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Abstract

The relationship between silence and architecture is fascinating, intimate and ripely allusive, yet largely unexplored in Western architectural history and theory. Particularly resonant with the aims of early twentieth-century Modernism, silence may also provide a bracing counterforce to the architectural cacophony of more recent times. This thesis introduces silence as a subtle and enveloping element in the built and natural worlds, and investigates its subterranean impact through an examination of four archetypal buildings of the Modern Movement. Interpreting silence on levels both metaphoric and real, the study foregrounds the understated power of what is *not* said in a work and provides insight into such architectural intangibles as dignity, solace, desire and revelation.

The project is organized as a sequential analysis of four iconic modern buildings – Walter Gropius' Fagus Factory, Louis Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum, Luis Barragan's San Cristobal Stables and Richard Neutra's Kaufmann House – and traces the theme of silence through a corresponding trajectory from public to private spaces. Ultimately, the investigation offers a speculative reverie about prospects for contemporary architecture, gripped as it has been in alternating paroxysms of whispers and shouts.

Hush:
notes on architecture and silence

Elizabeth Pincus

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Prelude

In March of 2002 I drove west from Brooklyn, New York to the village of San Antonio, in south central New Mexico. I was leaving my job at a neon shop in the bare-boned industrial corridor of south Brooklyn for a temporary assignment at a dusty wildlife refuge in the high Chihuahuan Desert. I was also trading a studio apartment adjacent to the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway for a roomy adobe dwelling amidst creosote bush, cacti and the subtle rise of the Chupadera Mountains. What I left behind was a cozy little hideaway in a chopped-up tenement block, a brick-walled urban cave that almost entirely shut out the boisterous tumult of New York City; what I found was a remote wilderness site exposed

to howling winds, keening coyotes, and the loud and lovely rumble of the passing Santa Fe-Burlington Northern freight train. The rugged cacophony of rural New Mexico made Brooklyn, at least in my imagination, seem like a haven of bucolic tranquility. Though equally smitten with both locales, if I ever equated the city with *noise* and the countryside with *silence*, I forever retired the thought after this headlong journey west.

I also got to thinking about other extremes of serenity and commotion I've encountered over the course of a polymathic, wanderlusty life. I've experienced all manner of apartments, houses and temporary quarters, and worked in comparably disparate settings – rural, urban and in-between. Throughout, I've been rattled by car alarms and overhead copters, plagued by schoolyard pandemonium and the ceaseless thrum of jackhammers. I've also known the beautiful whisper of a subway train gliding on elevated tracks and the quiet pulse of a lighthouse marking its circular sweep in an otherwise inky night. I've been lulled by the peaceful hush of sudden desert downpours, soothed by the equally prosaic patter of street commerce and camaraderie. I've been piqued by the ruckus of storefront ministries, charmed

by the distant echo of egrets in flight, blasted by the ubiquitous uproar of entertainment media. In short, as for most of us, I have forever been greeted by an infinite assortment of aural disruptions and delights. Life is a noisy bit of business – a little bit country, a little bit rock 'n roll – and the infrastructures we build up around us offer no particular guarantee of a muted world. If anything, they seem to crank up the volume.

It's an oddity, really, because architecture has often been conceived (and perceived) as a civilizing force. Meant to shelter and protect us, to provide a buffer from the implacable unruliness of nature, the built environment would seem to offer an oasis of quiet amidst the maelstrom, the physical means with which to drown out all the clamor. Indeed, it is often described as such. Contemporary architect Eric Owen Moss of Culver City, California says he considers his architectural interventions a "prayer for order"[1] while, at mid-century, European immigrant Richard Neutra crafted his own divinely quiet constructions as a foil to what he called the "too bright, too noisy"

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[1] Eric Owen Moss, *Buildings and Projects 3* (New York: Rizzoli, 2002), p. 215.

materiality of postwar American culture.[2] Visionary Christopher Alexander has also extolled, throughout his career, the virtues of architectural harmony and inner calm – "Use only essentials; avoid extraneous elements."[3] The late architect and poet John Hejduk brought a mythic stillness to his multivalent, revelatory projects, while the history of church architecture is nothing if not steeped in the rarefied aura of serenity and awe. Meanwhile, the fabled classical orders of Greek architecture are all about restraint, solemnity and repose, as are, arguably, the newfangled orders of the Modern Movement and the even more newly minted imperatives of sustainable design.

Certain architects, in particular, get pegged as maestros of silence based on the clarity and simplicity of their designs – Tadao Ando, Wiel Arets, Rudolf Schwarz, Carlo Scarpa, Antoine Predock and Will Bruder are but a handful of those so anointed. Mies van der Rohe, too. And historian Vincent Scully writes unabashedly of the silence encoded in the work of Louis Kahn, one of the giants of hushed austerity. Scully

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[2] Richard Neutra, "Human Setting in an Industrial Civilization," from *Architecture Culture 1943-1968*, Joan Ockman, ed. (New York: Columbia Books of Architecture, 1993), p. 281.

[3] Christopher Alexander, from Book 3 of *The Nature of Order*, a four-book series (Berkeley, CA: Center for Environmental Structure, 2003), excerpted in *Wired*, issue 12.03, March 2004, p. 5.

praises Kahn for resolving his mythic struggles into "such pregnant Silence," and says of Kahn's buildings: "They are silent. We feel their silence as a potent thing… his work is brooding, remote, mysterious."[4]

Presaging this ode to the power of understatement was Alvar Aalto, Finland's master of spareness and perhaps the quintessential "quiet man" of architecture. In discussing the dueling human needs for contact and privacy, he once described architecture as a "fundamental and enduring mystery, one involving biology and morality, tragedy and comedy."[5] This bemused assessment of the evolving, complex quandaries associated with socially responsive architecture dovetailed with Aalto's commitment to crafting design solutions at once elegant and humane. He advocated principles of harmony and eschewed too much decoration as "coquettish," both recalling Adolf Loos' diatribe against ornament and foreshadowing the late-twentieth-century turn against the loud excesses of postmodernism. Contemporary critic Roger Connah says, of this latest reversal, "Today, there is a fever in architecture for

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[4] Vincent Scully, "Introduction to the Louis I. Kahn Archive: Personal Drawings," from *Modern Architecture and Other Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 257.

[5] Alvar Aalto, "The Architect's Conscience," from *Architecture Culture 1943-1968*, Joan Ockman, ed. (New York: Columbia Books of Architecture, 1993), p. 281.

the tolerable straight line."[6] It has become fashionable, he insists, to denigrate uncertainty and chaos, to resist the undoing of symbolic order, and to embrace "a return to silence, to eternal values."[7] Or, to what Scully calls the "palpable structural order and the dignity" attendant to elementally quiet architecture.[8]

So if silence has always been on architecture's agenda (and is once again in vogue), what to make of the racket in our daily lives? How to comprehend what historian Neil Levine calls the "blur of visual noise"[9] that comprises our current architectural palette? Has architecture's "prayer for order" gone unheard? Or is silence simply too contested a notion to emerge unsullied, too complex a phenomenon to serve as a straighforward manifesto for architectural design, urban vision, fantasias of utopian calm?

And in any event, at a time when a musical style called *screamo* is at peak popularity and the mania for incessant electronic intercourse ever more jacked, when

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[6] Roger Connah, *How Architecture Got Its Hump* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), p. 135.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Scully, "Introduction to the Louis I. Kahn Archive: Personal Drawings," from *Modern Architecture and Other Essays*, p. 252.
[9] Neil Levine, Introduction to "Where Is Modern Architecture Going," from Vincent Scully, *Modern Architecture and Other Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 159.

cultural appetites of all sorts seem to favor everything bigger louder faster, does anyone even *want* their architecture unplugged?!

* * *

According to composer and scholar R. Murray Schaefer, architectural space is never wholly silent anyway. He suggests that historian Sigfried Giedion's claim that "This is what one breathes in medieval chambers, quietude and contemplation," fails to acknowledge the astonishing resonance of ancient cloisters and, by extension, the analogous tonal intensity in all of architecture.[10] Marshall McLuhan, an early theorist on the effects of auditory experience, wrote, "A medieval space was furnished even when empty, because of its acoustical properties."[11] Schaefer emphatically concurs, and goes on to assert that, "When architectural historians begin to realize that most buildings were constructed not so much to enclose space as to enshrine sound, a new era in the subject will open

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[10] R. Murray Schaefer, "Acoustic Space," from *Dwelling, Place and Environment*, David Seamon and Robert Mugerauer, eds. (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985), p. 92.
[11] Ibid., p. 93.

out."[12] In particular, he cites the aggressive noisemaking of organized religions (church bells, communal song, organ music, oratory from the pulpit) as a reality often overlooked, adding that, short of warfare, the church produced the highest sound levels the citizenry had ever experienced – at least until factory whistles, motor vehicles, broadcast signals and amplified rock came along.

Silence is indeed a versatile concept, at once revered and vilified, and otherwise interpreted in such varied contexts that its connection to architecture remains largely fuzzy. The word itself stems from dual Latin origins, *silentium* and *taciturnitas*, suggesting both the quotidian understanding of the word – the absence of sound – and the more willful meaning, that is, the choice to refrain from speech or noisemaking. Modern dictionary definitions underscore "silence" as something fraught with contradictions: it is at once "the condition of being or keeping still and silent" and the "refusal or failure to speak out," as well as, in verb form, "to make silent" or "to curtail the

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[12] Ibid.

expression of."[13] The seeming innocence – even sweetness – of the word is dispelled by its multiplicitous usages.

In short, there is a distinct contrast between silence as a positive and a negative force. The word is variously employed to describe an extremely restive and wonderful phenomenon or, conversely, as a shackled state of suppression and/or frustration. Consider the most banal aphorism, "Silence is Golden" against the provocative sloganeering of AIDS activists, "Silence=Death," or the impassioned civil-rights oratory of Martin Luther King, Jr., who repeatedly declaimed that "Silence is Betrayal." Such sentiments were echoed recently by poet and musician Patti Smith who, addressing a 2002 antiwar rally in Washington, D.C. the day after the death of left-leaning Senator Paul Wellstone, declared, "He would not want us to give him a moment of silence!"[14] Smith was invoking the labor movement's beloved mantra, "Don't mourn, organize," as she launched into her signature rock anthem "People Have the Power."

And yet, here's another New York poet, Frank O'Hara, writing at mid-century, "…oh to be an angel…to be part of the treetops and the blueness, invisible, the

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[13] *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Third Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992), p. 1679.

[14] Editorial, "Paul Wellstone," *The Nation*, Nov. 18, 2002, p. 3.

iridescent darknesses beyond, silent, listening to the air becoming no air becoming air again."[15]

Silence, it seems, is ever malleable, and easily shaded, inflected or foregrounded in a multitude of ways. It is magical yet pleasingly ordinary, and prone to cliché (silent as the grave, the strong silent type). It can be forcefully breached; it can also pack a wallop. Is it any wonder that conjuring an *architecture of silence* is anything but straightforward, anything but a simple matter of advocating a built environment that is peaceful, uncluttered, deliciously quiet? But that the possibility, nonetheless, holds a romance, a charm, an imagined reprieve of tenderness and refinement reflected in the penstrokes of such scribes as O'Hara, or this, from a sixteenth-century dreamer: "Sweet silent Rhetorique of perswading eyes" (Daniel, *Compl. Rosamond*, 1592)?[16]

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I am replete with my own mixed feelings, in love with secrets and the sparest turn of phrase but susceptible to the raucousness of revelation. I am

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[15] Frank O'Hara, *Lunch Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1964).
[16] *Oxford English Dictionary*, online, 1999 edition.

especially taken with a certain streamlined austerity, an architecture of the strictest simplicity; but I am equally drawn to the pulpy bedlam of urban environments, the spectacle of disintegration and ingenuity that marks the tattered expanses of a city. I am enamored of the lonely allure of buildings that exist, as artist Elizabeth O'Reilly once described it, "between the fury of use and of neglect."[17] I like both the old and the new — sepia-toned quarters of vanished etiquette, crystalline constructs of shimmering modernity. What I yearn for, I suppose, is juxtaposition, hardly a novel longing; we have all been taught there is no unilateral narrative, no absolute truth. But I do relish silence, absolutely.

When Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck wrote, in 1962, "Chaos is as positive as its twinsister order,"[18] he was articulating the sentiments of numerous twentieth-century commentators weary of monolithic functionalist dogma and searching for a new theoretical order, one that honored both unity and diversity, one that brought history back into the mix. Novelist Norman Mailer weighed in a couple of years later, slamming modern

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[17] In conversation, Brooklyn, New York, July 18, 2001.

[18] Aldo van Eyck, "Steps Toward a Configurative Discipline," from *Architecture Culture 1943-1968*, Joan Ockman, ed. (New York: Columbia Books of Architecture, 1993), p. 355.

architecture for quashing "our collective desire for shelter which is pleasurable, substantial, intricate, intimate, delicate, detailed, foibled, rich in gargoyle, guignol, false closet, secret stair, witch's hearth, attic, grandeur, kitsch…."[19] Mailer was, uncannily, mirroring French philospher Gaston Bachelard's prescient essay "The Oneiric House" (from 1948), as well as honoring the ebullience of mavericks like Morris Lapidus, the bon vivant behind Miami Beach's superglam Fontainebleau Hotel (1953). He was also, perhaps, inspiring the man about to write the book on honky-tonk, Robert Venturi.

In Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), written in collaboration with Denise Scott Brown (an often unacknowledged colleague), he spins a winning, plurality-laden argument for the "messy vitality" of the modern vernacular, and revels in a whole slew of underdog, Maileresque elements: perversity, redundancy, ambiguity, distortion; the non sequitur, the vestigial, the vulgar. "Is not Main Street almost all right?" he queried, famously, pushing his sage, accommodating propaganda and setting the stage

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[19] Norman Mailer, from Neil Levine, "Vincent Scully: A Biographical Sketch," from *Modern Architecture and Other Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 22.

for a new era of nonheroicism in architecture.[20] "The move lately has been toward respecting the built fabric of our communities as it stands," historian Spiro Kostof would soon summarize, "[and] avoiding egocentric forms or monumental gestures that would disrupt its tone and quality."[21] Strange, how easy it is to respect (and even adore) the words of Venturi and some of his followers yet despair of the postmodern mayhem they unleashed. One could call this blatant inconsistency *Venturian* — or then again, one might say that the showy historicism of late-twentieth-century architecture is simply egoism of a different stripe.

When I left New Mexico two years ago I took my time getting out of the state, crisscrossing south to north, west to east, and meeting up with the original Route 66 in Albuquerque. This old motorway, celebrated in song and celluloid, stretches from Chicago to Los Angeles, attracting nostalgic road-trippers who crave a hit of folksy Americana long since vanquished by the advent of the interstate freeway system and its sterile, cookie-cutter corporate franchises. In Albuquerque, Route 66

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[20] Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966), p. 102.

[21] Spiro Kostof, "The Study of What We Built," *The History of Architecture Settings and Rituals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 12.

cuts a dogged swath through the center of town, as stubborn as a rusty zipper.

Driving this urban roadway, here called Central Avenue, I passed a sparse array of neglected industrial buildings, auto shops and barrooms – a slightly derelict yet uniquely Southwestern strip marked by busted neon, cowboy-and-Indian kitsch, and wide open skies. Heading into downtown, the scenery changed to a modest assortment of mid-twentieth-century retail establishments alongside refurbished offices, art galleries and a few highrises, everything low-key, mud-colored, sun-soaked. Further east, Route 66 sent me barreling through the sprawl of the vast Rio Grande Valley, with its tidy suburban subdivisions, then rising to the crest of the Sandias. By the time I merged back onto U.S. 40, I had eyeballed a microcosm of the new American West, an arid slice of the vernacular and the *au courant*. Route 66 may have been swallowed by the interstate, but in its tenacious survival in New Mexico, as in other regional outposts in the United States, it serves as a jagged visual marker of the complex hybridities of the modern era. Traveling this iconic throughway of tenacious dreams, New Mexico struck me once again as beautifully indeterminate – both

screamingly dramatic and impossibly still. Unearthly with quiet.

When I started to think about a topic for this thesis, I didn't begin with the notion of silence. I was interested in architects who create maximum impact with minimum artifice, who sculpt breathtaking results with the simplest strokes. I was also interested in big sky, that is, in vast landscapes and empty vistas and limitless horizons – the kinds of terrain that slow things down and quell the commotion. Built interventions in these fragile, evocative settings have always held an allure for me, though no more so than the jumbled loveliness of urban enclaves (read: Brooklyn). Both extremes suggest the lush promise of the unknown, in all its suspense and possibility. Both accommodate, even cherish, the silent spaces in between.

Big sky, big cities. I realized that the unifying theme was the intensity of contrast and, more specifically, a quiet elegance. The architects I was contemplating were all attuned to qualities of mystery and repose, and seemed mindful of their materials and their surroundings. They were all working in dialogue with early Modernism (or, in some cases, critically responding to it). They even shared an improbable sort

of humility. I decided to focus this project on the enigmatic power that underscores and connects such work — to focus on the concept of silence as an architectural force, both metaphoric and real.

Writing on silence is itself a paradox. There is no direct way to elucidate the absence of something, or to decipher what is most captivating in its undecipherability. But then writing (like architecture) involves as much subterfuge as revelation; it is a matter of choosing what *not* to say in order to say anything at all. Intimations of meaning are often best illuminated in the margins, coded in understatement, shrouded instead of unveiled. This study aims to reveal a glimmer of what is compelling in the shadows, a whisper of what resonates in the void.

Sound and Silence

At a recent gallery opening in Washington, D.C., the photographer Robert Frank wore a T-shirt with one blunt word emblazoned across the front: "Silenzio." Frank, an artist known for his trenchant images of the workaday, images thick with solitude and sympathy, fog and elliptical narrative, is not much given to talk. On hand for a new show of his London photographs from the 1950s, he deflected all questions, remaining as quietly elusive as the stories half-told on the gallery walls. Among the images was a photograph of a Welsh graveyard, where the statue of an angel is poised with a finger to its lips, the very cue for *silenzio*. There is a murmur of the elegiac here, but then, something joyful too:

Frank's approach offers the gift of intimate suggestion, the drift of something happening just beyond the borders.

Architecture, too, could be said to traffic in such backhanded power, engaging as it does in concealment and surprise, absence and presence, the materiality of construction and the haunting ephemerality of the void. Consequently, the relationship between architecture and silence is fascinating and enigmatic – at once overtly etched and stubbornly subterranean. While the notion of architecture as a form of *communication* has been thoroughly considered, silence itself has not been fully spotlighted (except, occasionally, as a kind of fetish).[22] This study aims to present silence as a subtle and enveloping force in the built and natural worlds, primally interconnected with architecture, and potentially intriguing to scholars and practitioners navigating a new century's cacophony of murmurs and shouts.

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[22] E.g., In a dialogue first published in the magazine *L'Architecture Vivante* in 1923, the poet Paul Valery imagines a conversation between Phaedrus and Socrates in the afterlife: "Tell me, since you are so sensitive to the effects of Architecture, have you not noticed, in walking about this city, that among the buildings with which it is peopled, certain are *mute*; others *speak*; and others, finally – and they are the most rare – *sing*?" Such metaphoric proclamations are innumerable. From Sarah Whiting's "Voices Between the Lines: Talking in the Gray Zone," in *Eileen Gray: An Architect for All Senses*, Caroline Constant and Wilfried Wang, eds. (Tubingen: Wasmuth, 1996), p. 72.

Forays into the realm of silence and architecture do unearth a vast and diverting array of material, some compelling, some superfluous. Because the subject is widely allusive, writing that touches on its themes can range from very directed commentary about particular architects to more encompassing overviews on certain typologies or geographies to theoretical musings from other disciplines. Silence is also addressed head-on in the writing of a number of prolific architects, while contemporary critics offer their own lively and sometimes pointed assessments. Silence, it seems, is anything but a subdued affair, which I will elaborate upon in the pages of this chapter.

The broad sweep of the subject can also lead to inspiring offshoots and devilish detours, a poetics of architecture astutely dubbed a "detective story in reverse."[23] Indeed, how *does* something as amorphous as silence relate to something as materially grounded as architecture? After all, silence and its relationship to architecture can be investigated on multiple, intersecting levels: as a reflection of a building's stylistic expression; as directly analogous to speech, language and the enduring notion of *architecture*

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[23] Roger Connah, *How Architecture Got Its Hump* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), p. 99.

parlante; and as an issue of noise or noise reduction resulting from choices in building materials and siting. Then too, silence is a somatic perception experienced through our capacity (or incapacity) to hear, while architecture need not even exist in built form; sometimes it is but a speculation or a set of drawings, a direct burst of intellect or imagination on paper or screen.

