential properties of architecture itself, as searches for objective knowledge that lies outside both the architectural agent's intentions and the building's uses, and inside the very material and formal operations of architecture. Such research discovered the new in the given "language" through an articulation and redistribution of its elements.*

Rossi, on the other hand, echoing the approach advanced by Durand a century and a half earlier, viewed the city as a source of architectural types that could be detached from their particular time and place, turning it into an abstract, atemporal archive of design elements. Generative and mobile, Rossi's types were decomposed, reconfigured, and redeployed under criteria other than the ones that determined their original use—by placing them in different contexts, invoking meanings from another epoch, hybridizing them, modifying their fragments and outlines, etc. In Anthony Vidler's words:

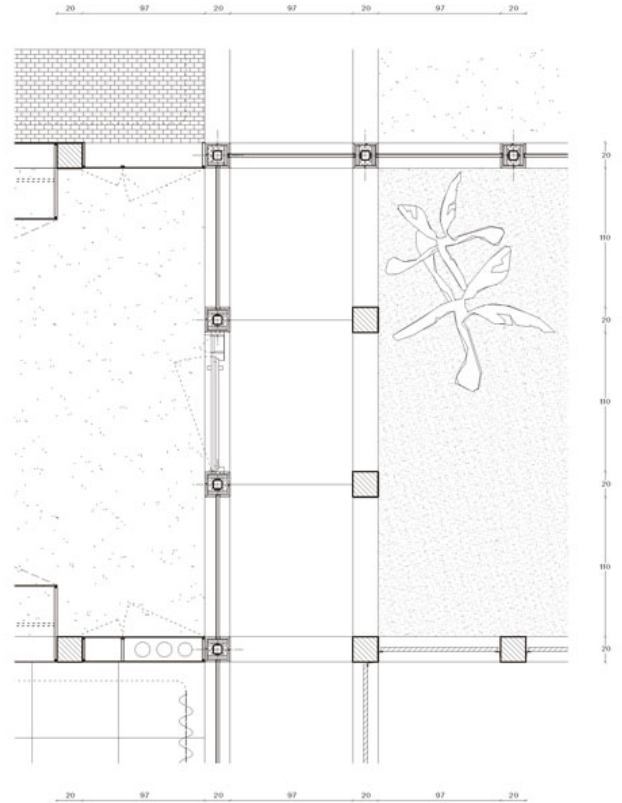
*The column, houses, and urban spaces, while linked in an unbreakable chain of continuity, refer only to their own nature as architectural elements. . . . It is clear that the nature referred to in these recent designs is no more nor less than the nature of the city itself, emptied of specific social content from any particular time and allowed to speak of its own formal condition. . . . The need to speak of function, of social mores—of anything, that is, beyond the nature of architectural form itself—is removed.*

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Ground floor plan.



Detail.

## Villa Schor Brussels, Belgium (2008–2012) OFFICE KGDVS

Although the two kinds of autonomy were clearly dissimilar, they both shared an impetus to reduce architecture to a kind of *itselfness* rooted in the essence of form, and to create a hermetically sealed—“immanent, self-referential”—system from this reduction meant to fall outside of time. In contrast, architectural thinking is not grounded in such itselfness. Firstly, formal reductions of that sort, though a methodological option, are certainly not written into architectural thinking's constitutive purposes—among other reasons because, as discussed above, a building is not just

“form” but a more complex construct that is irreducible to one single element or type of operation, and that incorporates “program” as a necessary, defining category. A building—and with it architectural design—is therefore social by definition, given the nature of program. Second, architectural thinking may or may not search for timelessness or universals. The condition that buildings are on some level bound to their time triggers the pursuit of historically contingent knowledge as a matter of course. Third, architectural thinking is not some closed epistemological field, if such a thing were possible. It is instead a permeable one: connected to other fields and to culture at large, it bears a distinct potential to project itself outward through those connections—a potential this book attempts to ignite. All of these distinctions vis-à-vis autonomy noted, architectural thinking is nevertheless a *specific* domain. The processes involved in the design of buildings, as well as the characteristics of the outcome, exhibit a number of particularities that make them fundamentally different from those of a piece of music, a novel, a painting, or a film, notwithstanding the analogies that can be made between those mediums. In short, autonomy is grounded in specificity, but specificity does not imply autonomy.

