

My office window at the University of Cincinnati framed a view of the large building addition (150,000 square feet) designed by Peter Eisenman for the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning (DAAP) (Fig. 1). Applying computer-assisted design, Eisenman and his associates shifted the angles of the original building ("tracing"), twisted and turned them ("torquing"), and connected the entire complex with blue "chevrons." Opinions and emotions regarding the new building ranged widely (Figs. 2a and b).

Herbert Muschamp, writing for the *New York Times*, maintained that it "is not a building one simply walks through. One works through it, as if it were an emotional problem."¹ Paul Goldberger (also for the *New York Times*) wrote that the building "looks rather as if it had been frozen after the first shocks of an earthquake" and that "[t]he clashing angles make being in [it] feel like living on a fault line."² Benjamin Forgey, writing for the *Washington Post*, similarly described it as "something like a gently orchestrated earthquake."³ Charles Jencks, who greatly admires the building, finds it an appropriate expression of recent developments in chaos theory and complexity science.⁴ Other visiting architects and architectural critics have been overcome by vertigo and complained of headaches and nausea. Design professionals invariably note the poor quality of the materials. Goldberger estimated that it might be "two months" before "this temple of plasterboard, paint, and acoustical ceilings [and walls] begins to show wear and tear."

Fig. 1. Northwest corner DAAP building, Peter Eisenman, 1996.



at home everywhere and nowhere:
prospects for making place in the global village

nan ellin

¹ Herbert Muschamp, "Eisenman's Spatial Extravaganza in Cincinnati," *New York Times*, 21 July 1996, sec. H33.

² Paul Goldberger, "Saluting a Building by a Man Who Struts Things Up," *New York Times*, 14 October 1996, sec. C11.

³ Benjamin Forgey, "Unconventional Wisdom? New York Architect Peter Eisenman's Edgy Ohio Designs," *Washington Post*, 6 October 1996, sec. G1.

⁴ Charles Jencks, *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe*, rev. ed. (New York: Academy Editions, 1997).

The international media attention garnered by the building more than doubled the applicant pool during that first year, and many prospective students visited the school primarily to see the building. Others were unaware that it constituted "signature" architecture, like the prospective student's father who ascertained that the building was a converted parking structure (thus the wide ramps). Similarly, a number of motorists, alarmed by the sprouting of non-right angles while the building was under construction, called university officials to notify them that it was falling down the hill. And while stirring healthy architectural controversy, the building's \$36 million price tag (exceeding the initial budget by at least three times) generated widespread resentment from the local taxpayers.

Students, on the whole, feel fortunate to have this brand-new facility. They appreciate its audacity, fame, and provision of public spaces. After a year of usage, however, they express frustration with appropriating it. They also report a fatigue, induced by the building's illegibility, lack of natural light, and abundant fluorescent lighting; they note a claustrophobia, induced by low ceilings or lighting fixtures, places where ceilings appear to be meeting the ground, and the tapering hallways, some of which culminate in dead ends (Fig. 3a).

Visitors have difficulty gaining entry to the building and even more difficulty locating classrooms, auditoriums, and offices (Fig. 3b). Until a massive and complicated signage project was initiated, getting lost was the rule rather than the



Fig. 2a. (top) View from the door through the entry tunnel to the park; columns are straight, building is crooked.

Fig. 2b. (bottom) "... like a gently orchestrated earthquake."

Fig. 3a. (top) Entrance lobby at pedestrian level: ceiling meets floor.

Fig. 3b. (bottom) Main entrance DAAP.



exception, a fate accepted with humor when lighthearted but with annoyance and a sense of helplessness when late for class or otherwise stressed. Even with the signage in place, the building's users have been compelled to post ad hoc signs such as "This is not an entrance" (Fig. 4), "This exit leads nowhere," and "This is not a classroom or a hallway" in an effort to assist others with commonly misread spatial signals or to prevent the interruption of classes in progress. Many express concern about rapidly finding an exit in the event of an emergency. Needless to say, people who are visually impaired or physically disabled find the building extremely difficult to negotiate.

Many members of the faculty and staff find their offices uncomfortable and inconvenient due to their odd shapes, inaccessible windows, and several shades of pastels (Fig. 5). Because no two offices are alike, there has been great contention among faculty, and no one will claim responsibility for having assigned them. With the exception of a line of studio spaces on the northern end of the building, studios and classrooms are equally problematic, with no or poor windows, discomfiting angles, and multi-colored floors, walls, and ceilings (Fig. 6).