My intention for this project is to explore the myriad ways in which silence operates as an architectural force, with a focus on twentieth-century Western architecture and the emergent impact of Modernism. While acknowledging the complexities mentioned above, my particular strategy is twofold—

1) I intend to examine four archetypal buildings of the Modern Movement: Walter Gropius' Fagus Factory (Alfeld-an-der-Leine, Germany; 1914), Louis Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum (Ft. Worth, Texas; 1972), Luis Barragan's San Cristobal Stables (Mexico City, Mexico; 1968) and Richard Neutra's Kaufmann House (Palm Springs, California; 1947), and

2) I will follow a progressive trajectory from public to private spaces, from exterior to interior, with an aim to illuminate aspects of modernity, the

machine age, industry and symbol, belonging and exclusion, yearning, awe and exile.

In effect, I am tracing the concept of silence through four distinct building types – factory, museum, thoroughbred farm and house – and reflecting on the experiences of those who use, encounter and consider these structures. Rather than focusing solely on the architects' intentions, with a potential tumble into imprecision or inconsistency,[24] I am concerned with the ways in which architecture is understood to create or enhance (or deny) the phenomenon of silence – how the mysteries of silence are revealed. Throughout this inquiry, I will attempt to expose broader questions of architecture's role as a force for social betterment, and lay bare the subterranean notion of built form as "mute witness" to its historical era. The study spans the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, a time of cross-fertilization of influences between Europe and the United States and an era of particularly fervent reaction against the perceived affront of ornamentation.

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[24] In their celebrated essay from 1946, "The Intentional Fallacy," writers William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley call into question the practice of delving into a creator's biography, socio- or psychological history, or other arguably peripheral aspects, and advocate for foregrounding the work itself: i.e., "…the poem is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it." From Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3, 1946, p. 470.

Each of my four chosen buildings exhibits ideals and characteristics reflective, at least in part, of early Modernism. My decision to select these four structures is based on personal interest in the architects as well as an instinctive sense that these particular buildings might unearth a compelling spectrum of revelations concerning silence; certainly, other exemplars may also have been appropriate. As it is, my sampling includes the work of two fabled European expatriots (Gropius and Neutra) and two North Americans renowned for their quiet ways (Kahn and Barragan). Earlier aspects of architectural history and theory may emerge in the course of this study – e.g., the elegant legacy of classical architecture, the Victor Hugo assertion that "the book will kill the building"[25] – but the thrust of the project will remain on the twentieth century, with related speculation on design innovations of contemporary architects working in a neo-modernist vein.

Other methodological concerns include–

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[25] Neil Levine, "The Romantic Idea of Architectural Legibility," from *The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, ed. Arthur Drexler (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1977), p. 356.

Sound:

As a relentless sensory experience, sound could potentially encompass anything that is audible, whether by intention or happenstance. So too could its absence. Sound and silence are constructs, and relative ones at that: human experience of, tolerance for, and understanding of noise varies across cultures, eras, land- and cityscapes, industrial fabrics. To tighten the scope of this project, it is necessary to eliminate certain aspects of sound from my inquiries. For starters, I will not venture into the study of music, a vast theoretical and artistic undertaking all in itself. Nor will I endeavor to probe ideas about sound/silence through a scientific framework. Instead I will rely on the fluid contemplations of writers, critics, architects and other thinkers, granting this subject the elusiveness, the shifting power and the potency it inevitably conjures up.

Technics:

Just as I will steer clear of music and science, I will also refrain from addressing the more technical aspects of acoustics. The mechanics of engineering and building construction are outside the parameters of this

research. I do intend to investigate how certain building materials and design decisions impact noise levels in modern architecture (and, when applicable, influence the broader social arenas of urbanism and regional planning), but I do not intend to be tech-heavy in my analyses. My aim is to delve into silence as a matter of sensation and perception, or lack thereof, and to consider how the built world affects the human experience of those who inhabit it or reflect upon it.

Ethereality/Theory:

While determined to present silence as a concept of subtlety and nuance, I am equally committed to a project grounded in tangible buildings, architects and ideas. To the extent that my topic touches on ethereality, it does so to reveal undercurrents of architectural theory not often explicitly tendered. I will not tackle religion per se, which, like music, is a discrete and massive project unto itself. My study is particularly attuned to the shift from Victorian eclecticism and didacticism to the supposedly clean break of the Modern Movement and, later, to the fallout that ensued with the advent of postmodernism.

Given this focus, my project could privilege any number of specific methodologies: psychoanalysis, critical theory, phenomenology, structuralism and poststructuralism, semiotics, critical regionalism, feminism, postcolonialism. While I acknowledge the potential relevance and overlapping concerns of some of these approaches, I do not intend to lean heavily on any one of them. Of particular note, I am choosing to forgo semiotics as an avenue of discovery, primarily because of the abundant research and commentary already available from this theoretical viewpoint; fundamentally, I remain concerned less with the structural mechanics of how a building is said to communicate than with critical-intuitive analyses of architecture's intangible, sensory effects. Nonetheless, my study may indeed borrow from and bleed into the above-mentioned realms of thought and activism.

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In isolating the literature most relevant to my study, I have found a sampling that best exemplifies the range of commentary on architecture and silence. What follows is a brief overview of these key writings,

organized thematically rather than chronologically, and encompassing voices of criticism, historical analysis, theoretical vision, and cross-disciplinary exploration. While far from definitive, these perspectives offer an overture to the existing corpus on silence, and a prelude to my own musings on twentieth-century collisions of commotion and quiet.

First up is the preface to the anthology *The Culture of Silence*, the most salient reflection I've found to date on the interface between silence and architecture.[26] Penned by Malcolm Quantrill and Bruce Webb, who co-edited this 1998 book for the Texas A & M series on Architecture and Culture, the piece introduces the concept of silence as a shadowy counterpart to architecture's enduring insistence on communication. "Architecture has often played the silent watcher," they write, "embodying within itself a silent and irreducible sense of place."[27] Yet Quantrill and Webb express alarm at what they call the "incessant chattering" of modern life and suggest that architecture, too, in its co-optation of linguistic vocabulary, has emerged noisily from the muted era of Modernism into a cacophonous postmodernity.

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[26] Malcolm Quantrill and Bruce Webb, *The Culture of Silence* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 1998), p. xi-xiv.
[27] Ibid., p. xi.

The writers are not without hope for architecture's potential – nor are they immune from blurring history and sentiment, as when they use the terms *sublime* and *pure* to discuss what has been lost in this age of ever-speedier (and louder) forms of communication. Yet their central thrust is nicely sustained in this brief introduction; Quantrill and Webb ponder silence across cultures and eras, and light on particular practitioners (Alvar Aalto, Adolf Loos) to bolster their viewpoints.[28] They suggest that if architecture can lose its "obsession with communication" it can regain its dignified primacy in "a language beyond language."[29] They give their argument a mystical spin, too, conjuring up the binary zones of dreams and reality, with architecture the portal between them.

In assembling an entire book on silence, the editors appear to have relied on chance and serendipidity. The original idea sprang from a 1993 symposium at the University of Houston; subsequently,

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[28] Architect Adolf Loos especially merits attention here as the author of the infamous polemic "Ornament and Crime," originally delivered as a lecture in Vienna in 1910. An excerpt reads, "I have therefore evolved the following maxim, and pronounce it to the world: the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects." Eschewing the decadence of "ornament" with evangelical fervor, Loos revived the disdain for a decoration-obsessed culture broached earlier by Enlightenment critics, and ushered in a new era of "silent" architecture. From "Ornament and Crime," in *Programs and Manifestos on 20th-Century Architecture*, Ulrich Conrads, ed., Michael Bullock, trans. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1975), p. 20.

[29] Quantrill and Webb, *The Culture of Silence*, p. xii.

other writings fell into place through what Quantrill and Webb describe as an improbable network of linked conversations. Recognizing silence as both a unifying subject and a limitation, they produced a book with an odd (and rather cunning) slant on Finnish architecture as well as a broader palette touching on various regions and related ideas. The editors also ventured into the notion of speech as a liberating vehicle. Several chapters address the proclivities of "talkative" architects, such as the essay on Reima Pietila of Finland, who, Quantrill maintains, has defied his nation's mythic reticence in his role as a garrulous, irrepressible storyteller.[30]

Another illuminating contribution to *The Culture of Silence* is Marco Frascari's chapter on, improbably, carnival masks in eighteenth-century Venice. Focusing on concealment and its consequences, "The Silent Architect and the Unutterable Nature of Architecture" begins with the description of two primary types of masks, the *bautta* (male) and the *muta* (female), and proceeds to explore two contrasting types of architectural personas, those who boast of their achievements and those who remain taciturn. Frascari

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[30] Ibid., Quantrill, p. 49-65.

refrains from judgment – or from assuming strict alignments according to sex – and instead forages back through architectural history to speculate on the interwoven worlds of theory and practice, and the very question of authority and interpretation. Who can best speak of a building?

The piece is beautifully suggestive; one thread flows into another, often with surprising imaginative leaps. His occasionally obtuse bullets – "The world of dreams is a living forest in which fantasy dwells by solving the riddle of architectural corporeality"[31] – are balanced by potent ratiocination into the imaginative dimensions of architecture. Frascari calls this an *intermondo* realm, one that transcends the banality of rationalism and upholds the "silent task" of translating dreams to built form.

The whole anthology is rich with such flamboyance. It also introduced me to a lovely invention, the word *archobabble*, which is either eminently useful or archly insulting. It's the construction of the aforementioned writer Connah, who debuted the concept in a lecture in 1993. He also makes note of the "tyranny of explanations" and the "chatter of architecture," and

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[31] Ibid., Marco Frascari, p. 85.

wonders if it is too quixotic to imagine that refuge from stress and confusion can be found in a stately built environment. Early in *The Culture of Silence* he asks, cogently, "With all the echo in the world, can we speak of the fortunate aesthetics of the shadow, expressed as it so often has been by architectural commentators as a silence, a respite, a metaphysical lull in the greater storm?"[32]

The musician John Cage takes up the question, with great élan. His seminal volume *Silence* is a puckish, maddening and slyly elucidating book on the topic of sound and its absence. Originally published in 1961, this collection of essays is an assemblage of fragments, allegories, aphorisms and prose, most of it taken verbatim from lectures Cage had given over the span of many years. On paper, the words create a visual and thematic artistry of their own – they exhibit a cut-and-paste quality of experimentation later labeled "hypertext." Yet as a sustained piece of writing, *Silence* is lacking obvious coherence. But then, that may be one of Cage's points about sound: its ubiquitous presence/absence in our lives makes it so commonplace as to almost escape notice.

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[32] Ibid., Roger Connah, p. 10.

Cage was most renowned for his 1952 composition entitled 4'33", in which he defined and projected silence as the presence of ambient and unintentional noise rather than the complete absence of sound. The work consists of three empty, silent movements through which all sounds from the surrounding environment can flow. As reported by Branden W. Joseph in "John Cage and the Architecture of Silence," an essay for the journal *October*, Cage first explicitly linked architecture with music during his Julliard Lecture of 1952 in which he stated that one can "hear through" a piece of contemporary music just as one can "see through" a modern building.[33] This explanation is in perfect accord with Cage's 4'33", a work deriving its full force from the impact of "hearing through."

In later years, Cage would further incorporate ideas about architecture (especially the material of glass) into his writings and teachings. An explicit reference appears in *Silence* in the chapter called "Experimental Music," taken from a lecture he gave in Chicago in 1957. In considering the question of whether new music is music at all, he says that (all) music includes sounds both notated and not; those that are not

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[33] Branden W. Joseph, "John Cage and the Architecture of Silence," *October 81*, Summer 1997, p. 85.

notated appear in the written music as silences. These open the doors to environmental sounds in a fashion comparable to the workings of modern architecture. "The glass houses of Mies van der Rohe reflect their environment," Cage continues, "presenting to the eye images of clouds, trees or grass, according to the situation…. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot."[34]

In his attention to reflectivity, Cage is pointing to the blurring of interior and exterior as accomplished by the modern glass curtain wall; his sense that modern architecture precludes emptiness aligns with his analogous perspective on modern music. In his *October* essay, Joseph takes this premise further, delving into Cage's shifting affinity with the avant-garde, Dada and Zen. He also explores Cage's preoccupation with repetition and variation and their connection to the sterility of mass production, referencing other critics who have linked Cage with architecture. Thus Joseph can assert that Cage's project was anti-ideological, one of liberation and multiplicitous interpenetrations, and

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[34] Ibid., p. 87.

inevitably conjoined with architectural ideas of space, transparency and dematerialization.

It is all quite a stretch. Cage himself was far more roundabout in his postulations, infusing his comments with seeming playfulness rather than analytical conjecture. Aside from the aforementioned excerpt from "Experimental Music," *Silence* refers only tangentially to architecture, as when Cage mentions the principles of collage and space and their affinity with modern painting and architecture, and then proceeds to suggest a corrective for a student's over-attachment to sounds (he should attach himself to the emptiness, to silence). More commonly the book offers esoteric material to chew on, little nuggets of wisdom or folly about *something* and *nothing* or, in what begins to feel repetitive by book's end, the non-existence of silence. According to Cage, something is always happening that makes a sound.

The relevance of *Silence* for my undertaking lies in its unhinged maneuverings across disciplines, its freewheeling unorthodoxy, which connects it to the work of other writers and thinkers musing on something/nothing. Indeed, Cage was keenly attentive to the architecture of his era, but then, he was also big on mushrooms; *Silence* ends, famously, with a chapter on

mycology and music. It could be a commentary on the realm of landscape, sound and serenity, or it could be an echo from earlier in the book where Cage muses, "What we require is silence; but what silence requires is that I go on talking."[35]

A more formal approach to silence is broached by historian James Dunnett in his essay "The Architecture of Silence," from the October 1985 *Architectural Review*. In the piece, Dunnett revisits the much-traversed territory of Le Corbusier studies to posit that the master's Radiant City formulation was always intended to encourage a certain ideal of intellectual life, one predicated on silence. Far from a purely functionalist proposition, in other words, the Radiant City with its clean, modern housing was meant to invite a calm and meditative atmosphere into people's daily affairs, leading to a human happiness best achieved through creative expression. Dunnett suggests that this interpretation reflects Le Corbusier's lifelong understanding of modern architecture and his overriding concern with separating the so-called "servant" functions of life from the "free" functions, those associated with art and the intellect.

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[35] John Cage, *Silence* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1961), p. 109.

Quoting Le Corbusier's beleaguered dismay at the misinterpretation of his famous coinage "the house is a machine for living in," Dunnett traces the architect's viewpoints and finds that he promoted the greater productivity of the machine age to free up time for the *real* business of living, which required stillness and repose, not to proselytize for machines per se. The Radiant City and its dwellings were not in fact machines, but constructions intended to liberate people from them for the higher purposes of the mind. Dunnett explains that, nonetheless, the machine was the underlying motif for Le Corbusier's evocations of modern life, and fueled his innovations in architecture and in art. His Cubist leanings merely underscored this devotion to industry, insofar as Cubism foregrounded universality and the purity of geometrical forms; these absolutist ideas reflected the dominance and beauty of machine mass production. In the case of the Radiant City, Dunnett claims, Le Corbusier emerged as an advocate of meditation for all. He promoted the democratization of the contemplative ideal, a private counterbalance to the collectivized urban milieu of the industrial revolution.

"The Architecture of Silence" is a linear, art historical argument which doesn't so much challenge earlier scholarship on Le Corbusier as spotlight a particular fanaticism on his part – that is, his conviction about the primacy of silence as the key to proper dwelling. Dunnett notes that in the Radiant City's program, Le Corbusier calls the dwelling "a vessel of silence and lofty solitude" which is necessary for "healthy mental activity."[36] He also sketches an influential visit that Le Corbusier made to a Tuscan monastery in 1907, and details how his ongoing explorations of nature impacted his work. The article concludes that Le Corbusier did, in fact, devise a design philosophy that would ensure silence for every home, access to nature, stillness among one's neighbors, a locus for meditation. He even cites, in apparent agreement, Le Corbusier's musings from *The City of Tomorrow*: "Here is the City with its crowds living in peace and pure air, where noise is smothered under the foliage of green trees."[37] What Dunnett fails to do is touch on any of the critical fallout from Le Corbusier's vaunted idealism – there's no speculation whatsoever on

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[36] James Dunnett, "The Architecture of Silence," *Architectural Review*, October 1985, no. 178, p. 75.
[37] Ibid., p. 75.

the school of thought that finds alienation rather than contemplation in these early Modernist visions.

For my purposes the piece is a nicely explicit document on just how silence can be manifested in built form (i.e., clean orthogonal geometry, uncluttered walls, lack of ornamentation, pilotis, roof gardens, balconies, dialogue with landscape, lightness, austerity). Of course, this is just one very exacting rendition, but in its encapsulation of the work of Le Corbusier and other Modern Movement pioneers, it situates the concept of silence on a continuum. It's a starting point from which to reflect on what came before and after, on Modernism's role in defining silence as a design construct, and on contemporary adaptation or rejection of this particular paradigm. It also broaches the relationship between building and landscape, a vexing and key entanglement in the discussion of contemplation (or what stymies it). "The Architecture of Silence," in its detailed concentration on Le Corbusier, offers an exemplary touchstone for the investigation of other architects' musings on silence.

Finally, a more contemporary angle on silence is tapped in "Everyday and 'Other' Spaces," first published as a chapter in the 1996 anthology *Feminism and*

Architecture. In this essay, scholar Mary McLeod tackles the concept of "other" as defined and discussed by deconstructivist architects and critics over the past two decades. Citing the pervasive influence of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, who she claims have inspired masculinist detachment and arrogance rather than subversive political thinking, McLeod challenges the received wisdom that finds the so-called neo-avant-garde necessarily disruptive to the status quo. Instead, she argues that the lofty decon language of *decentering, dismantling, dislocation, violation* (and the like) has ignored or trivialized the actual social condition of "others" worldwide – women, racial and ethnic minorities, colonized people, service workers. She suggests that a cultural feint has been underway in the academy and among the elite of architectural discourse: that is, that while promoting the idea of "otherness" as somehow good and transgressive, the deconstructivists and their loosely affiliated ilk have merely reinforced the same old system of dominance and hierarchy they purport to overthrow.

McLeod's argument speaks forcefully to silence in her attention to the perspectives and voices of those not commonly heard – those who occupy the "everyday"

also referenced in the essay's title (or, as McLeod notes wryly, "those for whom the avant-garde has little significance"[38]). She notes that "other," a term originally used in a politicized context by Simone de Beauvoir to refer to the marginal status of women, is a denotation that implicitly encompasses people excluded from the center. For architects and critics who in fact reside at the dead-center of institutionalized power to, in effect, colonize the word "other" strikes McLeod as hubris, repression, or worse. Specifically, she plumbs the genesis of "heterotopia" (Foucault) and "differance" (Derrida), finding in these postmodern tropes a form of negation that, when applied to architecture, severely limits the possibility for socially engaged theory or action.

McLeod is hardly shy in naming powerhouse architects and thinkers aligned with the culture of fragmentation and drift (among them, Bernard Tschumi, Mark Wigley, Jeffrey Kipnis and Peter Eisenman). As one of the first critics to challenge the allegedly unassailable gamesmanship of postmodernism, she is breaking silence herself, questioning the ascendancy of a burningly hip regime that chooses to undercut the very

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[38] Mary McLeod, "Everyday and 'Other' Space," *Gender Space Architecture*, eds. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 182.

concept of subjectivity just as historically oppressed people are beginning to name themselves as subjects. At the same time, she allows that some thinkers have found in postmodern theory – as it interfaces with architecture – a sympathetic construct for critiquing prevailing systems of power that perpetuate the degraded status of the "other." In other words, she acknowledges the complexity of intellectual and political forces intertwining and clashing in late twentieth-century discourse.

In addition to a thorough exposition of her core argument, McLeod outlines a variety of alternative strategies from groups and individuals working within the climate of doubt that has accompanied the dashing of any fixed truth. Among other exemplars, she cites the Situationists, Henri Lefebvre, Denise Scott Brown and Maya Lin. She also notes the documentable absence of women, non-Western and black architects from architectural conferences and journals as a prism reflective of a larger problem. But "Everyday and 'Other' Spaces" does not attempt to be comprehensive, nor does it explicitly prescribe any particular form of speech or action to redress the invisibility (silence) of real "others." By opening a fissure in an entrenched

discourse (ironically, itself a form of breakage), McLeod is expanding the boundaries of the project and validating the perhaps unspoken suspicions of others gazing from the margins.

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Whether within or outside of the margins, the choice to dodge direct expression contains its own tingle of authority. In architecture, as in other fields, there are those defying the contemporary penchant for bluster and excess; they are opting instead for reticence, choosing the power of the implicit over that of the blunt exposé. They are not engaging in, as critic Anthony Lane has pegged it, "the shapeless blurt."[39] Contemporary literary theorist Patti Duncan praises this sort of restraint for the very potency it conveys, calling a chosen silence the "will to unsay."[40] Describing *unsaying* as pro-active and potentially subversive, she further insists, "We have not listened

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[39] Anthony Lane, "The Fighter: Rereading Robert Lowell," *The New Yorker*, June 9, 2003, p. 86.