As a result of the traction generated by the prevalent unidirectionality mentioned earlier and the displacement of the building, architecture has for some decades occupied a blurred, uncertain territory relative to other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. The tendencies to resort to mediatory conceptual frameworks (often in order to validate itself) and to avoid a deep engagement with its main object underpin an ethos for architectural history and theory that may very well be perceived from the outside as somewhat compromised, if not downright apologetic. A significant effect of this ethos has been a decline in the importance of architectural thinking, which began to manifest itself more clearly around the mid-1990s and has reached a critical point today. A dominant strain of current historical and theoretical work simply neglects it as a domain of knowledge in itself, thereby reinforcing the status quo.

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## **House NA Tokyo, Japan (2007–2011) Sou Fujimoto Architects**

Capitalizing on a combination of specificity and non-autonomy, this project presents an alternative to that state of affairs. *The Building* attempts to enable architectural thinking to grow into a potent formation on the general map of the humanities and social sciences by precipitating an upturn in its recent trajectory and catalyzing a further balancing out of the discursive tendencies dominant since the 1960s. Then, the theoretical turn brought about a strong engagement with external disciplines characterized by the importation and illustration of concepts from those disciplines—while the building was used as a vehicle to focus on concerns elsewhere. The engagement advocated here is based upon inverting the former dynamic by inverting the latter. That is to say, it is one in which the

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building, now turned into the main object of research, is recast to trigger concepts, theoretical frameworks, and, even more ambitiously, systems of thought that can alter fields outside of architecture by becoming meaningfully relevant to them. It thus aims to produce *architecturally specific yet generalizable knowledge*. In contradistinction to *estranging internalization*, we may refer to this type of engagement as one of *outward projection*.

*The Building* suggests ways in which this shift is possible: ways in which knowledge grounded in the specificities of architectural thinking can be applicable outside the boundaries of the discipline; ways in which its tendency to import can coexist with its capacity to export. That is exactly, to stay with the same examples, what structuralism, Freudian psychoanalysis, Frankfurt School dialectics, and deconstruction were able to accomplish. And that is exactly how architecture could become substantially more germane—even beyond the humanities, in fields like computer science and the culture of Silicon Valley, which already display an inclination to use architectural terms.

By tackling the building in all of its complexity through the repository of intellectual tools available now, this volume makes a contribution to architecture culture that differs from that of a few important authors who have embarked upon related enterprises. Though also invested in writing about buildings by way of architectural thinking, some of those authors devoted themselves mainly to architectural historiography—rather than a larger project encompassing Theory in the humanities sense of the term, which includes the possibility of developing full-fledged theoretical systems. Others, writing prior to the 1970s, could not count on the sophisticated intellectual tools that have come to our disposal over the last few decades.

It is also important to note that, while the prospects of cultivating “distinctly and irreducibly *architectural* ideas,” of architecture enabling “certain ways of thinking that are irreducible to other modes of thought” and even “producing generalizable concepts” via such types of thinking have been identified earlier, they arose in the context of the production of architectural knowledge being predominantly premised on external paradigms. Strictly speaking, that discursive modality prevents such ideas and ways of thinking from being *irreducibly* architectural—i.e. specific to architecture—since on some level they are *reducible* to the external system of thought and related mediatory concepts that make up their realm of possibility. Seeking to expand the milieu of architectural history and theory without largely resorting to mediatory concepts, the challenge posed to the contributors was to forge original ideas from within the epistemology of architectural thinking while propelling them through the pores that link architecture to other domains of knowledge. The six terms under which the thirty buildings presented here are grouped (“elements,”