During the first year of use, there was a gnawing suspicion that the joke was on us. In spite of the star appeal of the architect, an exorbitant price tag, and the attention it brought to the school, most users did not consider it a comfortable building. Nor did most consider it beautiful, particularly because it turned its back on the surrounding nature and urban fabric. Although its public spaces were probably its most successful attribute, they were almost always empty because it was not a building that people lingered in (Fig. 7).

Eisenman has publicly proclaimed that all of this confusion and discomfort is precisely his intent. He has maintained that his buildings are intended to "disrupt the sense of normalcy"⁵ and has boasted that his buildings have the power to make people ill.⁶ For the students, he said, "Living with and working in this building ought to be an education in itself."⁷ And indeed it is. The building inevitably became a subject of discussion at some point in every seminar and studio.

Because he merely set up a formula and let the computer do the rest, Eisenman has remarked proudly that "[t]here's no design in it!" He emphasizes that he was an absent author, an implicit goal of modernism, which regarded human intervention as a fly in the ointment of scientific advancement and the pursuit of progress. In the case of architecture and planning, it was the pursuit of the perfect building and city through rational calculation, assisted by machine technology and modeled after the machine. The underlying philosophy remains the same; Eisenman is simply replacing an earlier machine technology with a more recent one.

541

NOT AN ENTRANCE

Fig. 4. Ad hoc signage, DAAP.

5 Forgey, "Unconventional Wisdom?"

6 Mark Alden Branch, "Critique: Queasy in Columbus?," *Progressive Architecture* (February 1994), pp. 78-81.

7 Forgey, "Unconventional Wisdom?"

8 Robert Stern, *Pride of Place: Building the American Dream* (New York: American Heritage, 1986), p. 87.

9 Bruce Thomas, "Culture, Merchandise, or Just Light Entertainment? New Architecture at the End of the Millennium," *JAÉ* 50:4 (May 1997), pp. 254-64.

Modern urban design, regarding people as messy, eliminated them from theory and plans. Frank Lloyd Wright, for instance, sought to make his houses "client-proof" so that people would not be able to alter them. In similar fashion, Eisenman claims that he does not pander to clients' wishes when designing houses; rather, he "attempts to destabilize the notion of home."⁸ "The resulting architecture," wrote Bruce Thomas in a recent analysis of Eisenman's work, "often appears designed to dominate, or even to humiliate, rather than to ennoble."⁹

The office from which I viewed this new building was located in the original building designed for the School of Architecture in 1952 by local architects George Roth and James Allen (Fig. 8). At the time of construction, it cost \$200,000 to build, or \$7.48 per square foot (28,487 square feet). In 1988, it was awarded an AIA Award. This 1950s modern building was, it turns out, much more user-friendly than the addition. As a user, I was grateful for its right angles, curtain walls supporting expanses of windows, the views it offered of the natural and urban surroundings, its exposed brick, tubular steel banisters, legible floor plan, and single-colored walls and flooring. I regretted that its operable windows were locked shut, and many windows and views were entirely eliminated when the new building was attached to it. In contrast to the acute- and obtuse-angled offices of the new building, the offices in this older building comfortably accommodate right-angled desks and file cabinets. In addition, its studio spaces were vastly and wildly appropriated by students, in contrast to the studio spaces in the new building, in which students had difficulty making themselves at home and avoided as a result.

Both of these buildings—the original one and the new one—represent attempts to respond to globalization. In the expansive atmosphere of the postwar era, the earlier building offers an example of the International Style, which aspired to dig beneath cultural differences in order to reach a common well of humanity. It reflected a desire to neutralize space and to create a universal aesthetic in the interests of liberty, equality, fraternity, structural integrity, light, and views. Amidst the more recent loss of faith in the modern project, the new building makes no attempt to set things right. Rejecting the modernist idioms of progress, universal rationality, and truth, this deconstructivist approach expresses lack of harmony through fragmentation and disorientation. It embraces, if anything, idiosyncratic versions of chaos theory and anarchy.

In certain instances, this approach can produce buildings that users find beautiful, meaningful, defamiliarizing, and an expression (and perhaps celebration) of the demise of a bankrupt worldview. At the DAAP building, however, this is not the case. Rather than heighten people's awareness, the experience of this building may actually dull it. Rather than expressing a critique of modern ideals, it seems to bemoan their loss.



Fig. 5. (top) Trapezoidal office, DAAP.

Fig. 6. (bottom) Studio, DAAP (not appropriated).