[40] Patti Duncan, *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), p. 30.

enough to this language of silence, to its ever-changing meanings, to its resonances of possibility."[41]

In a recent edition of the British journal *Blueprint*, critic Hugh Pearman poses a related query: "Is look-at-me, show-us-your-knickers architecture in retreat at last? Is quiet architectural dignity, even anonymity, making a comeback?"[42] Indeed, in the wake of an aggressive period of noisy destabilization and faux alterity, is the shadow zone so enticingly broached in *The Culture of Silence* gaining a fresh currency? A glance across disciplines reveals at least an underground swell of devotion to the eloquence of restraint – a calling to locate beauty, poise and reflection in oftentimes hidden realms.

Certainly, there is a subset of artists so inclined, that is, unfashionably loathe to tell all, either in their lives or in their work. While examples could be cited from across the arts, this laconic tendency is perhaps most detectable, if not most intriguing, among writers and poets. Literary legend Joseph Conrad, for one, was a notoriously oblique novelist, however sprawling and untidy. As the late scholar Edward Said explains, "Conrad's language

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Hugh Pearman, "Name Droppers," *Blueprint*, July 2003, no. 209, p. 56.

regularly carries with it eloquent indications that language is not enough. He once wrote, 'Compared with music all communication by words is shameless; words dilute and brutalize; words depersonalize; words make the uncommon common.'"[43] Another twentieth-century giant plumbing this paradoxical realm was James Joyce, who described his literary arsenal as comprised entirely of "silence, exile, and cunning."[44]

Poet Elizabeth Bishop was of like mind to Conrad and Joyce and, perhaps not uncoincidentally, also deeply attuned to the experience of exile. In a chapter about Bishop titled "The Queer Land of Kissing," critic Marilyn May Lombardi writes, "Bishop understood that the power of all narrative lay in secrecy or parable. Speech that is too revelatory, too direct in its implications, necessarily limits the narrative's potential…. Undisguised confession held little intellectual appeal for her."[45] The same could be said, perhaps, of that master of secrecy, Edgar Allan Poe, who has inspired countless tomes about his bewitching indeterminacy. And any number of more contemporary

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[43] Edward G. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), P. 77.
[44] From a review by Wyatt Mason, "There Must I Begin To Be," *Harper's*, v. 308, no. 1847, April 2004, p. 88.
[45] Marilyn May Lombardi, *The Body and the Song* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995).

writers, from Hemingway to Highsmith to Carver, have staked their reputations on the shifty command of minimalist prose.

Of course, not everyone applauds (or fathoms) such authorial discretion – some would call it avoidance, cowardice, the inevitable fallout of hegemonic treachery, arguing with the kind of political smarts Mary McLeod brings to the discussion of marginality. Among the classics of second-wave feminism are two essays, Tillie Olsen's "Silences" and Shoshana Felman's "Women and Madness," that directly condemn the forces that consign women to the silent periphery. The very title of Ralph Ellison's masterwork, *Invisible Man*, points to the voicelessness of black men in America, who are neither heard *nor* seen (though, paradoxically, Ellison is nearly Conradian in his brilliant, cryptic storytelling). In recent decades, countless writers have continued to plumb similar terrain; indeed, the resounding imperative to "speak truth to power" has unleashed an unceasing tide of self-proclamation, open to all manner of praise, derision and everything in-between. And that does not even account for the minefield of modern-day theory on matters of speech and

language, pithily foreshadowed almost a century ago by poet Stefan George, with this haunting couplet:

> *…So, sadly, I became aware*
> *That things are not if words aren't there.*[46]

This tension between naming and not-naming – between revelation and concealment – is artfully bared in architect Henry Urbach's essay from 1996, "Clothes, Closets, disClosure." Addressing "the closet" as both an interior space for the storage of clothing and as the metaphoric realm of clandestine sexuality, he discusses how each interpretation of the closet could not exist without its opposite. In so doing, he breaks new ground in directly linking issues of architecture and speech, while hinting at even fresher turns in the shifting discourse of sexual power and pleasure. "The closet, in the end, can only be so inconspicuous," Urbach suggests. "There is always some seam, gap, hinge, knob or pull that reveals the door… closet and room work together."[47]

Likewise, he explains, the closet situates gay identity as an open secret, or what he calls "a telling

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[46] Stefan George, *das wort*, kahome.co.uk/sebast.htm, 1919.

[47] Henry Urbach, "Closets, Clothes, disClosure," from *Gender Space Architecture*, Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden, eds. (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 346.

silence."[48] As with the interior fixtures that betray the closet, the absence of positive indicators of the straight life (i.e., wedding rings, traditional families) imply the possibility of same-sex affinity even without overt disclosure. Arguably, the closet is not only a specific metaphor for life on the down low, but a potent symbol for the surreptitious, intimate thrill of keeping it *strictly on the q.t.* Or, simply stated, of keeping it quiet.

Are language and architecture, then, equally potent with dissemblance? Necessarily cloaked in deception, the slipperyness of a "telling silence"? Is expression in word or wall merely a crafty foil to everything *not* revealed? Scholar Sophia Psarra would appear to argue otherwise when she discusses, in a recent article on fiction and architecture, the linear progression of a reader-occupant through a plot or building; she sees each journey as a path toward clarity rather than obfuscation.

"The task in both literature and architecture," Psarra insists, "is to order experience."[49] Yet she also goes on to differentiate between the two, reiterating

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[48] Ibid.

[49] Sophia Psarra, "The Book and the Labyrinth Were One and the Same: Narrative and Architecture in Borges' Fictions," in *Proceedings of the 4th International Space Syntax Symposium*, London 2003, Vol. 2., p. 61.4.

Jorge Luis Borges' fundamental proposition that "literature creates representations of experience, whereas architecture creates physical space which we occupy with our bodies."[50] Perhaps Spiro Kostof best captures the both-and aspect of the conundrum – the puzzle of built form as a conduit of meaning – when he writes, "Language, the agent of expression, is also the hotbed of ambiguity. And the translation of words into the physical substance of architecture is peculiarly open to contention."[51] Landscape historian and critic J. B. Jackson enters the fray with this arguably impatient (and politicized) observation, proffered in a mid-century critique of modern architecture: "It is idle to argue whether architecture is an art of communication or of form when it is apparent that our buildings are being called upon to say something to the public. They are required to sell goods, to establish social position, to inspire confidence, to impress or elevate or excite…."[52]

Indeed, at the intersection of silence and architecture lies the bedrock matter of intelligibility, an arena ever rife with factions, fissures, evolutions and revolts. At one extreme is a Miesian plane of pure

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[50] Ibid., p. 61.21.

[51] Spiro Kostof, "The Study of What We Built," *The History of Architecture Settings and Rituals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 5.

[52] J. B. Jackson, "Hail and Farewell," from *Landscape in Sight: Looking at America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 287.

abstraction; at the other, the Vegas strip. For every voluble "paper architect" prone to design-not-build, there is a hidden coterie of Eileen Grays and Chris Rischers, designers who build but do not talk. For every postmodern acolyte embracing complexity and contradiction, there is an upstart like Steven Holl, in thrall to "clarity and simplicity."[53] All along the spectrum, the question of what is intelligible, what *resonates* in a work of architecture, is open to interpretation – can be gauged, in fact, through the paradigm of silence and its converse.

"Everything is architecture!" blared Austria's Hans Hollein in the 1960s, asserting that, in a speedy, postindustrial age of constantly evolving technologies, architecture is yet another form of media, new and shiny, muscling for attention. Hollein was keyed into television as the media most omnipotent and, from a present-day vantage point, his cheeky manifesto seems almost sweetly naïve. But he was on to something. In the decades since his proclamation, architecture has morphed into blobs, blurs, fragments, spikes, swoops, screens and digibits, jostling all the more for its

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[53] Steven Holl, from *INDEX Architecture*, Bernard Tschumi and Matthew Berman, eds. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), p. 194.

fifteen minutes, straddling the line between intelligibility and obscurantism.

In a chapter on architecture in an anthology titled *The Postmodern Moment*, McLeod tackles the ticklish matter of meaning, suggesting it was broached but never resolved by the Modern Movement. She writes, "The return to historical styles, decoration, enclosed rooms, and traditional urban form can all be viewed as part of a larger objective to make architecture 'speak.'"[54] But, she continues, the architectonics of a building – its actual structure and composition – remain overwhelmingly uncommunicative. Cultural meaning may be conveyed through such touches as sculpture and ornament and stained glass, but a building itself is decidedly ambiguous, she contends, reticent and still. *Evocative*, perhaps, but signifying nothing. McLeod concludes, "The possibility of a clearly understood public and social meaning cannot be readily assumed."[55]

Others would certainly disagree, finding symbol, signification or at least a definitive shout in architecture's very physicality, its visceral presence. Volumes have been penned on the coded meanings,

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[54] Mary McLeod, "Architecture," from *The Postmodern Moment: A Handbook of Contemporary Innovation in the Arts*, Stanley Trachtenberg, ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 26.
[55] Ibid., p. 33.

telegraphed messages and compulsion towards expression evident in various styles, materials or architectural fraternities. Historian Carter Wiseman cautions, however, against interpretive overkill: "The most powerful message broadcast by this *architecture parlante* [is] that cerebration past a certain point is almost always fatal to a process that had traditionally depended on some level of intuition to be considered art."[56]

Meanwhile, predating Hollein's media punditry, Marshall McLuhan argued that Western society values the eye over the ear, that auditory space is perplexingly infinite, without boundaries, but that *seeing is believing*. Painter Fernand Leger believed what he saw in modern architecture (as did numerous artists and intellectuals of the era), finding beauty in its nonrepresentational innocence, in its clean white walls. Then he chose to free it – to make it sing – with raw color. A liberated color, Leger further explained: "Everything set free!"[57] Others might find liberation in

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[56] Carter Wiseman, *Shaping a Nation* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), p. 353.

[57] Fernand Leger, "Pure Color," from *Explorations in Communication: An Anthology*, Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan, eds., (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 99. Leger wrote extensively about the relationship between painting and architecture, and affectionately chided his colleagues, as follows: "My architect friends, you want to forget that painters are put into this world in order to destroy dead surfaces, to make them livable, to spare us from overly extreme architectural positions. But

alternative fashion, through form or fragmentation, duck or decorated shed, the recycling of historical motif. And the flip side of all the hubbub over communication? Its humble doppelganger? *Silenzio.*

"But what is silence?" asks philosopher Christopher Day, trespassing in Cage's terrain, once again posing the unravelable koan. "Where can we go in the world and find absence of sound – no wind in the grass, no distant clink of rock, no lap of water? Sound means life; in quiet places, the ear sharpens to listen for it. We even start to hear the sounds of our own body."[58]

Architect Tadao Ando would likely concur. In a recently published series of interviews, coinciding with the 2002 opening of his Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, he argues for a built world that "does not speak too loud."[59] He says: "There is a real need to create spaces that suggest solitude and spiritual freedom. I think you do this through order and simplicity…. It should be a quality that people feel unconsciously, a feeling of awareness and contemplation."[60] Throughout,

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who is responsible for dispensing color? *We are.*" From an unpublished essay, "The Wall, The Architect, The Painter," 1933, excerpted in Marc Treib, *Space Calculated in Seconds* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 162.

[58] Christopher Day, *Places of the Soul* (Northamptonshire, England: The Aquarian Press, 1990), p. 138.

[59] Michael Auping, *Seven Interviews with Tadao Ando* (Fort Worth, TX: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 2003), p. 78.

[60] Ibid., p. 44.

Ando advocates for an architecture of intellectual calm and lively intuition, a quiet blend that expands to embrace the spirit of those who enter or encounter a building. Rick Joy is another modern-day practitioner in tune with these sounds, in touch with these silences, responding to the din of a new century with a new kind of repose – in his case, conceived amidst the energy and aching emptiness of the desert Southwest. A one-time musician, Joy writes, "As a drummer I was always more interested in ways to make the music 'feel' a certain way than in attempts to be flashy…the silence is often more profound than the sound."[61]

These architects are in sympathy with photographer Robert Frank, boasting *silenzio*; they are mining territorites ripe with shivery enticements, awash with gravitas (but lightness, too). Like their vaunted predecessors in the architecture of silence – e.g., Mies, Aalto, Kahn, Scarpa – they favor suggestion over explication, understatement over spectacle. Subtlety, if you will: an approach to design that locates intelligibility in the limpidness of clean lines, the clarity of spare surfaces, the pellucid confidence of intentional stillness.

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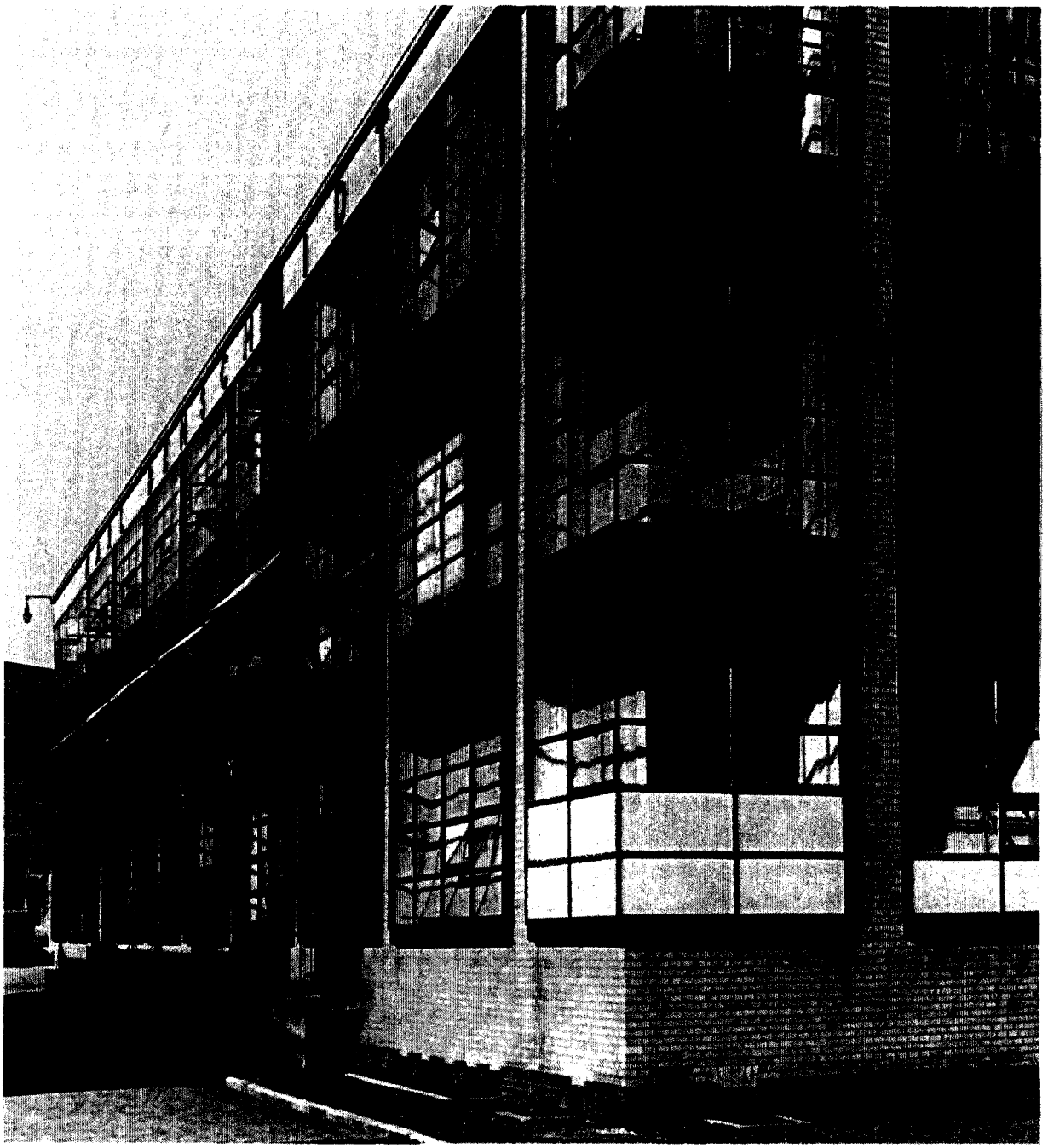
[61] Rick Joy, from the introduction to *Desert Works* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002). P. 20.

In response to an extended period of innovation and upheaval, these practitioners and their cohorts are testing the intersection of new technologies and classical sensibilities, searching, perhaps, for that architectural dignity so long desired, deployed, dispatched. An exploration of silence and its particular rapport with twentieth-century architecture is but one realm of inquiry into contemporary uncertainty and aspiration, a quest perhaps overseen by a tender stone angel, at once brimming with symbol and signaling silence.



Fagus Factory

…And finally I affirm that just as the ancients draw their inspiration in art from the elements of the natural world, so we – materially and spiritually artificial – must find our inspiration in the new mechanical world we have created, of which architecture must be the fairest expression, the fullest synthesis, the most effective artistic integration.

–Antonio Sant'Elia, *Messagio* (1914)

Walter Gropius' Fagus Factory in Alfeld-an-der-Leine, Germany is widely regarded as a masterwork of industrial architecture and a prophetic prelude to the Modern Movement's coming adulation of the machine. The project, completed in 1914, set the standard for factory design worldwide and was the first building of any sort to feature a fully enveloping curtain wall of glass.

This architecture of near weightlessness and transparency certainly spoke to Sant'Elia's plea for engagement with the mechanical world, as articulated in his epoch-defining *Messagio* that graced the exhibition catalogue for Milan's nervy *Nuove Tendenze* show;[62] it also reflected Gropius' expressed intent to create "a dignified guise" when sketching plans for a machine-age workplace.[63] His pioneering edifice of light, air and crystalline beauty was, after all, a factory, and its workers were compelled to perform mundane tasks in the service of routinized mass production, the very dehumanizing effect of industrialization that Gropius would soon combat in guiding the direction of the Bauhaus.

If his status as progenitor of the "factory aesthetic" seems to contradict his imminent embrace of Expressionism and the Arts and Crafts revival, as presaged by Ruskin and Morris, it also points to an underlying confusion among some early advocates of technologia in pre-World War I Europe: while extolling the liberating potential of standardization and machine-powered progress, they also attempted to give it a

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[62] Alan Phillips, *The Best in Industrial Architecture* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1993), p. 17.

[63] Peter Gossel and Gabriele Leuthauser, *Architecture in the Twentieth Century* (Koln: Taschen, 2001), p. 95.

spiritual thrust, aiming to instill a collectivist honor in capitalist enterprise. This approach was fostered in part by the German architect and historian Hermann Muthesius who, aiming for a harmonic bridge between art and industry, helped launch the Deutscher Werkbund in 1907. This loosely affiliated group sought to tie the work of artists, designers, architects, and critics with a German economy revitalized by mechanization and technical know-how. While Sant'Elia and fellow Italian Futurists were consumed with the dazzling possibilities of dynamism and speed, their German counterparts were intent on connecting new industrial capabilities with an orderly, calm, more static monumentalism. They were determined to impart an atmosphere of sobriety – indeed, as Gropius desired, *dignity* – to the factory environment, to complement their quietly uplifting ideology of productivity and communal gain.

Gropius was in the audience when Muthesius delivered an influential address to the Werkbund Congress of 1911, titled "The Spiritualism of German Production." Though he would later oppose Muthesius over issues of artistic creativity, believing national production norms to be potentially limiting to free expression, Gropius would soon become a member of the

Werkbund and fundamentally supported its principles. This was evident when he told a gathering of German industrialists, also in 1911, "Work must be established in palaces that give the workman, now a slave to industrial labor, an indication of the great common idea that drives everything. Only then can the individual submit to the impersonal without losing the joy of working together for that common good…."[64] In response to this idea, not unlike a design philosophy floated a few years earlier by Frank Lloyd Wright, critic Alan Colquhoun notes that workers were being offered a "transcendental experience" in exchange for their alienation.[65] He goes on, however, to credit Gropius with forging a conceptualization of the artist-architect as wholly independent from either state bureaucracy or big business, and thus free to meld art and pragmatism in a manner entirely congruent with the socially driven goals of technical rationalism.

Nikolaus Pevsner also grants Gropius a pivotal and laudatory role in the history of industrial architecture. In his seminal book *Pioneers of Modern Design* from 1936, Pevsner cites Gropius as the seer who synthesized the tradition of handicraft with the

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[64] Alan Colquhoun, *Modern Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 68.
[65] Ibid., p. 68.

fledgling glory of machine art, though, churlishly, he dubs the new century's architects, presumably Gropius among them, as "colder" than practioners of the previous era who were marked by "warmth and directness."[66] Nonetheless, Pevsner raves about the Fagus Factory, finding it stimulating, ethereal and utterly new. Like countless commentators since, he praises the building, a facility intended for the manufacture of shoe lasts, for its revolutionary use of steel and glass in place of conventional load-bearing walls.