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“wholes,” “content,” “context,” “referents,” and “technology”) were selected for being at once directly related to architecture and elemental enough to be central to fields outside it. Thus, they function as heuristic devices for exploring the various case studies through a number of questions both intra- and meta-disciplinary. These are as diverse as replication, value, iconography, the urban subject, objecthood, boredom, and the digital, to name a few. As a result, the ideas and reflections in *The Building* prove capable of extending to fields such as cultural and intellectual history, philosophy, literary theory, the city, the arts, and design at large.

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The title *The Building* alludes to a general epistemological category across all of those fields, as opposed to a particular instantiation of a building, or the construction process of “building.” As Philip Ursprung points out in his essay, “What Buildings Know,” there is a recognizable relationship between this project and Koolhaas’ *Fundamentals*, the theme of the Venice Architecture Biennale that he directed in 2014. Indeed, the chronology indicates the emergence of a *zeitgeisty* sensibility: although the genesis of *The Building* dates back to 2011—much before we knew anything about *Fundamentals*—it was only officially launched in 2014, through two international symposia held at the [Architectural Association in London](#) (on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, five days before the opening of the Biennale) and [Columbia University in New York](#) (on November 15<sup>th</sup>), respectively. The shared sensibility is grounded in the ontological primacy within architecture of the objects of study that both projects invoke. However, the essentialism of Koolhaas’ taxonomy, structured around strictly architectural categories, is to be contrasted with the heuristic character of this book’s section titles, afforded by their relevance across various domains of knowledge.

By exploiting the capacity of architectural thinking to induce conceptual frameworks and systematic thought, in combination with the depth, rigor, and sophistication that underpin the production of scholarship, *The Building* aspires to effectively bridge the spheres of practice/studio culture and history/theory. This scope is amplified via a deliberate cross-continental approach, and even more through a large group of contributors comprising a striking number of essential voices in the current architectural scene. The range of ages—spanning forty years of views on the question at hand—and the array of different perspectives they represent delivers a set of contents that cuts across generations, career stages, and disciplinary boundaries. Authors include deans and academic leaders as well as architects, historians, theorists, philosophers, and doctoral candidates based at



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institutions such as Columbia, Princeton, Harvard, and UCLA in the US, and the Bartlett, the Architectural Association, ETH Zürich, and ETSA Madrid in Europe. As a result, *The Building* stages a myriad of interactions between the different perspectives on either side of the Atlantic.

Those whose texts were requested for the book's main section were asked to tackle the project's twofold agenda through a building of their choice, built or designed within the last 25 years. Consequently, *The Building* offers poignant discussions of key architectural structures conceived in Europe, Asia, and the US over the last three decades. The second section contains five longer critical essays that address the question of the building as a form of knowledge as well as other disciplinary and interdisciplinary issues, partly through reflections on the project's goals and materials. The third and last section offers five brief pieces assessing the importance of a renewed interest in the building vis-à-vis the status of architectural education today. The inclusion of short (1,200-word) and long (4,000-word) essays, and a balanced text-to-image ratio, caters to the various types of readers in both practice and academia.

This volume is at once based upon the two abovementioned symposia and independent from them. The vast majority of participants became contributors. Yet, for one thing, they were asked to write their texts from scratch so that they read as essays in and of themselves, rather than simply transcriptions; for another, a number of authors who did not take part in either event were invited to contribute. The six book sections do not coincide with the six roundtables that were held at the two symposia combined. In the spirit of curating the project as an ongoing conversation, the structuring of the publication took into consideration the reworkings and expansions of the various contributions in relation to what was presented at the events, in addition to the relationships between them that subsequently arose. This conversation was further fueled across the book's pages by having the respondents engage the newly written pieces, and by requesting that several of the five longer essays discuss some of the shorter texts.

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