Retreat/Escapism

Architectural deconstructivism is just one response to the prevalent sense of anxiety. The predominant reflex has been to retreat or escape. As new technologies, the end of the Cold War, and the overall acceleration of global flows have made the world seem smaller—a global village—they have also instilled a desire to assert cultural distinctions. Paradoxically, it is as we are achieving the modernist ideal of universalism that it has become unacceptable. This is apparent in the search for "roots," resurrection of old customs, invention of "new" traditions, and retreat to one's own kind. Although our popular culture today celebrates multiculturalism, certain trends suggest we are in fact becoming a more phobic and segregated society. In city building, the retreat and escape reflexes are apparent in segregated and defensive urbanism as well as theming.

In anthropology—the study of cultural diversity—the modernist quest for objective truth was manifested as an effort to scientifically study society without imposing one's own viewpoint. With a focus on statistical average, people became factors in equations, devoid of flesh, blood, and emotional complexity. It became painfully apparent, however, that this attempt to be an absent author only revealed an absent subject.

One reaction was to retreat to your own backyard (and study your own kind) or inward (and study yourself). This attitude has been described as reflexivity or, more pejoratively, as navel-gazing. Another reaction was to fictionalize one's accounts and not even aspire to tell it like it is.

What used to be a search for truth became an acknowledgment that there are many or no truths. These tendencies in anthropology to retreat or escape, needless to say, counter its pursuit to better understand those different from ourselves, thereby decreasing cultural conflicts. In architectural and urban design, the retreat/escape reflexes have been proving similarly self-defeating.

The Blasé Cosmopolitan

In Georg Simmel's seminal essay about the impact of city living on people, he suggests that urban over-stimulation leads to a blasé attitude.¹⁰ The term *blasé* is from the French and literally means to be rendered indifferent due to the abuse one has sustained. As urbanization has proceeded apace, the blasé attitude has grown more prevalent. Artist Barbara Kruger describes this sensation and the mediating role of today's new technologies saying: "To put it bluntly, no one's home. We are literally absent from our own present. We are elsewhere, not in the real but in the represented. Our bodies, the flesh and blood of it all, have given way to representations: figures that cavort on TV, movie, and computer screens. Propped-up and ultra-relaxed, we teeter on the cusp of narcolepsy and believe everything and nothing."¹¹

10 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in ed. Richard Sennett, *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969), pp. 19-30.

11 Barbara Kruger, "What's High, What's Low—and Who Cares?" *New York Times*, 9 September 1990, sec. H43.

12 Pico Iyer, *Ultrareader* (May/June 1997).

13 I acknowledge Paul Rabinow for characterizing the cosmopolitan as someone who is "at home everywhere and nowhere."

In addition to the blasé attitude, the ongoing process of urbanization has also increased the prevalence of the cosmopolitan. Writer Pico Iyer describes the cosmopolitan mentality saying: "Seasoned experts at dispassion, we are less good at involvement, or suspension of disbelief. . . . We are masters of the aerial perspective, but touching down becomes more difficult."¹²

Combining the two, we get the "blasé cosmopolitan" who is at home everywhere and nowhere, who believes everything and nothing, who is good at dispassion but not at involvement, who is rendered indifferent due to overstimulation.¹³ Certainly, much of our architecture could also be described as "blasé cosmopolitan"—the fast food restaurant, the hotel, the corporate office building, the suburban tract development, the multiplex, the hypermarket, and other features of our global landscape that are indistinguishable whether they be in Atlanta or Shanghai.

Hyper-mobility and the increased influence of intelligent machines in our daily lives, along with the lack of certainties and role models, all conspire to produce an identity crisis. This difficulty in defining a stable self is exaggerated by our sound-byte culture of one-liners, as opposed to thoughtful, gray responses, and by our enhanced ability to experiment with new identities through consumption, body modification, and networking online. We can be chameleons as never before, altering our identities according to the circumstances.

This offers the freedom not to be bound by cultural and individual constraints. But then, how do we preserve or develop the core identity that governs our actions and behaviors? The psychology profession identifies pathological responses to the insecurity this condition can generate, including splitting, disassociation, disembodiment, reality inversion, and the borderline personality syndrome.

Perhaps less pathological and extremely pervasive is the defense mechanism of irony. The ironic attitude says, "Nothing I do really matters; we can only live in and create fictions. So, we may as well just distract ourselves with bread and circuses. Food and entertainment. Rather than take care of our environment, others, and ourselves." The marketplace fills the void created by this back seat position. In architecture, the ironic attitude can discourage taking a stance and striving for betterment, settling instead for pleasing oneself and impressing colleagues, resulting in what has been called "starchitecture" or the "edifice complex."