While skyscrapers in the United States and industrial buildings in Europe had been boasting glass curtain walls and metal or concrete frames since before the turn of the century, the factory at Alfeld struck a chord with its precision, clarity and technological daring. It became the *tabula rasa* of emerging modern architecture, a radically inventive structure that would later be viewed as the tectonic and philosophical link between the Werkbund and the Bauhaus; Gropius himself would be seen as the conduit of a bold, forward-thinking, and ingenious new design position. Its influence extended around the globe as well, and transcended building type. J. B. Jackson, the landscape

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[66] Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 214.

historian, credits Gropius' *tour de force* with ushering in public understanding and, eventually, acceptance of the new modernist idiom, one stripped bare and stirringly beautiful.[67]

Specific features that have garnered accolades for the Fagus Factory are its shimmering cubic form and slender support apparatus, its leathery yellow brick, innovatively recessed and dematerialized, and its transparent volumes and orthogonal geometries that virtually define the modern industrial sensibility. In fact a hybrid of previously introduced construction elements – brick piers, steel beams and reinforced concrete floor slabs and stairways – the combination is nonetheless perceived as qualitatively fresh and unprecedented. The glass walls of the plant wrap around its skeletal framework, creating an impression of blurred thresholds between inside and out, and its corners, startlingly free of traditional support columns, appear to dissolve almost entirely. The effect is one of simplicity, grace and stateliness; it is an explicit dramatization of the hygienic ideal and the emancipating potential of technological advancement.

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[67] J. B. Jackson, "Truck City," from *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 181.

While some theorists, such as Colquhoun, above, question the political motivation behind the creation of awe-inspiring edifices for sites of monotonous factory work, others are more circumspect. It has been noted, for example, that unlike classical manufacturing buildings which often serve as veritable temples of labor, with a concomitant call to worshipful obedience, the Fagus Factory cleanly objectifies the notion of work. Internal production processes are largely visible through the transparent glazing, and the building's functions are similarly revealed through straightforward structural expression. The factory is sited with direct access to a railway station, and is otherwise designed to optimally coordinate the pragmatic workings of a manufacturing plant. There is nothing romantic, in other words, about the factory's presentation: its purpose is as plain as its styling.

Of course, many social critics are unappeased by this pro-industry, pro-machine rationale, and have contested this argument at the time of the Fagus Factory commission and more recently as well. Contemporary architect and writer Elizabeth Diller, for one, critiques the early twentieth-century craze for "scientific management" which understood the laborer as

an extension of the factory apparatus and "sought to rationalize and standardize the motions of the body, harnessing its dynamic energy and converting it to efficient labor power."[68] She sees a streamlined factory building, no matter how aesthetically novel, as a stage set for the dehumanizing practice of engineering bodies. So too does Jackson, despite his praise of Gropius' formal inventiveness. In an essay first published in the 1950s, Jackson expresses concern about the "uncongenial" and "isolating" effects of the Bauhausian wave in building design and – sounding like a vatic precursor to Robert Venturi – applauds the "popular flamboyance" of the era's emerging architecture, in all its shaggy variety and humanizing potential.[69]

Critic Aaron Betsky, writing in the 1990s, echoes both Diller and Jackson in discussing the dawn of industrialization in the West, and perhaps summarizes the dicey contradictions embedded in the machine-age enterprise. "The very idea of humanity," he explains, "the proudest achievement of Enlightenment logic, disappeared into the logic of mechanical reproduction, which turns all of man into no more than a potential

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[68] Elizabeth Diller, "Bad Press," from *Gender Space Architecture*, eds. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 386.
[69] J. B. Jackson, "Hail and Farewell," from *Landscape in Sight: Looking at America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 286.

part of the machine."[70] A dour protestation, and a critical commentary on the adoption of "Taylorism" to save time and maximize labor output, this assessment comes less than a century after Sant'Elia penned soaring verse about the prospects for a vibrant, fully mechanized, and gloriously speedy future.

Historian James Marston Fitch, on the other hand, falls in with those who celebrate Sant'Elia's visions and link the Futurists' optimistic imaginings with the parallel, pro-mechanization viewpoints prevalent in Germany of the early 1900s. Fitch applauds the fresh architectural idiom devised by Gropius in his design for the Fagus Factory, with its modern techniques employed to match modern aspirations. He further commends Gropius for evoking a "poetic image of the industrial process" and for providing a workplace at once "sun-flooded" and "immaculate."[71] Indeed, Fitch and other enthusiasts are reacting in part to the horrendous working conditions reportedly endured by early industrial laborers in England and elsewhere, and condemned most notoriously by Marx and Engels, as well as by other nineteenth-century social commentators like novelist Charles Dickens. Compared to the filthy,

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[70] Aaron Betsky, *Building Sex* (New York: William Morrow, Inc., 1995), p. 135.
[71] James Marston Fitch, *Walter Gropius* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1960), p. 20.

dangerous and overcrowded conditions described by these writers, the Fagus Factory may truly have appeared as a model showcase of civilized workplace reform. Apparently, this was the intention of factory owner Carl Benscheidt, an entrepreneur and strapping health aficionado who reportedly insisted on "light, cleanliness and organization" in the factory halls, and brought to his Fagus planning years of experience in naturopathy, shoemaking innovation and the advocacy of guaranteed workplace, health and child welfare benefits for employees.[72]

If the social and political meaning encoded in the building's radical break from tradition are fated to remain open to dispute, its influence has never been in doubt. As Fitch remarks, the Fagus Factory displays an "absolute freedom from any dependence upon historical form" and is void of any "tinge of ornamentalism."[73] What Gropius invented just prior to World War I was, in Pevsner's enthusiastic words, "the legitimate style of our century."[74] Other commentators have been equally effusive, concurring that Gropius' prototypical modern

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[72] Annemarie Jaeggi, *Fagus: Industrial Culture from Werkbund to Bauhaus* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), p. 13-14.
[73] Fitch, p. 20.
[74] Nikolaus Pevsner, in *The Werkbund: Design Theory and Mass Culture before the First World War*, by Frederic J. Schwartz (New Haven: Yale Univeristy Press, 1996), p. 4.

factory was a stunning precursor to the coming reign of high Modernism in Europe and the United States. In attempting to wed artistic form with the newest construction technologies, Gropius just may have fulfilled William Morris' edict that "The synonym for applied art is architecture."[75]

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The Fagus Factory was, in fact, Gropius' first independent commission. Designed in collaboration with Adolf Meyer, who would become his longtime partner, the project was launched almost immediately after Gropius left the architectural office of his teacher and mentor Peter Behrens, another key figure (and founding member) of the Werkbund. In 1907, Behrens had been appointed artistic advisor to the AEG, Germany's General Electric Company, where he was responsible for both product design and the company's brand identity; the young architect Gropius surely gained singular experience in designing industrial buildings while in Behrens' employ. When hired in 1911 by Benscheidt, the founder and owner of the Fagus shoe-last company, Gropius was reportedly

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[75] William Morris, noted in Pevsner, *Transactions, Edinburgh Meeting, 1889* (London, 1890), p. 224.

instructed to give the plant and its administrative offices an overall "tasteful" appearance. In so doing, he virtually reversed the classicizing effects that Behrens had used in his best-known building, the AEG Turbine Factory, constructed in Berlin in 1909.

Indeed, the very significance of the Fagus Factory may lie in its direct opposition to the Turbine Factory, a temple-like monolith of concrete and solemnity that sought to reconcile traditional notions of factory design with the new possibilities of commerce and mass production. While Behrens' building is awash in classical symbolic gestures, Gropius' design is abstract and strictly geometrical. Whereas Behrens projects and repeats his corporeal columns to emphasize their grandiosity, Gropius recesses his brick piers to the point of near invisibility. Behrens offers soft, rounded edges and a colossal gantry, while Gropius' structure is all sharp angles and perpendicular planes. And while Gropius' corners are virtually transparent, Behrens beefs his up with voluptuously thickened buttresses. The two near-contemporaneous factories could be said to represent a contrast between the classically expressive nature of historic architecture and the newfangled austerity of the modern era. The

husky AEG Turbine Factory emotes, while the delicate Fagus Factory stands serene and still.

Gropius' breakthrough building is nonetheless, in many respects, an homage to his architectural forebear Behrens, in that Gropius admired and sought to emulate the "compelling monumentality of the Canadian and American grain silos and the totally modern workshops of North American firms"[76] which Behrens had already – and quite grandly – captured in his Turbine Factory. The functional capabilities, in other words, are comparably advanced in the two structures, and their aesthetic goals each beautifully realized. At the time of the Fagus Factory commission, Gropius even told a group of businessmen that he hoped to situate "the secular industrial building within the sphere of monumental art."[77] He also owes a sense of illusionism to the influence of Behrens, which is particularly evidenced in the Fagus Factory's generous evocation of space and the almost transcendent quality of its glass façade.

The Fagus Factory remains a conundrum, at once a unique creation and an intelligent reinterpretation of what came before, which may be due in part to Gropius' immersion in Germany's pre-war design philosophy. At

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[76] William J. R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, third edition, 1996), p. 103.
[77] Gossel and Leuthauser, p. 99.

the time, the nation's artists and industrialists were beholden to advancing a symbolic, even poetic representation of the modern world. Unlike, say, the American architect Albert Kahn, who designed starkly utilitarian factories and warehouses for the Ford Motor Company (also dating to the first decades of the twentieth century), Gropius was striving to convey the new spirit of the times, the *zeitgeist*. He wanted more than an efficient, serviceable building; he wanted an edifice to stand as witness to "our way of thinking," as a "symbol of our work."[78] The Fagus Factory was marking history, even as it defied it.

As architectural historian William J. R. Curtis notes, Gropius was also keenly attentive to the programmatic requirements of the Fagus Factory. That is, while concerned with nobler and arguably more esoteric aims, he did not neglect the prosaic dictates of his client. In addition to its dazzling modernity, the factory and its administrative wing provided "good ventilation, a logical, open plan for machine serial production, and well-lit spaces for draughtsmen and managers to go about their business of helping improve

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[78] Ibid., p. 100.

the condition of those with foot problems."[79] The enlightened goals of Fagus owner Benscheidt were, by all accounts, taken seriously; Gropius approached the project with a mind to the abstracted yet utterly humble practicality of his beloved grain silos. In other words, the more modest, mundane functions of the shoe-last plant necessarily set it apart from Behrens' architectural set piece for AEG, one of Germany's mightiest and most ambitious companies.

Whereas a building like Behrens' may now seem overwrought, the Fagus Factory, in its preternatural simplicity, remains uncannily modern (and, in fact, still functions as an operating manufacturing facility). Fitch points out that industrial buildings of this type soon became ubiquitous: "The world is full of glass and metal curtain walls hung outside a steel or concrete frame."[80] Yet this particular design solution, with its explicit separation of skeleton and skin, its elegant lightness, was bracingly novel in 1914. Gropius would later write, in his 1960s manifesto *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus*, of this and other accomplishments: "A breach has been made with the past, which allows us to

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[79] Curtis, p. 104.
[80] Fitch, p. 19.

envisage a new aspect of architecture corresponding to the technical civilization of the age we live in."[81]

In this slim, almost poignant treatise, Gropius also celebrates liberation from a "welter of ornament" and praises the pleasing efficacies of glass. "Its sparkling insubstantiality, and the way it seems to float between wall and wall imponderably as the air, adds a note of gaiety," he enthuses.[82] Despite brewing architectural discord and rumblings of even further disturbance, Gropius remains convinced of Modernism's "breach"; he is devoted to a moral vision that finds in spareness and abstraction the necessary prerequisites for social unity, individual freedom and, indeed, for access to beauty, plenitude and contemplation. Such a vision can be understood to provide *silence*, the meditative blank slate on which to inscribe (a) life.

Peers of Gropius, as well as contemporary practitioners and thinkers, are no less beholden to this notion. Charlotte Perriand, for example, the pioneering twentieth-century architect and interior designer, came to embrace a credo of fidelity to empty space – a liberating, clutter-free zone she called *le vide*. Perriand, who lived and worked in Paris, frequently

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[81] Walter Gropius, *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1965), p. 19.
[82] Ibid., p. 23, 29.

cited a passage from the Japanese *Book of Tea* to underscore her point: "It is only in emptiness that the essential resides."[83] Among current commentators, the aforementioned Rick Joy speaks glowingly of the wealth of associations unleashed, paradoxically, through concealment, and the breadth of intimate experience afforded through deliberate minimalism and an appreciation of the "divine void."[84] And British architect John Pawson expresses something very similar when he writes, "When an object is reduced to its essentials, proportions come alive and simplicity takes on its own resonance and character."[85]

In Alfeld-an-der-Leine, the Fagus Factory stands as a pivotal prototype of such restraint, such evocative silence. It is occupying *le vide* (the divine void), even while satisfying its quotidian mandate. Gropius invented an industrial structure of quiet pragmatism as a riposte to Behrens' more noisily expressive citadel of labor. The workplace, a site of unrelenting clamor, was

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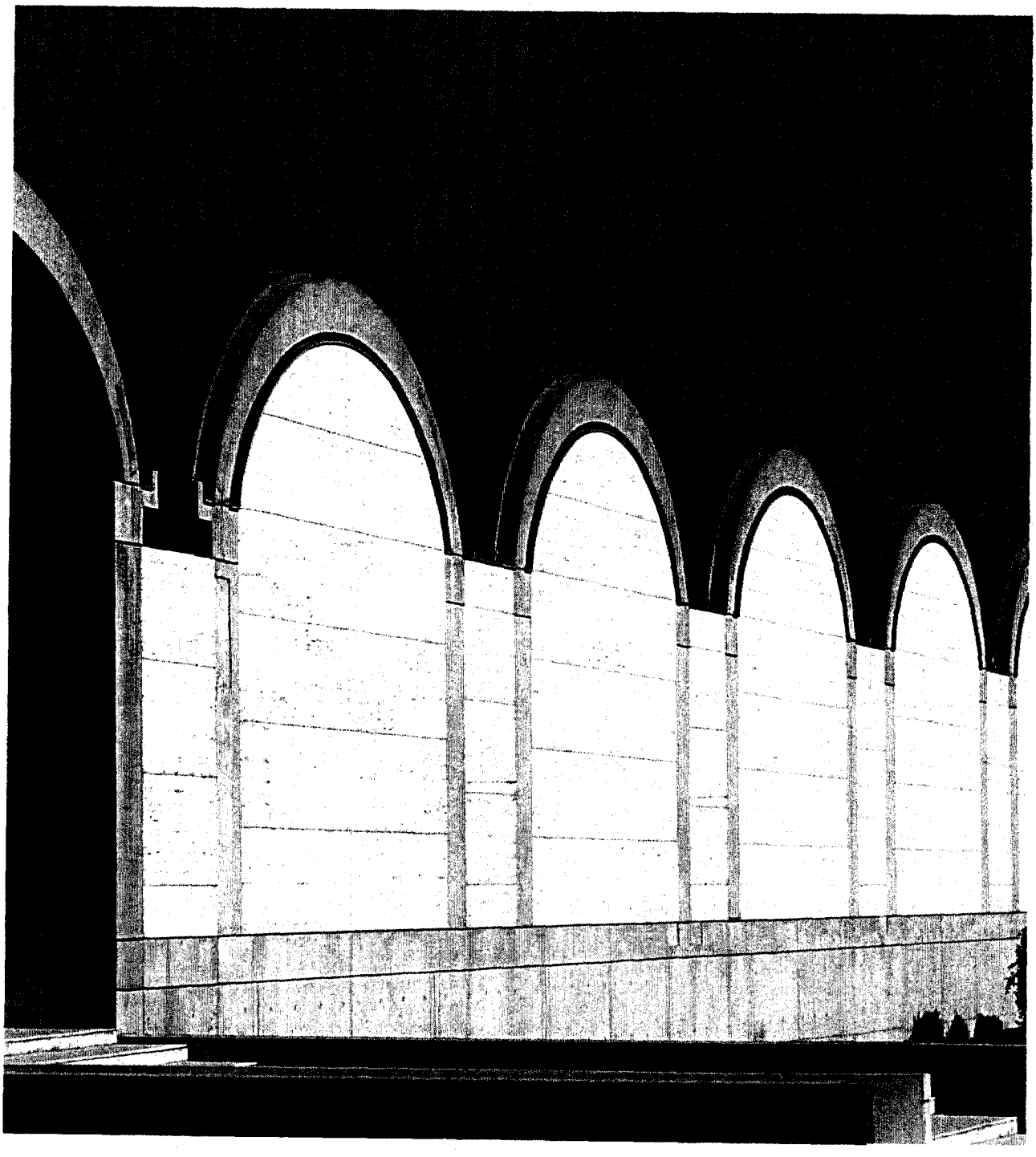
[83] Excerpted in Joan Ockman, "Lessons from Objects: Perriand from the Pioneer Years to the "Epoch of Realities," from Mary McLeod, ed., *Charlotte Perriand: An Art of Living* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003), p. 175.

[84] Rick Joy, from *Desert Works* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), p. 10. In the book's introduction, Juhani Pallasmaa writes, on p. 20: "Joy's ethical stance is firm: the task of architecture is not to entertain us, or to suffocate us with impressions of witty formal inventions, but to create the silence, calmness, and concentration that enable us to experience the beauty of the world and life around us."

[85] John Pawson, *Minimum* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), p. 13.

suddenly anointed with, at least, the illusion of dignity.



Kimbell Art Museum

Because in all the blunder and bluster of Texas about all the wrong things, one thing is really so. The sky. The sky in other places is like an inverted cup…with limits, like a painted room. Not in the Southwest. The sky is really millions and millions of miles deep of blue. Then swiftly, in a moment it seems, the steel clouds cover the sky, the wind comes. The tumbleweeds rush with it. And always there's the fearful wailing.

—John Rechy, *El Paso del Norte* (1963)

The Kimbell Art Museum in Ft. Worth, Texas is often cited as one of the most splendid public buildings in the United States. It is also regarded as a premier achievement of architect Louis Kahn, a giant in the field whose modest output was counterbalanced by a legacy of intense exactitude, attention to structural

detail, and keen intellectual and spiritual pursuit. The Kimbell – completed in 1972 and designed to house the private collection of Texas art patrons Kay and Velma Kimbell – is an intimately scaled and elegant outpost for painting, sculpture and other fine artifacts. That the structure itself has garnered avalanches of praise only serves to bolster the reputation of the museum as a revered destination for architecture as well as art. It is spoken of with the sort of murmured awe usually linked with cathedrals or graveyards, cloisters or temples, solemn settings rife with otherwordliness, or with peace. Architectural historian William Curtis grants the museum nothing less than "genuine poetic language," and lists the Kimbell as among the elite buildings of "the modern tradition" that possesses extraordinary depth and timelessness of character.[86] Meanwhile, echoing any number of his peers, contemporary British architect John Pawson describes the Kimbell thusly: "It creates the sense of silence on which contemplation depends."[87]

Indeed, Kahn's architectural tendencies are steeped in restive tranquility, in quiet deliberation, in a canny blend of the evocative and the abstract. His work

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[86] William J. R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, third edition, 1996), p. 402.
[87] John Pawson, *Minimum* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), p. 210.

is invariably associated with silence, and the Kimbell — one of the final projects in his lifetime — is especially so anointed. This may be due in part to Kahn's own aphoristic musings on the theme, which have been widely published, discussed and emulated. In the adulatory book *Between Silence and Light: Spirit in the Architecture of Louis I. Kahn*, John Lobell, a former student of Kahn's, presents a roundup of the architect's philosophies as delivered in lectures given late in his life. The section entitled "Silence and Light" is a virtual prose poem that spells out Kahn's personal definitions of these complementary terms, as follows: *silence* is the unmeasurable, shot with desire; *light* is the measurable, the promise of desire met, the giver of presence.[88] Together, these intangibles join at what Kahn calls the Treasury of the Shadow, where the artist's expression serves to emerge in luminous becoming. Or, as Kahn elaborates: "This prevailing luminous source can be visualized as becoming a wild dance of flame that settles and spends itself into material. Material, I believe, is spent Light."[89]

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[88] Louis I. Kahn, "Silence and Light," from John Lobell, *Between Silence and Light: Spirit in the Architecture of Louis I. Kahn* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1979), p. 20.
[89] Ibid.

Whereas some might find these utterances bordering on the nonsensical, others would locate a laudable yearning in Kahn's stabs at transcendent exposition. He seems in full sympathy with those practitioners and theorists, like Marco Frascari, who would define architecture's subterranean challenge as one of translating dreams into built form. Kahn's words are certainly drenched in the questing soulfulness for which he is renowned, and may have served to lend an aura of the metaphysical to his buildings. On the topic of silence, in particular, Kahn could be said to epitomize the impossibility of articulating *that which is felt* – experiences that are firmly grounded in the realm of the somatic. Call him an embodied paradox, a man who crafted what he could not explain.

Scholar Michael Benedikt would likely concur with this assessment. In a book-length essay aiming to deconstruct the Kimbell, he revisits Kahn's assertion, "I'd much rather write cryptic things, and then *do* something,"[90] and concludes that Kahn's buildings are themselves "cryptic things." For Benedikt, Kahn's architecture stands in place of an excess of commentary,

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[90] Louis Kahn, from R.S. Wurman, ed., *What Will Be Has Always Been: The Words of Louis I. Kahn* (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), p. 223, excerpted in Michael Benedikt, *Deconstructing the Kimbell: An Essay on Meaning and Architecture* (New York: SITES/Lumen Books, 1991), p. 91.

with no building "more cryptic than the Kimbell."[91] Indeed, for Kahn, reticence is a recurring motif. Elsewhere in *Between Silence and Light*, he suggests that "the poet" begins with the unmeasureable and moves towards the measurable (a breaking of silence), but "…he almost disdains to write a word. Although he desires not to say anything and still convey his poetry, at the last moment he must succumb to the word after all. But he has traveled a great distance before he uses any of the means, and when he does, it is just a smidgen and it is enough."[92]

It is enough. Transferred to the domain of architecture, one could detect here a manifesto for minimalism, an appreciation, at least, of Modern Movement pioneers who foregrounded function and defied the use of ornament as a superfluous indulgence. Alternatively, Kahn's "smidgen" may refer back even further to the controlled eloquence of architecture's classical language. His pithy authority is also evoked when he takes on *order* and realizes, after scribbling many passages on the damnable topic that, quite simply, *order is*. Kahn's contemplations are rife with such

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[91] Michael Benedikt, *Deconstructing the Kimbell: An Essay on Meaning and Architecture*, p. 91.

[92] Kahn, "Silence and Light," from Lobell, *Between Silence and Light: Spirit in the Architecture of Louis I. Kahn* p. 14.

gnomic moments; even when he is not pondering silence per se, he seems to be taking the (almost) silent path. It is a puzzle (and an entertainment) to savor these delicate riffs on the material arena of architecture, and to consider how Kahn parlayed his own "unmeasurables" – silence, desire – into the measurable edifices of his solid, built oeuvre.

In the case of the Kimbell, the quintessential form of the building is the barrel vault. Kahn's trademark, submerged Classicism is on display in the conjoined series of sixteen low-arched galleries that comprise the small museum. Massed in a tripartite arrangement of six, four and six vaults, connected by eight-foot service channels and oriented on a north-south axis, the concrete structures hug tightly to the earth, topped by lead-covered copper and supported by four columns each. The effect is at once somber and glorious, a declaration of earthy magnificence reminiscent of the stark beauty of ancient ruins. Here, Kahn has elongated and flattened the archetypal vault into a cycloid shape, but the primordial impact of the classic form is undiminished. Though a thoroughy inventive modern building, the Kimbell is infused with a sense of prehistoric intransigence, as if rooted in place, like a

sentry on the cusp of an unmapped frontier. Adding to this quality of preternatural grace is the pristine landscaping of the museum's west entrance, encompassing reflecting pools, fountains and an orderly forecourt of yaupon holly trees, which call to mind the enduring mysteries of a sacred grove.

The other distinguishing feature of the Kimbell Art Museum, along with the mesmerizing repetition of barrel vaults and the stunning garden entrance, is the breathtaking integration of natural light on the building's interior. This effect is achieved through overhead splits in each vault that function as a series of lean, continuous skylights, allowing washes of daylight to bounce off pierced aluminum reflectors and shimmer beneath the concrete ceilings. Each reflector is cut in the refined shape of an extended bird's wing, creating a delicate dance of illumination that, by many accounts, is unrivaled in the history of architecture. Moreover, glass-walled internal courtyards further enhance the quality and intensity of natural light within the museum, as do the unadorned yet handsomely finished surfaces of concrete, travertine and white oak paneling. Together, the low, embracing space of the galleries and the beautiful, diffused light creates a

sophisticated, serene setting for the contemplation of the Kimbell collection.

The client for the project, Richard F. Brown (the first director of the museum, appointed in 1965), was concerned with crafting a program that would be enveloping, warm and complementary to the Kimbell's moderate-sized artwork. In Louis Kahn, he found a like-minded architect who famously decried the fatigue induced by bombastic, gigantic museum exhibitions.[93] Indeed, the Kimbell is the opposite of the museum as oversized spectacle; it is small and seductive, a flawlessly integrated system of structure and illumination. The light inside the Kimbell is often said to exhibit the "luminosity of silver," a description first parlayed by Kahn himself during the design process.[94] This caressing phrase indicates a discreet, flattering softness of light far removed from the actual intensity of the scorching Texas sun. Indeed, the museum could be described as something of an oasis, a tony cultural enclave on the rugged, forbidding Western plain. In its heady manipulations of light, as

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[93] Kahn in 1967: "The first thing you want in most museums is a cup of coffee." From David B. Brownlee and David G. De Long, *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 130.

[94] Patricia Cummings Loud, from David B. Brownlee and David G. De Long, *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 516. She explains that Kahn inaugurated the idea at a talk in Boston in 1967, during which he expressed hope that visitors would experience the "comforting feeling of knowing the time of day."

in its husky yet elegant exterior forms, the museum projects a seemingly antithetical mix of the robust and the tender, a sleight of hand that points to Kahn's storied gift for melding the classical and the modern.

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Architectural historian Vincent Scully, perhaps the preeminent chronicler of the life and career of Louis Kahn, is the scholar who has most fully advanced this theory about Kahn's work. Writing, for example, about the architect's use of the barrel vault at the Kimbell Art Museum, Scully explains, "The Kimbell employs the Roman round-headed arch, but deformed so the ceilings would distribute indirect light better. The running arches of the porticos on the outside are actually very close to an element of Hadrian's villa. …Kahn is always close to his Romantic-Classic roots, to the ruin, deformed only a little."[95]

According to Scully, Kahn, who was educated at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1920s under Beaux-Arts master Paul Philippe Cret, allowed his classical training to re-emerge at midlife after suppressing such

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[95] Vincent Scully, from "Louis I. Kahn and the Ruins of Rome," in his *Modern Architecture and Other Essays*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 317.

tendencies as a young man during the rise of the International Style. This evolution purportedly followed a period of time Kahn spent overseas in the early 1950s. Kahn was a native of Estonia, and had emigrated to the United States with his family in 1906, at the age of five. After a diligent if unremarkable early career in architecture, Kahn traveled to Europe in 1950 for a residency at the American Academy in Rome, and then continued to wander extensively throughout the region to visit and document monumental ruins in Italy, Greece and Egypt. Scully deduces that, thereafter, Kahn allowed a "concealed" Classicism to emerge in his designs through axial composition and precise structural detailing, creating a delicious tension between the modern and the classical that opened revolutionary new avenues for architecture.

He compares Kahn to eighteenth-century predecessors Giovanni Battista Piranesi and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, declaring that, "Like those architects, and their many colleagues at the dawn of the modern age, Kahn wanted to begin architecture anew by concentrating upon the ruins of the ancient world and starting afresh from them."[96] Scully elaborates further, noting that Kahn took

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[96] Vincent Scully, from the "Introduction," David B. Brownlee and David G. De Long, *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991).

architecture beyond the conventions of the International Style to "a much solider Modernism, one in which the revival of the vernacular and classical traditions of architecture would eventually come to play a central role."[97] He calls Kahn a "hinge," that is, the mid-century American architect who opened the way for a full classical revival (and fresh advocacy for historic preservation), even though Kahn himself was a canonical modernist with no use for classical idioms in his own work.

Scully goes on to explain this apparent contradiction by arguing that Kahn was "primitively architectural, thus pre-pictorial."[98] In other words, Kahn was initiating modern architecture as it had been conceived of two centuries earlier, reliant on heavy, solid, geometric forms derived from structure; early twentieth-century architecture, on the other hand, such as the work of Gropius, Loos and Le Corbusier, had derived its characteristics from the pictorial freedoms associated with abstract painting. Kahn was determined to start anew, Scully insists, to lose and find his way, and thus he reinvented reality; he gave architecture more *presence* than anyone else of his era and, in the

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[97] Scully, *Modern Architecture and Other Essays*, p. 299.

[98] Scully, from the "Introduction," *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture*, p. 14.

process, redefined Modernism. For Scully, Kahn's buildings "shape spaces heavy with light like the first light ever loosed on the world, daggers of light, blossoms of light, suns and moons. They are silent, wholly devoid of gesture."[99]

Architectural historian Kenneth Frampton, by contrast, sees a "profound historicism" in Kahn's work, though he too credits the architect's stay at the American Academy in Rome as a turning point in his rediscovery of the past.[100] He also points to Kahn's earlier preoccupation with the radical (some would say mystical) leanings of functionalist innovator R. Buckminster Fuller as a pressing influence, and asserts that Kahn, ultimately, was the architect responsible for establishing monumentality as a cultural force in postwar America. Also citing Fuller's impact on Kahn, and casting doubt on the putative "epiphany" that Kahn was said to have experienced overseas, is writer Sarah Williams Goldhagen, whose 2001 book *Louis Kahn's Situated Modernism* brings a number of such Kahn-ian myths to light. Goldhagen writes, "The truth is that while Kahn was abroad, he principally explored abstraction and materiality, aesthetic issues that he

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[99] Ibid., p. 12.

[100] Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p. 242-46.

had started to examine several years earlier…. As in other periods, Kahn's artistic development in the early 1950s, like life itelf, was complex, fluid, and progressed only incrementally."[101]

Goldhagen insists on more layered interpretations of the architect's career, expressing skepticism about Kahn as the father (or instigating "hinge") of historicist postmodernism, or as a mystical figure with unique access to otherwordly wisdoms. She grants, however, his finesse with "elemental geometries,"[102] echoing Frampton's theory about Kahn and postwar monumentality. Meanwhile, another Kahn scholar, Joseph Rykwert of the University of Pennsylvania, brings a slightly different shading to the analysis of Kahn's formative experiences. While acknowledging the impact of Kahn's Beaux-Arts training, Rykwert describes the Parisian Cret, Kahn's teacher, as something of an iconoclast and a dissident, and says his instruction was devoid of the historicist imprimatur then de rigueur in American schools of architecture. Rykwert suggests that Kahn absorbed from his mentor, instead, a respect for "the virtues of the plan as a generating form" and for

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[101] Sarah Williams Goldhagen, , *Louis Kahn's Situated Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 3.
[102] Ibid., p. 2

"the power of proportion."[103] His concentration was thus attuned from the start to a rational or nearly scientific approach to program, as opposed to an emphasis on decorative or stylistic flourishes.

Rykwert also devotes more attention than other scholars to Kahn's deep ties to Philadelphia, his lifelong home, and to his collaborations with other architects and builders working there, including George Howe and William Lescaze (who designed the Pennsylvania Savings Fund Society skyscraper of 1932); the Swiss-trained architect Oscar Stonorov; the French engineer Robert Le Ricolais; architect Anne Tyng; and — as widely noted in most literature about Kahn, if often underplayed — his chief engineering consultant, August E. Komendant. Kahn's renown as a teacher (in the architecture programs at Penn and at Yale University) is also foregrounded by Rykwert, along with his ongoing involvement with city planning and housing concerns in Philadelphia. Concluding that Kahn's classicist inclinations were always subordinated, never explicit, he writes of Kahn: "His passionate concern with

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[103] Joseph Rykwert, from *Louis I. Kahn: The Construction of the Kimbell Art Museum* (Milan: Skira, 1999), p. 9.

materials, their nature and their use, became the touchstone of his theory and his teaching."[104]

If Kahn's relationship to historicism is variously interpreted, other aspects of his work are more routinely and consistently excavated, notably his eccentric penchant for asking architectural material to speak for itself – "What does the brick want to be?"[105] – and his dedication to the notion of what he called "served" and "servant" spaces. This concern is evident in Kahn's first major commission, the addition to the Yale University Art Gallery, a project he secured in 1951 shortly after his return from Europe (perhaps due in part to his association with George Howe, who had become chair of the Yale architecture department). The building faces the street with a clean, blank wall of brick and limestone, but just inside the entryway the orthogonal geometries are interrupted: the foyer exhibits a surprising concrete cylinder housing a triangular staircase, along with a comparably articulated rectangle that accommodates an elevator and other mechanical systems. Perhaps in a nod to Fuller, the ceilings reveal a span of reinforced concrete shaped into tetrahedons, another instance where the structural

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[104] Ibid., p. 11.

[105] Carter Wiseman, *Shaping a Nation* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), p. 206.

aspects of the building are left unconcealed. In this gallery project, Kahn is already working with intense sculptural precision to delineate the so-called served and servant spaces, that is, to isolate and expose the manner in which a building is put (and stays) together.

His devotion to the concept comes to further fruition in the Richards Medical Research Buildings at the University of Pennsylvania (1957-61), the commission that finally secured Kahn an international reputation. Though later revealed to be a frustrating complex of buildings, inadequate to its multiple tasks, the laboratories nonetheless present a soaringly cogent organization of formal devices that cleanly convey Kahn's mastery of servicing and structure. They also display a skillful integration of brick and precast concrete, adroitly reflecting a sensation of antiquity. Architectural historian Carter Wiseman summarizes the accomplishment succinctly: "Kahn created a building that remains convincing to one's understanding of structure, but beautiful to look at as well."[106] This crisp praise would recur to describe Kahn's subsequent achievements as well, notably the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California (1959-65) and

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[106] Ibid., p. 208.

the National Assembly Building in Dhaka, Bangladesh (1962-83).

In an intriguing side note, Louis Kahn's son, Nathaniel Kahn, recently illuminated a heretofore underexamined perspective on the architect's body of work. Nathaniel, whose autobiographical film about his father, *My Architect*, was released to wide acclaim in 2003, traveled around the world to research his personal documentary. During his extended journeys, he visited many of his father's monumental constructs of concrete and stone, including those in California, New England, Bangladesh and elsewhere. Yet it was a trip to the urban core of Philadelphia – where Louis Kahn grew up – that especially grabbed Nathaniel's attention. His father's neighborhood, called Northern Liberties, is a dense zone just north of downtown comprised of narrow alleys and zigzagging streets, with a number of imposing, red brick factory buildings. As reported by critic Paul Goldberger, it became clear to the filmmaker that "the roots of Kahn's style are not in Rome but much closer to home."[107] The factories of Northern Liberties boast facades of sturdy brick, open loggias, big square windows, concrete lintels, sliced-off corners – in

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[107] Paul Goldberger, "Many Mansions," *The New Yorker*, November 12, 2001, p. 130.

short, compositions of "light and shadow, solid and void" that would mark Kahn's architectural preoccupations all his life.[108] The proud, lonely temple for which Kahn would become legendary is captured on film by Nathaniel Kahn in its prototypical form, right in the old neighborhood.

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The Kimbell Art Museum was completed and opened to the public in 1972, just two years before Kahn's death at the age of 73. The project, about eight years in the making, could be seen as a culmination of the architect's spare but incandescent life's work. "This is a contemporary monument," contends Pawson, the British architect, "one whose monumentality comes from the clarity with which its structure is given aesthetic expression."[109] For his part, Benedikt calls the Kimbell a landmark work with a "boldness and economy of formal invention that we have yet to appreciate fully."[110] If the quality of a boutique museum resides in the reciprocity between the building and the art it is

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[108] Ibid.

[109] Pawson, *Minimum*, p. 71.

[110] Benedikt, p. 57.

emboldened to showcase, then the Kimbell is indeed a resounding triumph. At the same time, it raises questions about contextuality that would more fully flower in the coming decades, in emerging discussions of what would later become known as Critical Regionalism.[111] Then too, the Kimbell, like the entirety of Kahn's built legacy, continues to stimulate contradictory commentary about Modernism's impact on twentieth-century America. As Goldhagen insists, regarding Kahn, "His work presents less the peaceful resolve of Beaux-Arts neoclassicism than the tensions, irresolutions, and dynamism of modern architecture and modern art."[112]

The Kimbell occupies 120,000 square feet and rests on 9.5 acres of land about two miles from downtown Ft. Worth. The site is gently sloping and in the difficult shape of a trapezoid, yet the museum trumps its awkward boundaries and quasi-suburban setting with the exquisite force of Kahn's formmaking. Both the aforementioned formal gardens and the structure's abstracted, "primitive" geometries serve to elevate the Kimbell to

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[111] The term "Critical Regionalism" was coined by architects Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre in the early 1980s and soon popularized by Kenneth Frampton, who wrote a series of essays in which he outlined and refined a theory of dual mediation against the cold dictates of homogenization and the easy comfort of local vernacularism. See "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p. 314.

[112] Goldhagen, p. 199.

what some would call exemplar status as a building representative of its late modern era. The museum also cannily adapts to the earth's slope, creating a careful harmony of ground floor galleries with a terraced floor below to accommodate parking lot access and administrative servies. But even Scully, Kahn's great champion, acknowledges that the Kimbell – and Kahn's work in general – is insufficiently attentive to its context, prioritizing tectonic expression and the taut deployment of volume and mass over concern with regional specificities.

Scully is not particularly bothered by this, claiming that the museum in Texas has settled into a "permanent repose," and raving further that it is "all solemn assemblage of materials and silent joints, everything at once obsessively perfect and just at the edge of savage crudeness."[113] Still, the Kimbell's apparent indifference to its surrounding milieu (paradoxical, given the eloquent accomplishment of the west courtyard and garden expanse) suggests other facets of a building's engagement with *silence*. Whereas the Kimbell's absence of decorative surfaces is often cited to define its heroic rectitude, others would target the

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[113] Scully, *Modern Architecture and Other Essays*, p. 257.

museum's fascinating inconsistencies to explain its stoic, enduring power. Benedikt, for example, enumerates the elegant juxtapositions at play in the museum, such as the contrast between the light and empty vaults and the dark and dense grove of hollies. He also compares the modular repetition of the building vaults with similarly recurring motifs in factories, warehouses and grain silos, what he calls architecture's most "pragmatic genres."[114] Likewise, the museum has been lauded for its deeply enigmatic command of threshold and margin, of interior and exterior, throwing a wrench into the alleged simplicity of its iteration. In other words, it may not be the Kimbell's *lack* of ornamentation that renders it mysterious (i.e., silent), but the presence of an unusually rich array of insinuations and primal allusions. (And thereby, arguably, the building may not be a-contextual at all.)

Louis Kahn once stated that "the essence of silence is commonness."[115] He was also prone to using the word *natural* to describe his approach to materials and workmanship, belying the advances in construction technology that allow for such building components as leaded shell roofs, brushed aluminum, creamy travertine,

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[114] Benedikt, p. 57.

[115] Kahn, from Lobell, *Between Silence and Light: Spirit in the Architecture of Louis I. Kahn*, p. 26.

quarter-sawn white oak and, indeed, the post-tensioned concrete vaulting that secures the Kimbell's fabled, attenuated skylights. This is not to suggest that the architect was dissembling, but that, as scholar David B. Brownlee writes, "Kahn was willing to obscure the real complexity of a structure for the sake of visual clarity."[116] The sophistication of form and craft lends the Kimbell an awe-inducing majesty, and has earned Kahn rapturous notice for his wonderfully elemental approach to architecture (the historian Curtis calls him "a sentinel of ancient sense and principle"[117]). But Kahn could also be honored for preserving the mysteries of the discipline, for maintaining such dignified restraint. The Kimbell Art Museum, for all its bold simplicity, is as intensely – and archetypically – unknowable as any construct poured of concrete, determination and love.