Proaction

In addition to these reactive reflexes (retreat, escapism, deconstruction, and ironic detachment), there have also been some proactive responses to the crises, responses that do not retreat or escape but engage in a hopeful and constructive manner. The modernist quest for objective truth had compelled creators and



Fig. 7. Café, atrium, and skylights, DAAP Building.

their interpreters to model themselves after scientists and engineers. In architecture and urban planning, this was manifest in the emulation of the machine, the quest for efficiency, and the desire to produce universal plans. But the disappointing outcome has incited attempts to bring the author back and thereby breathe life back into all these endeavors.

In the social sciences and humanities, these approaches have been variously described as New Historicism, eco-feminism, and cultural studies, among others. They involve efforts to bring place and space back into the discussion and to find and express one's own voice along with the voices of others. In academic disciplines and professions, there has been a breaking down of boundaries, interdisciplinarity, and collaboration, all with an eye towards greater relevance. In society, in counterpoint to NIMBYism, we have been seeing an exponential growth in community-based activities such as neighborhood associations and community gardens, in the provision of quality public spaces, and in efforts to preserve and enhance the environment. In architecture and planning theory, cities and buildings are no longer likened to the machine, but to a narrative, text, collage, bricolage, kaleidoscope, or jambalaya.

But what is this place we are trying to make? In a rapidly globalizing world, which history and which vernacular should we be referring to? How can we preserve local cultural traditions? What should we do with that recent chapter of our history, the high modern one that has become a cultural tradition itself, albeit a more or less global one?

This is certainly not the first time we have faced this dilemma. Many early modernists emphasized place-specificity, from John Ruskin and William Morris to Camillo Sitte and Louis Sullivan, Gaudemar, and the French colonialists. By the early 1960s, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur articulated this dilemma saying: "There is the paradox: How to become modern and to return to the sources; how to revive an old dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization?"¹⁴ The dilemma of satisfying our contradictory desire—for stability as well as adventure and for preserving our cultural traditions while embracing the future—is an age-old one, but it is today more pressing than ever.

There is also a meta-question now: What is it we are really seeking when we invoke the past or the vernacular? What is the need we are seeking to fulfill? Without complicating matters, but at the risk of being reductive, I suggest that it is a need to experience interconnectedness with others and with nature, to live in places that provide opportunities for realizing common bonds. In the headlong rush not to fall off the treadmill of progress, these most obvious of all qualities—integral to most prewar landscapes—have become increasingly elusive. And it will not do to copy traditional buildings and cities, for we have changed. What we need to recover is the ability to understand what these qualities are today and how to provide them.

Fig. 8. George Roth and James Allen, DAAP, 1952.



Conclusion

In an article entitled "The End of the Classical," Peter Eisenman maintains that humanism is dead and buried. He is not alone in perceiving some sort of ending; the sense is widespread. Sociologist Daniel Bell spoke already in 1950 of the end of ideology. More recently, economist Francis Fukuyama intoned the end of history (1989, 1992), philosophers Rorty and Wittgenstein speak of the end of philosophy, Arthur Danto the end of art, Lukacs the end of the modern age (1993), Jean Baudrillard and Homi Bhabha the end of modernity, Peter Blake the end of cities (1982), Richard Ingersoll the end of suburbia (1992), and Michael Sorkin the end of public space (1992). Others have described the end of utopia, of taboos, affluence, intelligent writing, religion, comedy, libraries, law, art theory, beauty, conversation, and desire.¹⁵ Although there is no consensus about what is ending, there is nonetheless a certain meeting of minds regarding saying goodbye to our binary logic, traditional hierarchies and centers, the transcendent ideal of abstract rights, positivism as a means for understanding the world, and the related notions of linear progress and a single truth.

We are at a crossroads. It is often remarked that outsiders provide the necessary perspective to critique a situation. Today, we are all outsiders to some extent: at home nowhere and everywhere. This is clearly a transitional moment, and we are strategically situated to direct its course, from disenchantment to re-enchantment. We now face the task of intervening in a way that nurtures the communities and the environments that ultimately sustain us. It is not an easy one. But, if we do not reconstruct, they will deconstruct. It is up to us.

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 1961, cited by Kenneth Frampton in "Towards a Critical Regionalism," in ed. Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Fort Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983).

¹⁵ Cullen Murphy, "The Way the World Ends," *The Best of Wilson Quarterly* (1992), pp. 78-82.