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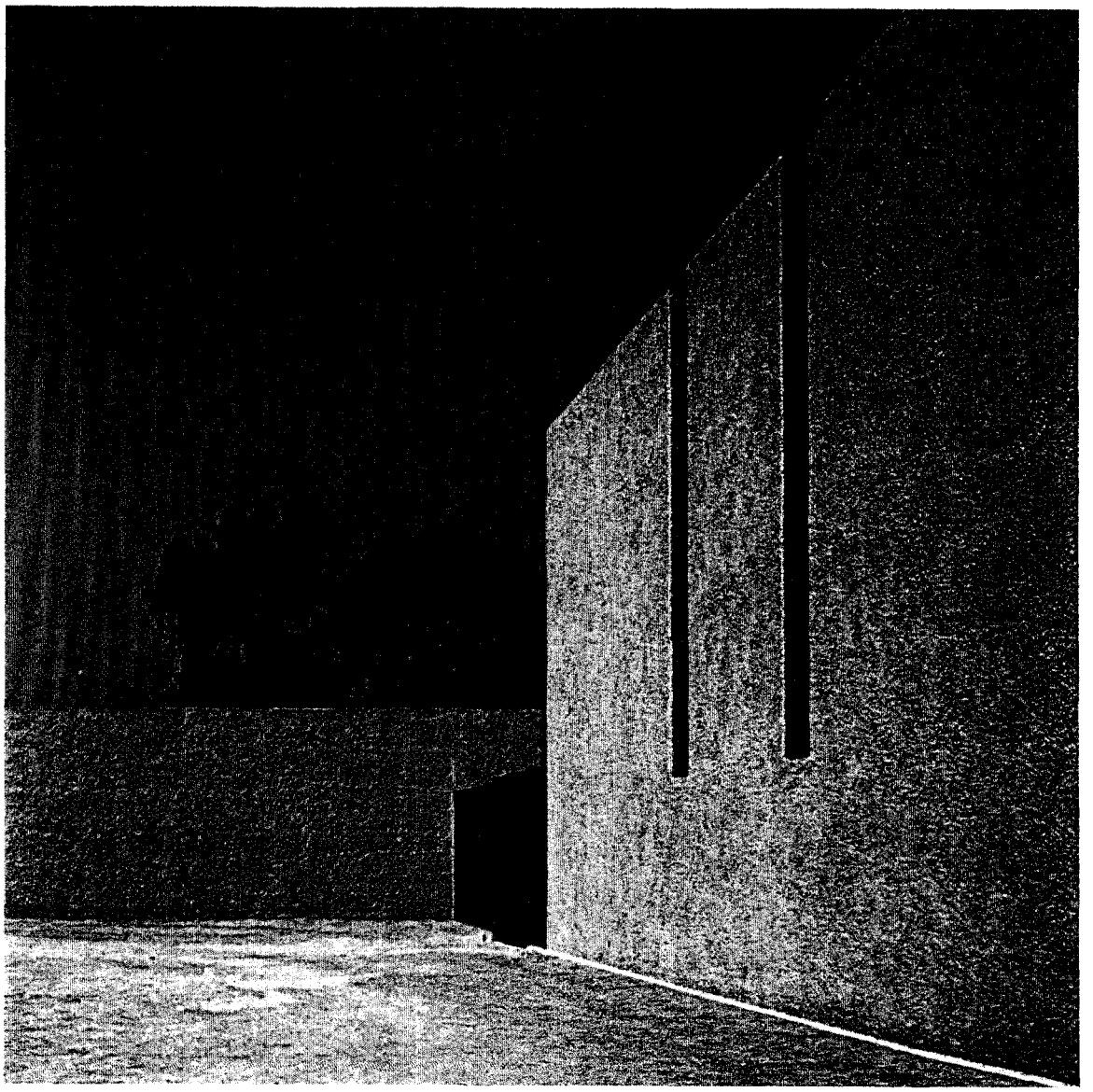
[116] David B. Brownlee, *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture*, p. 132.
[117] Curtis, p. 350.



San Cristobal Stables

[It is] architecture that envelops us like a physical presence, simple and dense, defying description, imitation and photography…. Someone guides us through its spaces. We glide along. Talking seems superfluous; everything is unique, yet never demanding. The light is relaxing, or ecstatic. And the colour? It matches the variable state of the Soul.

—Alvaro Siza, *Oporto* (1994)

Mexican architect Luis Barragan was an enigmatic, solitary figure with a cool command of minimalism when tapped to design an equestrian riding complex for the Folke Egerstrom household in Los Clubes, a verdant neighborhood on the northern outskirts of Mexico City. Dubbed the San Cristobal ranch, this breeding facility for thoroughbred horses was completed in 1968 and

features generous stables adjacent to the main residence, along with a spacious courtyard, training track, fresh-water pools, troughs and gardens, all delineated by rough-stuccoed walls in vivid hues of pink, purple, russet and mauve. A site of almost archaic tranquility, the complex has since been pegged as an especially fine example of Barragan's "poetry of sparseness,"[118] an architecture comprised of lucid geometries and radiant color, the still life of walls, the tough, gorgeous interplay of shadow and sunlight, and the caressing pleasures of silence. At San Cristobal, the racehorses are the central players in a drama of sumptuous, pastoral retreat. They inhabit a space at once rugged and luxuriant, an indoor/outdoor spread that embodies Barragan's distinct flair for melding Modern Movement abstraction with the vernacular building traditions of Mexico's multifaceted past.

Indeed, Barragan is widely seen as the most important figure in the history of Mexican architecture, as well as an enduring role model for current practitioners devoted to exploring form, opacity, regional identity and contextual reinterpretations of the International Style (including such established

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[118] Peter Gossel and Gabriele Leuthauser, *Architecture in the Twentieth Century* (Koln: Taschen, 2001), p. 310.

Mexican architects as Ricardo Legorreta, Enrique Norten and Bernardo Gomez-Pimienta). A younger protégé, Juan Pablo Serrano of Mexico City, explains that Barragan "synthesized the bright colors of Mexican vernacular architecture with the simple geometry of Modern architecture."[119] He contends that all working architects in Mexico start with Barragan, who inspired a revival of interest in the country's architectural and cultural heritage, with its uniquely textured layering of many different civilizations. This renewed appreciation is understood to include a keen feel for the subtle power of garden architectures, another forte of Barragan's. He is renowned for striking a brilliant balance between nature and architecture, for crafting spaces of understatement, interiority and exile, for creating peaceful unions of earth, sky and wall that some describe as nothing less than mystical.

Other scholars, meanwhile, are careful to grant Barragan a more complex breadth of vision, and a less tidily encapsulated legacy. For example, architectural historian William Curtis writes, "To speak merely of the fusion of regionalism and the International Style, of the vernacular and the modern, is to trivialize

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[119] Juan Pablo Serrano, in Cathryn Drake, "Common Walls Make Good Neighbors," *Metropolis*, October 2003, p. 73.

Barragan: his style expressed a genuinely archetypal mood in touch with the tragic vein in Mexican cultural history."[120] Curtis seems attuned to Barragan's purported reserve – his tendency to sidestep easy description or analysis of his projects, preferring instead to grant the work its own quiet, visceral force. Many powerhouse international architects – Japan's Tadao Ando among them – offer comparable accounts of Barragan's storied elusiveness, but also of his refinement, artistry and devotion to beauty and silence as profound, integral elements in his work. Contemporary architect Carlos Jimenez, originally from Costa Rica, also raises the specter of complexity (and mystery) in Barragan's architecture when he writes: "The work reveals the power of its emotive manifesto: a poetic interlude between the inevitability of space and the wonder of nature."[121] He is impressed, he says, by the nakedness of the architect's work and by its simultaneous evocation of the intimate and the universal.

That dual mastery, Barragan's finesse at devising built environments of both personal and global resonance, is generally thought to have its roots in his

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[120] William J. R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, third edition, 1996), p. 333.

[121] Carlos Jimenez, in Susan Gray, ed., *Architects on Architects* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), p. 85.

travels to the Mediterranean and to Spain, especially the Andalusian landscape around Granada and Seville. As a young man on an extended European tour in 1924-26, fresh from completing his engineering studies in Guadalajara, Mexico, Barragan was reportedly most awed by a visit to the Alhambra, the sweeping citadel and palace compound constructed in Granada in the twelfth and thirteen centuries.

There, according to Curtis, the fledgling architect "was captivated by the water-gardens with their dreamlike vistas, shifting axes and surreal atmosphere."[122] Yet Barragan's subsequent adaptation of Islamic/Moorish effects – the serenity of enclosed courtyards, the gentle sounds of running water, the secret loveliness of plants – was joined by his fascination with avant-garde art and architecture of the early-twentieth century, notably the work of Le Corbusier and the paintings de Chirico, Magritte and Orozco. He was also affected by a wide variety of literature, including the books of French landscape architect Ferdinand Bac, early texts from Le Corbusier, publications on the dwellings of North Africa, and the writing of, among others, Federico Garcia Lorca,

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[122] Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, p. 333.

Baudelaire and Barragan's peer, the Mexican poet Octavio Paz.[123]

It could be said that Barragan's disparate influences, from the stark, ancient shapes of Spanish Colonial convents to the machine-age imagery of early Modernism, from the still bounty of Islamic garden courtyards to the metaphysical tinge of European surrealism, lent his life's work a radical multiplicity at once lush and austere, spontaneous and languid, and forever drenched in *presence*. "Barragan was secure enough as an artist," writes architecture critic Martin Filler, "to rely on the enduring power of walls, the powerful effects of deeply saturated color, and the certainty of age-old construction techniques, allowing himself to concentrate his mental energies on the subtleties, the very heart of the minimalist mystery."[124]

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Luis Barragan was born in 1902 to a well-to-do family in Guadalajara, then a parochial, modest-sized

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[123] Spanish scholar Marco De Michelis characterizes Barragan's eclectic education, fondly, as brimming with a "motley accumulation of experiences." From "The Origins of Modernism: Luis Barragan, the Formative Years," in Federica Zanco, ed., *Luis Barragan: The Quiet Revolution* (Milan: Skira, Barragan Foundation, 2001), p. 46.

[124] Martin Filler, "More or Less: Tate Modern and the Crisis of Minimalism," *The New Republic*, June 19, 2000, TNR online, p. 7.

town far removed from the noisy cosmopolitanism of Mexico City. His childhood included long stays at the family ranch to the south, in Mazamitla, Jalisco, and an accompanying passion for the equestrian life and the natural landscapes that define it. He trained as an engineer at the local Escuela Libre de Ingeniera and, upon his return from Europe in the late 1920s, evolved into what some have called one of the last of the "gentleman-architects." In other words, he was a largely self-taught practitioner (and intellectual) originally called upon to design and maintain bourgeois residences and rural retreats for his family, as well as for other mostly wealthy associates.

He also became involved early on in land speculation and community development in Guadalajara and the neighboring region, working for both private clients and civic groups. In an essay for the 2001 anthology *Luis Barragan: The Quiet Revolution*, historian and critic Kenneth Frampton points to the significance of the dual forces at work in Barragan's architecture. "Perhaps more than any other figure of his generation," Frampton writes, "Barragan seems to have been consciously suspended between two worlds: on the one hand, a secular technological modernity whose presence

as a universal impulse he did not deny; on the other, his memory of his youth as a scion of a land-owning family in the mountains of southern Jalisco."[125] Barragan himself would later aver as much, claiming he hoped to "adapt to the needs of modern living the magic of those remote nostaglic years."[126] He was aiming, perhaps, to honor memories of a Mexico that was fast vanishing in the twentieth century – a place of open countryside and freedom and resplendent color, of sensuality and sunlight and sleepy haciendas, a native land of vast and fertile resources that resided in Barragan's consciousness at least, whether it had ever really existed at all.

After further travels in the United States and abroad, Barragan moved to Mexico City in 1935, a shift that expanded the scope of his practice and led to the new challenge of realizing park and landscape designs within the context of a pulsing, dense metropolis. Later, he would also work as a planner and consultant

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[125] Kenneth Frampton, "Apropos Barragan: Formation, Critique and Influence," from Federica Zanco, ed., *Luis Barragan: The Quiet Revolution* (Milan: Skira, Barragan Foundation, 2001), p. 18.

[126] Luis Barragan in conversation with Emilio Ambasz, in *The Architecture of Luis Barragan* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1976), p. 9. Ambasz, the scholar who first brought international attention to Barragan's work, suggests that the architect indeed succeeded in his efforts. About San Cristobal, Ambasz writes (p. 91): "With extraordinary discipline and very few architectural elements [Barragan] has recreated a micro-model of the *pueblos* he knew as a child: the house, the plaza, the horses, the friendly trees, and the water…. Like Borges, Barragan is the author of one archetypal story inexhaustibly reformulated."

for the Las Arboledas subdivision of the city. A key player in Barragan's maturation as an architect and urbanist was the German artist Mathias Goeritz, whom Barragan met in 1949; the two became frequent collaborators on projects in Mexico City, including the much-studied garden and residential settlement (dubbed "a conceptual paradise"[127]) in the neighborhood of El Pedregal. Goeritz's large-scale, abstract sculptures lent substance and dramatic expression to Barragan's equally bold constructs, solidifying a notion that Goeritz referred to as "emotional architecture."[128] Barragan soon adopted the phrase as well, a shorthand term tossed off to capture something that was, in actuality, far more complex.

It has been suggested that Barragan was interrogating Modernism throughout his early career, that is, engaging in a critical practice in a country he determinedly regarded as avant-garde. (Hence, his insistence on remaining rigorously abstract, even while incorporating elements reflective of indigenous Mexico and its spiritual-mystical Roman Catholic ambience.) Yet Barragan was unknown on the international stage –

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[127] Keith L. Eggener, "Barragan's 'Photographic Architecture': Image, Advertising and Memory," from Federica Zanco, ed., *Luis Barragan: The Quiet Revolution* (Milan: Skira, Barragan Foundation, 2001), p. 192.

[128] Frampton, "Apropos Barragan: Formation, Critique and Influence," from Federica Zanco, ed., *Luis Barragan: The Quiet Revolution*, p. 18.

and largely dismissed on the homefront – when commissioned to design the San Cristobal riding stables in 1966. A full decade would pass before he became a sensation, first in the wake of an exhibition of his work at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1976[129] and then, four years later, when he was awarded the 1980 Pritzker Prize. Barragan was an instant smash, suddenly beloved for the "poetic imagination" and "haunting beauty" of his architecture, revealed to the Pritzker jury – and most everyone else in the architectural community – through stunning, enchantingly suggestive photographs. His work was applauded for its very *Mexicanness* or, at least, for appearing in that light to observers from Europe, Japan and the United States.

According to scholar Keith L. Eggener, Barragan may be uniquely positioned as the one major modern architect whose ouevre is primarily known through the photographic images of a single interpreter, in this case, Armando Salas Portugal. Barragan met the young chemist and amateur photographer in 1944 when Salas Portugal exhibited a small collection of photographs of the Pedregal lava fields south of Mexico City, soon to become the site of Barragan's celebrated garden-

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[129] Emilio Ambasz's book, *The Architecture of Luis Barragan,* accompanied the show and further publicized the architect's career and accomplishments.

residential project; the two subsequently worked together for virtually the rest of their lives. In 1976, Barragan's breakthrough show at MoMA consisted almost entirely of Salas Portugal's photographs projected on a screen and accompanied by poetic, ambiguous narration; critics raved about Barragan's work as if it were a piece of theater or performance art. The Priztker jury, also, responded glowingly to the architect's accomplishments based on the evidence of Salas Portugal's lyrical, abstract compositions. His photographs are minimalist shots of walls, gates, rocks, water, fountains, foliage and sky, images that beautifully complement Barragan's own evocatively wrought simplicity.

While Eggener suggests that the merging of architectural and photographic sensibilities was not uncommon among twentieth-century modernists (he cites, in particular, Richard Neutra's longstanding association with photographer Julius Shulman), he contends that Barragan's situation is especially noteworthy in that most of his built work is located in Mexico City and Guadalajara, away from the centers of Western architectural criticism and publishing and hence less likely to be seen by the cognoscenti. Furthermore, he

says Barragan's post-Priztker reputation, however stellar, often carries a hint of objectification along with it, a stamp of exoticism and supposed "timelessness" that leans heavily on imagined ideas about the passions embedded in Mexico's religious and cultural history – again, ideas that found (and continue to gather) a wide audience through the alluring photographs of Salas Portugal.[130]

Although a fuller discussion of the relationship between photography and architecture is beyond the scope of this project, it bears mention here in light of Barragan's own poignant views on nostalgia. He was reportedly an admirer of that other famous recluse, Marcel Proust, and, like the author of *Remembrance of Things Past*, believed that "the elusive flavour of experience was best tasted in recollection."[131] Barragan's collaborator Goeritz suggested after Barragan's death that the architect designed and built with an acceptance of ephemerality, the notion that decay and disintegration were inevitable; therefore, he valued photography as a conduit for memory, a means through which to access the fleeting beauty of dreams

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[130] Eggener, "Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism," *Journal of Architectural Education*, 55/4 (May 2002), p. 230-31.

[131] Reported by Eggener in "Barragan's 'Photographic Architecture': Image, Advertising and Memory," from Federica Zanco, ed., *Luis Barragan: The Quiet Revolution*, p. 193.

and faded visions. Eggener writes, achingly, and with an edge of bittersweetness, about Barragan's work: "Its peculiar poetry resonates most forcefully from those features that can be seen but not touched."[132] For his part, the architectural historian Curtis says of Barragan's garden hideaways that they are "labyrinths of curiously nostalgic character."[133] Barragan himself would likely find solace in such sentiments, in the idea of nostalgia as a confirmation of continuity, a seamless, sometimes private reminder of the depth of lived experience. And he may have concurred with contemporary artist Diane Sylvain, who comments in reference to her own paintings of the changing American West: "I was born nostalgic, I think, haunted by time and the movement of shadows; I miss things before they even have a chance to disappear."[134]

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Barragan's devotion to the misty realm of memories and dreams is consistent with reports of his deeply introspective bearing. In architectonic terms, it means

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[132] Ibid.

[133] Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, p. 333.

[134] Diane Sylvain, "Seeing the Mysterious in the Everyday," *High Country News*, June 9, 2003, P. 14.

he was strongly reliant on the wall as a delineating form, especially in his more fully realized, postwar work. Indeed, his later buildings are characterized by brilliantly pigmented slabs of rough stucco that serve to define, separate and dignify space, with a monastic, intoxicating interiority.[135] Barragan was certainly critiquing a Modern Movement shibboleth when he announced in the 1976 catalogue for his MoMA exhibition that, "Any work of architecture which does not express serenity is a mistake. That is why it has been an error to replace the protection of walls with today's intemperate use of enormous glass windows."[136] He was also revealing a longstanding kinship with his contemporary Louis Kahn, with whom he met in the 1960s to discuss plans for the central court of the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California.[137]

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[135] Arguably, vivid color can deeply affect one's emotionally charged, inner experiences (as opposed to simply creating loud, external effects). As novelist Virginia Woolf notes, "It must be remembered that when bright colors mix themselves in our eyes, some of it rubs off on our thoughts." From *Orlando*, 1928 (London: Virago Press, 1993), p. 169. Excerpted from Marc Treib's discussion of color in Le Corbusier's Philips Pavilion (Belgium; 1958) in *Space Calculated in Seconds* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 167.

[136] Reported by Peter Gossel and Gabriele Leuthauser, *Architecture in the Twentieth Century*, p. 310.

[137] It is uncertain if Barragan actually contributed to the design of the Salk courtyard; no such documentation has been found. It is believed, however, that Barragan inspired Kahn's solution when he advised: "Don't put one leaf, nor plant, nor one flower, nor dirt. Absolutely nothing…." From Richard Saul Wurman, ed., *What Will Be Has Always Been: The Words of Louis I. Kahn* (New York: Access Press and Rizzoli, 1986), p. 268-69.

Kahn also visited Barragan in Mexico around that time, and, upon seeing some of Barragan's gardens and buildings, announced: "The wall has become the horizon/ To honour the sky so that it may be seen."[138] It seems Kahn recognized Barragan's extraordinary gift for creating wall planes that serve not only as barriers for security, but as built totems that welcome and disclose the majesty of the natural environment. Interestingly, Barragan was also acquainted with – and extremely moved by – architect Richard Neutra, who was equally respectful in turn of his slightly younger colleague. Neutra, too, had traveled to Mexico, the first time in 1937, and Barragan subsequently made numerous trips to Los Angeles and Palm Springs to see Neutra's pioneering "California Modern" buildings, which left a tremendously vital impression.

The two architects split, however, over the matter of glazing: though Barragan *did* on occasion employ large surfaces of glass, they were generally occluded by deep overhangs and never used for front elevations. It has been suggested that Barragan's real debt to Neutra involves the latter's formal command of interlocking geometries and mastery at extruding wall planes into

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[138] Louis Kahn, from Richard Ingersoll, "In the Shadows of Barragan," in Federica Zanco, ed., *Luis Barragan: The Quiet Revolution*, p. 220.

landscape. And indeed, these touches – along with the use of flat-headed openings to frame garden entrances, inner courtyards enclosed by high parapets, and the blurring of interior and exterior space – are combined to dramatic effect at the San Cristobal stables.

The complex in Los Clubes is a prime instance where Barragan merges tradition and innovation. This blend is most clearly represented by the union of earthy equestrian spaces with the modest but thoroughly modern house for client Folke Egerstrom, a split-level cubic structure all in white, which anchors the southern perimeter of the compound. The house and stables are immediately adjacent to one another, yet the Egerstroms' love of horses is apparent in the program's overall privileging of the equine realm. The montage of colorful, stately garden enclosures and accompanying water baths, troughs and fountains is just to the north of the house, and designed to accommodate the resident thoroughbreds. The stables and practice track fill in the northern reaches of the property. This seven-acre site on a rectangular plot is a veritable symphony of sights, sounds and smells, at once complex in arrangement yet simple architecturally, that is, comprised largely of high stucco-on-masonry walls with

cutaways strategically placed to conceal (and reveal) the various functions of the ranch. The built forms of San Cristobal are offset by mirroring expanses of water, clear streams that lap, leap, spill and fall from fountain to pool to trough. The heady perfume of eucalyptus, horses and saddle leather, and the gentle sounds of wandering game birds and wild turkeys, adds to the overall effect.

Moving throughout the complex, from the closed, understated modernity of the Egerstrom residence to the open, sun-dappled collage of landscaped gardens is said to evince a harmonious mood of border-crossing from the built to the natural world, a sensation of entering what Mexican architect Antonio Fernandez Alba calls "mortared labyrinths of pleasing textures and order, through whose perspective we discover space."[139] According to Fernandez Alba, Barragan was – like Louis Kahn – beholden to the power of materials and supremely talented at unconcealing elemental "truths" from simple masonry and wood, and elegantly proportioned forms.

At San Cristobal, to cite one specific example, the large, crystalline central pool is backed by a solid pink wall with two slits that emphasize its scale and

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[139] Antonio Fernandez Alba, "Postscript: Shaded Walls," from Paul Rispa, ed., *Barragan: The Complete Works* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), p. 39.

expose the enclosed barn behind it; just to the east, a lower wall stained in deep scarlet hugs the courtyard and provides parallel openings that allow the horses to mosey to and fro, like actors on an exquisite stage set. All around, native flora provides shade, contrasting color and privacy, as well as a relaxed ambience amidst the almost ritualistic parade of horses and riders. Fernandez Alba calls this a "space where solitude dwells," and says of Barragan's buildings, with rather unabashed exuberance, "Their message is contained in their very construction and is legible only to the gaze as innocent as the intuitive sensibility that created them."[140]

Barragan's success at San Cristobal may be due in part to his lifelong interest in horses; he was a friend of the Egerstroms, and stabled his own thoroughbred at the ranch. Reportedly, Barragan considered horses superior to human beings. He was also notoriously quiet and contemplative, well-suited, it seems, for crafting secluded compounds for the appreciation of animals and the enjoyment of solitary pleasures. Scholar Richard Ingersoll has visited San Cristobal, which remains an operating horse farm still owned by the Egerstrom

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[140] Ibid., p. 40

family, and describes the compound as a serene and enveloping paradise where time seems on hold – a spot of exile far removed, he notes sardonically, from the frantic chaos of sprawling Mexico City with its 25 million people, located just on the edge of the ranch.

Throughout his life, Barragan sketched dozens of images of horses. While the equestrian mindset denotes a closed community of affluence and aristocratic ideals, it could also be seen, according to Ingersoll, as a clue to the architect's subconscious; it suggests a condition of liminality that positions Barragan – like a rider on horseback caught in mid-leap – between traditionalist and modernist modes. In other words, Barragan's affinity with horses went beyond the confines of social privilege and connection, and fueled his solemn, continuing attempts to grapple with architecture, heritage and landscape. "The sport was a discipline for both animal and rider," Ingersoll summarizes, "reflecting an equilibrium between dominating nature and collaborating with it."[141]

Barragan's own thoughts on the matter are largely unrecorded. Critics and observers have busily filled the void by tagging the architect as "intuitive" and

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[141] Ingersoll, "In the Shadows of Barragan," from Federica Zanco, ed., *Luis Barragan: The Quiet Revolution*, p. 209.

"magical," and by remarking upon his evasiveness and lack of rhetorical flamboyance. Indeed, Barragan is one of architecture's taciturn heroes, about as diffident and secretive as they come. Fernandez Alba writes, "His verbal silences mirrored the bastions of architecture he built in the face of the frenetic destruction of Mexico's urban spaces."[142] His sturdy stuccoed ramparts and tall, imposing walls could certainly be read in that manner – as architectural gestures of silence, and of rescue. Their opacity connotes a refusal, a turning inward, a posture of retreat, even as their spectacular colors invite a rapturous communion with the sensual world. The walls *do* create silence, insist writers Francesco Dal Co and Juan Jose Lahuerta, in their introduction to the 1996 book *Luis Barragan: Mexico's Modern Master.* By their reckoning, Barragan's walls isolate space in order to await memory and invite chance, to honor "the deepest and most precious silence of nature."[143]

Barragan reportedly shunned all architectural theory and rarely agreed to speak in public. He would regularly mimic his close friend and collaborator, the

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[142] Fernandez Alba, "Postscript: Shaded Walls," from Paul Rispa, ed., *Barragan: The Complete Works*, p. 38.

[143] Francesco Dal Co and Juan Jose Lahuerta, from the Introduction, Antonio Riggen Martinez, *Luis Barragan: Mexico's Modern Master, 1902-1988* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1996), p. 11.

eccentric Mexican folk artist Chucho Reyes, as follows: when asked what he thought was beautiful, Barragan would answer "what I like," and when asked what he liked, he would reply "what is beautiful."[144] Nonetheless, Barragan was a bit more forthcoming when he addressed those gathered in New York for the official 1980 Priztker Prize award ceremony, though even then he wove an aura of fanciful lyricism into his comments. After citing the concepts of serenity, silence, intimacy and amazement as his "guiding lights," Barragan offered this further observation about *silence*: "In the gardens and homes I have designed I have always tried to allow for the interior placid murmur of silence, and in my fountains, silence sings."[145]

At the San Cristobal stables it seems that all the contradictions and dodges that mark Barragan's work come into synchronous play. Despite the piquant noises that emerge from the workaday goings-on at the ranch, the clomp of horses' hooves, the whistling of birds, the spill and swirl of fountains and baths, there is at the same time, apparently, a palpable absence of

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[144] Ingersoll, "In the Shadows of Barragan," from Federica Zanco, ed., *Luis Barragan: The Quiet Revolution*, p. 224.
[145] Luis Barragan, from "Other Works and Projects," Paul Rispa, ed., *Barragan: The Complete Works*, p. 204-5.

tumultuousness, a seriously guarded silence. An atmosphere of peace and repose, and of dignity.

Barragan is said to have perfected the art of waiting; he was an advocate of *idleness* as a necessary pathway for imagination, as a transcendent idyll of anticipation, and this faith in the potency of unhurried time is embodied in his best creations. For Barragan, time is beauty's ally. The architect Carlos Jimenez writes of Barragan's work, "As if in a prolonged pause, nature is discovered anew through the weight of its choreographed splendor."[146] Barragan may indeed have blended modern abstraction and Mexican idiosyncrasy with unparalleled grace; in this manner, San Cristobal stands poised and still, a site of suspended revery, at once breathtaking and infinitely melancholy.

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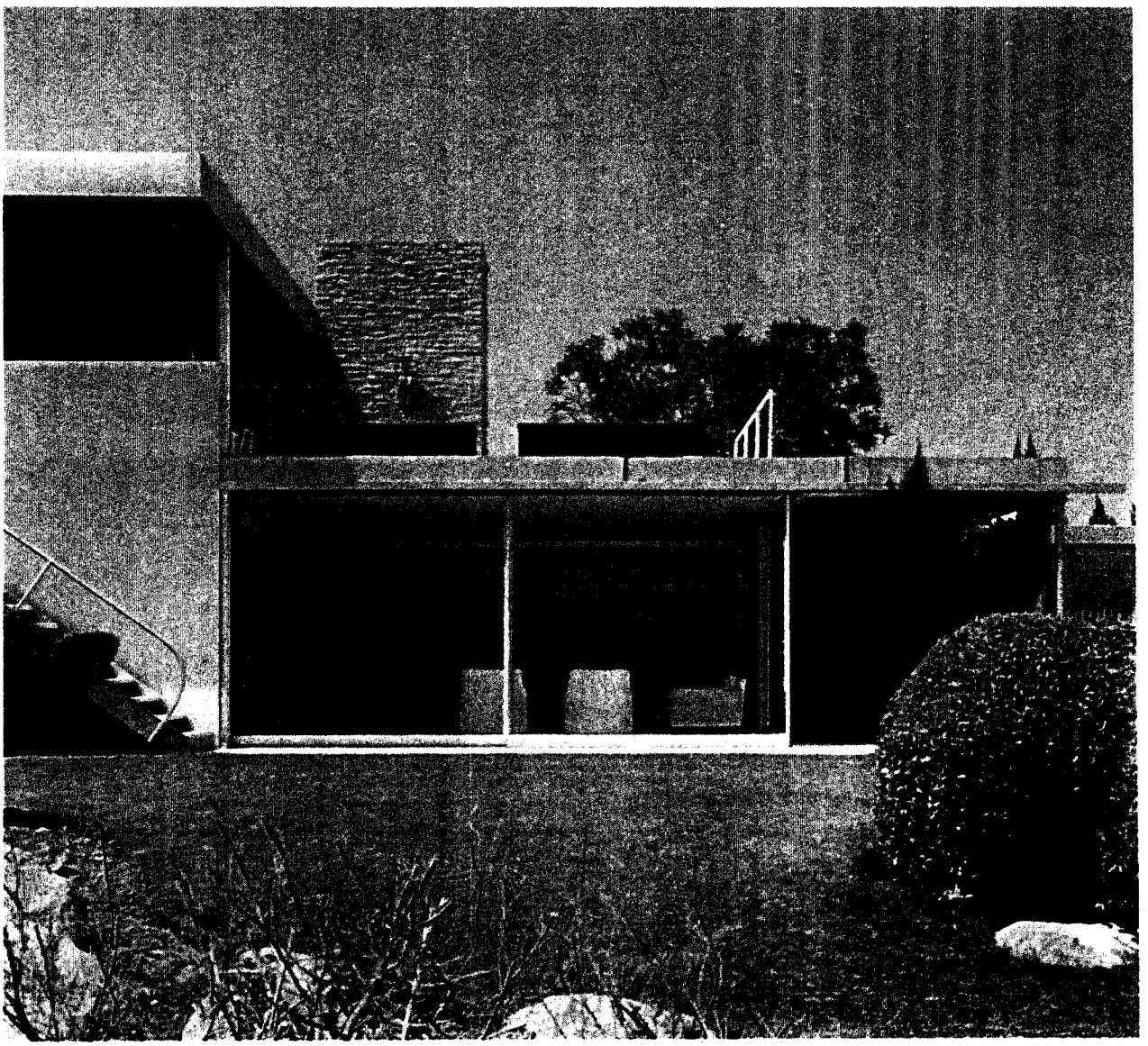
[146] Jimenez, in Susan Gray, ed., *Architects on Architects*, p. 89.



Kaufmann House

The weird solitude, the great silence, the grim desolation, are the very things with which every desert wanderer eventually falls in love. You think that very strange perhaps? Well, the beauty of the ugly was sometime a paradox, but to-day people admit its truth; and the grandeur of the desolate is just as paradoxical, yet the desert gives its proof.

– John C. Van Dyke, *The Desert* (1901)

Richard Neutra's Kaufmann House in Palm Springs, California rests as precisely in its Mojave Desert locale as a fine china cup in its saucer. This little jewel of domesticity, completed in 1947 for client Edgar Kaufmann, is considered a masterpiece of modern design, and helped place Palm Springs on the map as a site of iconic cool for well-heeled urbanites. Neutra was

hardly the first architectural colonist to penetrate the American West, though, with the Kaufmann House, he may have been the one who made desert living seem impossibly *soigné*. It wasn't only the force of transplanted European Modernism that gave the house its mystique. In post-World War II America, a whole host of influences combined to pump up California's desirability quotient: Hollywood, tourism, automobile culture, populism, a swell of bohemianism, a revamped advertising industry, the allure of the supposed "frontier." Neutra's Kaufmann House was emblematic of the new glamour, a showcase built to see and be seen in.

Indeed, this pristine villa appears to validate Neutra's crowning genius, revealed through the luminous – and much publicized – photographs of Julius Shulman.[147] Neutra himself appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1949; there and elsewhere he was celebrated for integrating modern architecture into the everyday fabric of American life, evidenced most recently in the Kaufmann House. Yet curiously, the house does not interact with the American landscape as much as trump it. Its shiny gray skeleton, gleaming glass skin and angular geometries play in dramatic, machine-like relief

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[147] Simon Niedenthal, "'Glamourized Houses': Neutra, Photography, and the Kaufmann House," *Journal of Architectural Education*, Nov. 1993, v. 47, n. 2.

against the brown and curvaceous Coachella Valley terrain. While certainly sited to frame sublime desert views, blurring interior and exterior space with exquisite finesse, the house is more exotic than organic – a swank modern refuge complete with swimming pool, servants' quarters, elevated "gloriette" and sophisticated climate control system.

Neutra, an Austrian who emigrated to the United States in 1923, was by most accounts a deeply commited humanist who claimed he wanted to create a "slice of eternity" in each of his houses, that only an architecture in harmony with nature could provide a "harbor for the soul."[148] But his Palm Springs masterwork expresses more devotion to the precison-based imperatives of the International Style – flat roofs, rectilinear shapes, steel frames, glass walls – than to any apparent concern for the general health and happiness of society. Nor does the house overtly reflect Neutra's infatuation with the organic, site-sensitive architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. Yet many would argue that Neutra *was* able to reconcile his words with his deeds, thanks to his pioneering efforts to

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[148] Peter Gossel and Gabriele Leuthauser, *Architecture in the Twentieth Century* (Koln: Taschen, 2001), p. 221.

promote psychic and emotional well-being through the elegant austerity of functionalism.

Architectural historian and critic Kenneth Frampton, for example, writes of Neutra's "extraordinary sensitivity and supra-functional attitude," and adds that "Nothing could be further removed from the exclusively formal motivations attributed to the International Style by Hitchcock and Johnson."[149] In describing such an approach as one of "ambient hedonism,"[150] Frampton may be jousting a bit with Neutra's pretensions, but he is also praising the architect for his deeply grounded feel for sun and light, atmosphere and emotion, aura and aroma, indeed, for the ethereal totality of a building and its context – including, in the case of the Kaufmann House, the reverberating silence of the desert.

The reminiscences of Neutra's son Dion, himself an architect and collaborator in his father's firm, indicate that Richard Neutra was directly grappling with the promises and obstacles of building on such a "foreign" stretch of earth. Dion Neutra explains that his father spoke of the Kaufmann House as a forerunner to a potential rocket station on the moon, a project

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[149] Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p. 249.
[150] Ibid., p. 250.

requiring technological contrast with the raw natural landscape. Dion cites this passage from Richard Neutra's writings:

> A desert house can, of course, not be "rooted" in a soil to "grow out of it" – nothing is rooted therein, not even a tree can grow. It is frankly an artifact, a construct transported in many shop-fabricated parts over long distances into the midst of rugged aridity, like the needed water which is piped over many miles. Its lawns and blooming shrubs are imports just like its aluminum and plate glass.[151]

Similar sentiments regarding the desert's rigors emerge from others not native to the region, from Victorian-era art historian John C. Van Dyke, who loved the desert but found it a forbidding terrain laced with horror; to contemporary critic Walter L. Creese who contends that interventions in America's "irregular spaces" have resulted in "improved entities";[152] to curators from UCLA in the 1970s who wrote, in reference to the Kaufmann House, "The desert is still the grandiose waste as ever,

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[151] Dion Neutra, *Neutra: Kaufmann "Desert House"* (Tokyo: A.D.A. Edita, 1971).

[152] Walter L. Creese, *The Crowning of the American Landscape: Eight Great Spaces and Their Buildings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 3.

but it has taken on a new significance since man [sic] can now live in the midst of it."[153]

The desert, of course, has been inhabited for at least several millennia. As Alan Hess and Andrew Danish wryly note in their book *Palm Springs Weekend*, also in reference to the Kaufmann House, "Flat roofs do not seem so much a part of the International Style as of the native Southwestern adobe architecture and the rainless climate."[154] Neutra had, in fact, written glowingly of the work of Pueblo Indian builders, whose cliff dwellings and staircased terraces in the desert Southwest are echoed in his early California architecture. Still, when Neutra and fellow modern architects infiltrated the mountainous, boulder-strewn environs in and around Palm Springs, perhaps their innovations *did* seem as spectacularly otherworldly as any projected lunar outpost. Perhaps they had tapped into the spooky yet alluring mystique best conveyed by novelist Paul Bowles in his existentialist touchstone *The Sheltering Sky*: "The desert – its very silence was

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[153] UCLA Art Galleries, *Richard Neutra: Is Planning Possible, Can Destiny Be Designed?*, p. 70.

[154] Alan Hess and Andrew Danish, *Palm Springs Weekend* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001), p. 16.

like a tacit admission of the half-conscious presence it harbored."[155]

Far from showing disrespect with the taut coolness of the Kaufmann House, Neutra was attempting to emphasize the unique character of the desert – to reveal its constant dynamism of mood and shadow, the power of its understatement. He was also mirroring the sentiments of his contemporary Le Corbusier who, as scholar Beatriz Colomina reports, once described his Villa Savoye (1931) as "a box in the air…in the middle of meadows, dominating the orchards…."[156] The Kaufmann House, like the Villa Savoye, is detached from its setting, in command of it, more subject than object, as unexpected in its context as an ocean liner run aground. (Or, as Colomina asserts, "The house is *immaterial*."[157]) Neutra's energetic command of new technologies and minimalist abstractions in the desert were, arguably, less an invasion than an homage – both to his European modernist roots and to the shimmeringly avant-garde palette of American landscapes.

As Hess and Danish note, Neutra borrows from the horizontal and vertical planes of the Mojave Desert

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[155] Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky* (New York: Ecco/HarperCollins, 1977), p. 251.
[156] Beatriz Colomina, "The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism," from *Sexuality and Space* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 114.
[157] Ibid., p. 114.

environment to craft a refined facsimile of flat roofs and perpendicular columns. Relying on mostly artificial materials for the Kaufmann House, Neutra purposefully incorporates the look and feel of machinery to emphasize the contrast between technology and nature; the lightweight glass curtain walls and lean metal supports create a delicate harmony in an unlikely locale.

The writers compare this strategy to that of another Palm Springs architect, John Lautner, whose Elrod House of 1968 employs a radically polar take on Modernism: the house is a cavelike bunker of poured concrete reflecting the region's voluptuous silhouettes and textures. A warm and earthy dwelling, it highlights the continuity of building materials and nature. These starkly opposite approaches to integrating site and structure – machine-like vs. organic – foreshadow the coming discussions on Critical Regionalism, a term coined in the early 1980s by architects Tzonis and Lefaivre (and mentioned earlier in regard to the Kimbell). This discourse advocates for a re-evaluation of the interwoven arenas of architecture, region and culture and invariably revolves around modern interventions in ancient settings, the very situation at play in contemplation of the Kaufmann House.

These dueling strategies, contrasting or communing with nature, also reveal a fundamental schism between early modern architecture in Europe and the United States. Neutra was straddling the divide, if leaning toward Europe's embrace of the machine when commissioned to design the Kaufmann House (and, like Walter Gropius, using abstraction to foreground the essentials of a building, its structure and quiet repose). At the same time, the floating, mirage-like quality of the villa is balanced with the weighty mass of its rock and concrete walls and its carefully contextual desert landscaping.

Some would cite the Kaufmann House as a prime example of regional Modernism, more than of the International Style. Others would call it an ingenious amalgam. Others still, e.g., critic David Leatherbarrow in his recent book *Uncommon Ground: Architecture, Technology, and Topography*, challenge the accepted wisdom that "place" is necessarily erased by the technological impositions of modern architecture.[158] He names Neutra in particular as a practitioner uniquely skilled at placemaking in a variety of specific settings. According to Neutra's biographer Thomas S. Hines, Neutra was indeed better equipped than any other

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[158] From a review by Ted Cavanaugh, "Recent Works on the Theme of Technology and Place," *Journal of Architectural Education*, Feb. 2001, v. 54, n. 3, p. 199.

architect to bridge "the frequently polarized worlds of Taliesin and Bauhaus."[159]

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Richard Neutra had long been smitten with the promise of America. Growing up in late-nineteenth century Vienna, a protégé of architects Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos and, later, Erich Mendelsohn in Berlin, Neutra was deeply swayed by accounts coming from overseas about the enormous potential of industry and technology in the United States. Loos and Rudolph Schindler, Neutra's friend and classmate at the Vienna Technische Hochschule, had traveled across the Atlantic to witness developments first-hand; the publication in 1910 of Frank Lloyd Wright's work in German further convinced Neutra that America was emerging as the premier staging ground for progressive architecture. Meanwhile, Neutra's social swirl in Vienna included contact with such influential figures as Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Sigmund Freud and Freud's disciple Otto Rank. By the time Neutra left Europe for the United States in 1923, in advance of contemporaries Walter

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[159] Thomas S. Hines, *Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 6.

Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, he had begun to meld the most sophisticated new ideas about architecture and art with the fresh disciplines of psychoanalysis, behavioral sciences and human ecology.

Once he got to the States, Neutra worked in New York City for several months before heading west to Chicago. He was eager to meet his idols Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright (and even stopped en route in Buffalo, New York to study the Guaranty and Larkin Buildings of Sullivan and Wright, respectively). In Chicago, he secured a position at the large and prestigious firm of Holabird and Roche and began to investigate the landmark skyscrapers of the city, as well as all of Wright's local projects. But Wright himself proved elusive. Neutra had better luck with Sullivan, who reportedly offered him a warm welcome in spite of his own failing health and growing destitution.[160] Neutra finally met Wright several months later at Sullivan's funeral at Graceland Cemetery. The successful encounter led to an immediate offer of work at Wright's Taliesin in Spring Green, Wisconsin, a proposal Neutra accepted later that year. He jotted these first impressions of the setting: "I felt as

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[160] Ibid., p. 51.

though I were in a Japanese temple district, whatever I thought that might be like. Taliesin was completely removed from anything I had known before and here there did live a man who fitted it."[161]

Neutra's brief stint at Taliesin no doubt further enriched his nuanced attempts to blend European abstraction with American landscape consciousness. He was apparently taken with the Wrightian flare for liberating the box, for crafting multiple roof planes that intersect, overlap, appear to ride free. Scholars have noted, however, that Neutra's indebtedness to Wright notwithstanding, he may ultimately have been more strongly influenced by his early teachers, especially iconoclast Adolf Loos. "The thing that stayed with me most," Neutra wrote in a diary entry, "was his faith in and almost cult of 'lastingness,' as compared with passing fashion. He was reaching out for some contact with history, to produce this 'lastingness' despite the fashions of the day."[162] Ironically, Neutra was soon to light out for California, a spot fast morphing into the very mecca of fashionableness. Honoring a longstanding promise to his friend Schindler, Neutra left Wisconsin behind and moved to Los Angeles in February of 1925.

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[161] Ibid., p. 52.
[162] Ibid., p. 22.

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Thomas S. Hines, in his definitive biography *Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture*, describes Neutra's basic architectural scheme as that of the timeless post and beam, topped by cantilevered roof slabs extending into space. In California, Neutra found lucrative work and a clientele happy to embrace these elegant and novel design ideas. His breakout success in the late 1920s was coincident with the flowering of European Modernism back on the continent (i.e., *tour de force* buildings from architects Gropius, Mies, Mendelsohn, Peter Behrens, Le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto and more). But Hines singles him out from the crowd. Calling Neutra *the* twentieth century architect most interested in and knowledgeable about the biological and behavioral sciences, Hines insists, "There was in Neutra's best work a combination of both Neutran personality and benevolent neutrality, a neutrality that tolerated and encouraged the client's own vision and creativity."[163]

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[163] Richard Neutra, *Nature Near: Late Essays of Richard Neutra* (Santa Barbara, CA: Capra Press, 1989), p. viii.

Hines is alluding to Neutra's doctrine of "biorealism," a concept Neutra developed throughout his life and most fully explored in his book *Survival Through Design*, a project he honed while working on the Kaufmann House commission. Biorealism describes an architecture that could "satisfy man's [sic] inner constellation of natural necessities…. It is the most practical sort of realism, taking in everything that is the body and soul of man – along with that space we call the pysche, which performs as a dynamic mediator between them."[164] Neutra's philosophy centered on the deepseated needs of human beings, locating in modern architecture the therapeutic potential to create a restive sense of harmony and spiritual wholeness.

In other words, for Neutra, the fundamental simplicity of modernist construction – with its lightness, lack of ornamentation and open room planning – served to choreograph the very fluidity of inner space, both the space of interiors and the internal emotional space of human organisms. Furthermore, the transparency and reflective property of glass walls allowed him to fully blur the boundaries between interiority and exteriority, dissolving the rigid

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[164] Ibid., p. xxii-xxiii.

structural and psychological parameters set by traditional masonry or frame construction. This could surely be said of the work of any International Style devotee, but Neutra's fervent commitment to biorealism brought the added challenge of incorporating concerns about physiological development and psycho-sexual health into the intimate arena of house and home. It seemed the discipline of modern architecture, on the whole, provided the paradigmatic materials and forms for Neutra's ambitious efforts.

A close-up look at the Kaufmann House reveals a domicile of extravagant comforts, one epitomizing Neutra's philosophy of biorealism. The 3,800-square-foot villa extends in a roughly cruciform shape, allowing a myriad of mountain and desert views radiating on four discrete axes. The north and west exteriors, which front the low-lying mountains, are comprised of sturdy stone and concrete walls to ward off high winds and sandstorms. The south and east flanks are nearly all glass, with floor-to-ceiling sliding plates which open entirely onto the pool, patio and front entrance prominade. Neutra devised a streamlined heating and cooling system that sent temperature-controlled water circulating beneath the polished terrazzo floors both

inside and out by the patio; residents and guests would be warmed in the winter and cooled beneath the desert's hot rays during summer months. He also designed a raised platform called a "gloriette" accessed by outside stairs and allowing 360-degree views. This elevated deck is at once open yet sheltered by louvered blinds and another horizontal rooftop, providing a space both snug and elemental.

With delicious ambiguity, the Kaufmann House seems to protect its inhabitants from the desert's sternest challenges while providing direct immersion in its beauties. In essence, Neutra conjured a technological mirage — an oasis as liberating as it is soothing. The house offers a nearly tangible caress, a dash of avant-garde glamour, a lightly muscular sense of security, a respite of silence. If Neutra's biorealism seems overwrought in theory, in practice, at least in the Kaufmann House, it manifests through canny sleight of hand. Neutra's modernist/regionalist invention provides silvery moonlight by night, endless horizons by day, and a continuous illusion of freedom amidst the broad expanse of the American West.

Some insight into the house's physiological and psychological implications rests with Sylvia Lavin, an

architectural historian and theorist who has written extensively on Neutra's domestic architecture and the psychological underpinnings of modernity. Lavin suggests that Neutra, a lifelong analysand who made frequent analogies between architecture and psychiatry in his writings, was dismissed as something of a "pseudo-scientist" by the architectural mainstream, even as the crucial connection between environment and psychic well-being became increasingly taken for granted. (She argues that psychoanalysis suffered a similar fate when it reached American shores – that is, it was at once imbricated into the pop psyche and simultaneously trivialized as the province of crackpots.[165]) Nonetheless, Neutra's domestic architecture was reportedly beloved by his clients and may have found its apotheosis amidst the swinging eccentricity of mid-twentieth century Palm Springs.

In assessing the Kaufmann House, Lavin focuses mainly on its glass walls, reflective mirrors and dissolving corners (noting only tangentially that, in terms of room planning, the house offers an almost anachronistic dose of privacy in situating residents, guests and servants in completely separate wings).

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[165] Sylvia Lavin, "Open the Box: Richard Neutra and the Psychology of the Domestic Environment," *A + U*, Aug. 2001, p. 12.

Lavin's concern lies with the structural capacity of the home to allay childhood traumas through its indeterminate thresholds and nearly oceanic spatial embrace. Dissenting from common opinion, she writes:

> Although Neutra's interest in the landscape has been normally understood as a regional adaptation to the mild climate of southern California and as part of a general concern to use landscape as foil to the austerity of architecture, it is rather the psychological smoothing of both the difference between spaces and objects as well as the transition between spaces that is the organizing principle in his work. Using abstraction as a means of establishing continuity between the landscape and architecture, deploying the free plan less as a formal and spatial creed than as a therapeutic technique, Neutra's designs operate on the trauma of being an autonomous object in infinite space.[166]

Lavin is referring to the notion of "birth trauma" as designated by psychoanalyst Otto Rank. A one-time follower of Freud, later deemed a heretic, Rank hypothesized that the physical act of birth – the moment of separation from the womb – was the principal cause of all subsequent human anxiety and neurosis. Neutra

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[166] Lavin, "The Avant-Garde is Not at Home: Richard Neutra and the American Psychologizing of Modernity," from *Autonomy and Ideology: Positioning an Avant-Garde in America* (New York: The Monicelli Press, 1997), p. 189.

wrote, in advocating for biorealism, that "After the 'birth trauma,' the shock to get into our outer unassorted scene … we all slip right into the hands of the architect."[167] The architect, in other words, is uniquely capable of tempering that trauma.

Lavin suggests that Neutra's invisible walls and illusory corners are intended to provide zones of comfort for people coming and going, to lessen the blow of sudden spatial disjunction. She also points to his use of "spider leg" columns in the Kaufmann House as serving a comparable function – not only do these slender supports demarcate an intermediate territory between inside and out (womb and the post-birth exterior), they gently recall and relieve the childhood fear of spiders and the concomitant envy of an arachnid's ability to re-enter the earth (womb).[168] Furthermore, the radiant panels that Neutra employed to control the house's thermal conditions indoors and out would provide uniform and comfortable temperatures approximating the stable environment of the womb. Conjecture all, Lavin's theories are nonetheless respectful of Neutra's expressed ideas and consistent

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[167] Ibid., p. 187.

[168] Though a prolific chronicler of biorealism, Neutra never explicitly advanced these theories in his writings – Lavin's interpretations come much later in the twentieth century, after Neutra's death.

with a wave of bohemian chic that swept California (and, to a lesser extent, the rest of the United States) in the immediate postwar years. The domestic realm – as the locus of willed self-improvement – was suddenly expected to salve all wounds and provide all happinesses. Neutra was a leading architectural light of the new, culturally pervasive home economics.

Nonetheless, this arena of intimacy was forged, in Neutra's hands, within the transparent shelter of glass, a far different form of "protection" than that afforded by, say, the solid, fortresslike walls of Luis Barragan's San Cristobal encampment.[169] If Barragan's unfenestrated barricades of masonry and stucco could be said to allow a kind of interior privacy, perhaps Neutra's use of plate glass promotes another form of intimate communion: that between humans and the broad, horizontal sweep of the world outside. Or, conversely, perhaps a solid blank wall acts as a vertical bridge uniting (and revealing) earth and sky; while a glass house pulses with the quiet mystery born of overexposure. Then again, maybe there is dynamism in the seemingly stark opposition between transparency and solidity, a dialogue of call and response in which one

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[169] Interestingly, these starkly opposite materials – resulting in transparent (light) vs. opaque (heavy) walls – both allow and even encourage a tangible quality of silence.

possibility invites another suggestion. The modern architect Eileen Gray reportedly approached her work in this fashion, proferring one design iteration, often hinged, with the expectation of an answer in kind, one expression presaging and in turn reacting to another.[170] Neutra, too, could be seen as engaging in communicative play by reveling in the deep ambiguities of glass – a substance at once transparent and reflective, cool and warm, welcoming and secluding, suggestive and silent.

In a diverting footnote regarding Neutra and psycho-sexual matters, Lavin notes that the architect failed to garner the approval of Freud himself in pursuing his chosen profession. Neutra had been childhood friends with Freud's son Ernst, and had had numerous occasions to visit the Freud household and interact with the doctor. As recorded in an interview late in Neutra's life, when he told Freud he wanted to study architecture, "Professor Freud would only smile, because to him the formative and molding influence on a human mind were primarily human relations… I, on the other hand, could not possibly study architecture if I

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[170] Sarah Whiting, "Voices Between the Lines: Talking in the Gray Zone," from Caroline Constant and Wilfried Wang, eds., *Eileen Gray: An Architect for All Senses* (Tubingen: Wasmuth, 1996), p. 75. Arguably, this analysis – and others like it – may stem from Gray's own silence about her life and practice; given a lack of explicit information, hypotheses emerge to fill the unbearable void.

were to subscribe to this view."[171] Much as Neutra borrowed from his architectural mentors while forging his own idiosyncratic identity, he seemed able to absorb the influence of other intellectual forerunners as well and yet not succumb to the dictates of passing fashion. Like Loos, he was reaching for history.

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When the art historian Van Dyke wandered into the American desert, he was ravaged by asthma and consumed by unrelenting fevers. Though the arid, implacable lands seemed to worsen his condition, he stayed for a handful of years in thrall to the saturated colors and dazzling displays of light. In 1901 he recorded his awe at the "yellow, saffron-colored, rose-colored, azure, steel-blue, ruby-red, topaz, lilac, and violet air."[172] Frank Lloyd Wright was no less beholden, reporting several decades later from Taliesin West that "The spiritual cathartic that was the desert worked – swept the spirit clean of stagnant ways and habitual forms

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[171] Lavin, "Open the Box: Richard Neutra and the Psychology of the Domestic Environment," p. 18.

[172] Alessandra Ponte, "The House of Light and Entropy: Inhabiting the American Desert," *Assemblage*, 30, 1996, p. 21.

ready for fresh adventure."[173] Neutra was yet another twentieth-century newcomer to the American desert who found the landscape a ripe stage set for modernity. And no wonder, writes Alessandra Ponte in *Assemblage*: "The desert is the house of pure visibility. Art/nature: no longer in opposition, but a simultaneous happening."[174]

And that simultaneity was just what Neutra sought to express in the Kaufmann House. Adapting the global ideals of the International Style to the specificity of his lunar desertscape, Neutra was striving for a biorealist architecture both flowing and self-contained, shimmering and silent, contiguous with nature and an improvement upon it. *Purely visible* yet subterranean in effect. He was aiming, in fact, to imprint a new architectural stamp on his adopted homeland. In a 1970 essay on the evolution of domestic architecture in the United States, historian and critic Vincent Scully writes, "Integration of the surroundings is everything; the individual is at once relaxed and enslaved by it. How American it is."[175] He was referring to Wright, but he may as well have been fingering Neutra.

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[173] Creese, p. 270.

[174] Ponte, p. 21.

[175] Vincent Scully, "American Houses: Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright," from *Rise of an American Architecture*, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, ed. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), p. 192.

Afterword

It is a blustery autumn day when I fly into Ft. Worth, Texas, the sun piercing, the wind rambunctious and unstinting. I am here to visit the Kimbell Art Museum and, more broadly, this spot that calls itself "where the West begins." I have decided, at a pivotal moment in my contemplation of silence, to embark on a journey to test my suppositions. I want to experience the raw physicality of one of my archetypes up close – to discover whether silence will steal upon me when encountering Kahn's beloved temple of art first-hand. Or whether, in fact, the opposite will occur, that I will feel overwhelmed with resonance, with a Cage-ian blast of *silence-as-sound*. I am calling my own bluff.

I am also feeling a bit foolish on this pilgrimage, like a stranger, a spy in the house of architecture. But then, I often do.

Ft. Worth is a modest sibling to the neighboring behemoth of Dallas, but it has its own traditions to boast of: the annual Southwestern Exposition and Livestock Show; the world's only daily cattle drive; the Stockyards National Historic District, reconstructed to reflect a faux Western ambiance of hitching posts and swinging saloon doors; a cavernous, world-renowned dance hall called Billy Bob's Texas. The city also promotes a neighborhood labelled, rather portentously, as the "Cultural District." It is here that the Kimbell resides, along with an ever-burgeoning variety of attractions ranging from the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame to a Japanese garden center to a science museum. Yet delightfully, Ft. Worth's moniker of "Cowtown" is reflected as robustly in this cultural enclave as elsewhere in the dusty burg. Directly across the street from the Kimbell is the site of the sprawling livestock show; this 1930s Art Deco complex includes a refurbished row of corrugated, vaulted sheds lettered in blunt sans serif type with the tags "Swine," "Poultry," "Cattle," et cetera. Indeed, a gamey musk of sweat and manure is

the prevailing aroma in the crisp Texas air as I approach the Kimbell – for the first time – on foot.

I have chosen to visit this structure, as opposed to any of my other three archetypes, for the simple reason that it is nearest to me geographically, and therefore most accessible. In addition, I recently traveled through Texas en route to my job in New Mexico, in the spring of 2002, so my memories of the state are fresh and my curiosity not yet sated for the vastness of the place, for its muscular provocations. Once again, Texas does not disappoint. As I stroll alongside the broad roadway that hugs the Cultural District (sans sidewalk, I'm bushwacking through tall-ish grasses), the sky is high and boundless, the vistas a rugged hodgepodge of strip malls, public parks, concrete overpasses. Everything feels a bit outsized and bursting, even the blue overhead a richer hue, as if the heavens had been freshly washed in cobalt ink.

I recall reading that Louis Kahn did not drive; he was slow to realize that, in a state like Texas, most visitors to a museum would arrive by car. In fact, my first glimpse of the Kimbell is from the backside – the automobile approach – as I traverse a cross street that leads to the museum parking lot. From here, the fabled

assemblage of travertine vaults looks like nothing so much as a refined version of the livestock sheds across the way. Then I walk around the building and absorb the full impact of the western promenade, the pedestrian entrance tucked into a rise and facing neatly away from downtown Ft. Worth.

Suddenly, the surrounding milieu of cattle and commerce recedes. Even the clamor of the afternoon wind gives way to the caressing lap of Kahn's reflecting pools. The orderly grove of yaupon holly that graces the forecourt feels vaguely Japanese, and the sweeping lawn that tilts upward appears leisurely and serene — a picturesque expanse more redolent of an eighteenth-century English landscape than of frontier America. The museum's doorway, meanwhile, is shrouded by trees and the deep shadow of its horizontal roofing; the building strikes me as mysterious and brooding, solemn as a ruin yet tidy and withholding, *modern*, in that creamy, mid-twentieth-century way. If Kahn was truly blending his "innate Classicism" (as Scully says) with the rigors of the International Style, then the Kimbell, at first blush, feels like nothing less than an apotheosis of Kahn's "lonely quest" (Scully, again). I am witnessing a dignified house-of-art aloof from its Texas setting

yet coolly affixed to the gentle slope of the land, whole and elemental, as if it had always been there. I find the Kimbell quiet all right, but quiet like a heartbeat, insistent. I think I understand why Kahn capitalized the "S" when he wrote of Silence.

This first visit of mine is on Thanksgiving day, fortuitous timing since my initial impressions of the museum are unencumbered by crowds, traffic, the buzz of a working day. The place is deserted, in fact, artificially still, and thus I am treated to its gentleness and its arrogance all at once; I am exposed, without buffer, to its paradoxical contextualism and lack thereof. I wander the periphery, admiring a vintage neon sign to the north for the "Joy Flower Co." and a faded shopping corridor on the east. Back at the front of the museum, I am taken with the one jolt of color at the Kimbell's entrance, a 1952 sculpture by Fernand Leger called *"La Fleur qui marche,"* an anthropomorphized "running flower" with limbs of red, blue, green and orange. The building and grounds are an otherwise uninterrupted swath of beige and honey tones, a deeply 1970s feel that strikes me as corporate, calming, upper-crusty, the vibe of an early Woody Allen movie. I find it beautiful, too. I decide to call it a

day, and come back the next morning for a second look. When I return on Friday the winds have died down, but now the people and the cars are everywhere.

In an essay about Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion, scholar Robin Evans observes, "Buildings are not always better than pictures show them to be, nor are they necessarily more significant than the theories that spring up around them. It all depends."[176] He goes on to describe the Barcelona Pavilion (Barcelona, Spain; 1929, reconstructed in 1985-86) as a sort of phantom, and to consider that what we think we know about buildings is often determined by the images and words we absorb about them – the rumors and prejudices that precede us. He posits, for example: "We believe that Mies's buildings exhibit a sublime rationality because so many people have reported seeing it there."[177] Such thinking echoes an earlier assertion from architectural historian John Summerson, who, in a 1960s essay, writes, "We believe that we have a Modern Architecture. Why? Chiefly because we want to believe it."[178] I consider these musings as I explore the Kimbell even further, inside

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[176] Robin Evans, "Mies van der Rohe's Paradoxical Symmetries," from *Translations from Drawing to Building* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), p. 234, originally published in *AA Files*, no. 19, Spring 1990.
[177] Ibid., p. 244.
[178] John Summerson, "The Mischievous Analogy," from *Heavenly Mansions* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963), p. 195.

and out, and ponder the full array of scholarship and documentation I have already consumed about this Modernist touchstone.

Inevitably, once more, I flash on the contested notion of "meaning" in architecture, from Victor Hugo's nineteenth-century death knell[179] to John Ruskin's follow-up proclamation of architecture-as-text[180] to protean feuds over ornament and function to the entire twentieth-century discourse of point and counterpoint, peaking, arguably, with the condemnation of high Modernism as a construct of bludgeoning blankness. What do we want to believe? Kahn himself wrote epigrammatically about silence (and Silence); countless commentators and aficianados have also ascribed this quality to his architecture. I am laden, in other words, with preconceptions. How can I gauge – standing within these pristine vaults, the light silvery and diffuse, the concrete interiors gone buttery with

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[179] In Victor Hugo's novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*, written in 1831, the protagonist prophesies that the printed book will irrevocably replace architecture as the repository of human thought and meaning. An excerpt reads: "The book will kill the building…the book of stone, so solid and durable, would give place to the book of paper, even more solid and durable. The printing press will kill architecture." Reprinted in Neil Levine, "The Romantic Idea of Architectural Legibility," from *The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, ed. Arthur Drexler (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1977), p. 356.

[180] In the chapter titled "The Nature of Gothic" in his 1853 book *The Stones of Venice*, John Ruskin writes, "Thenceforward the criticism of the building is to be conducted precisely on the same principles as that of a book." Excerpted in Adrian Forty's *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 74.

softness – whether the hush that I'm enveloped by is redolent of *silence* or merely the myth of such? And does the distinction matter?

In his reflections on Mies, Robin Evans also writes that "as things become simpler, emptier, the mind dwells on the little that remains."[181] Is this the lovely surprise of Modern Movement architecture at its best? The sharpened focus that comes with abstraction, the intense relief of such distilled awareness, such luscious quiet? I think so. The hush of the Kimbell – its impact and intelligence – is surely due in part to its stunning *simplicity* (another concept thoroughly problematized in architectural discourse[182]). But I think too that Evans is right when he dubs this kind of beauty "the architecture of forgetting."[183] Here in this worshipful setting, a palace of canonical artwork, chaos is temporarily shunted aside to spotlight the tasteful and the restrained. The art itself, however bold, is as polite as the building, domesticated by its context, a

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[181] Evans, p. 255.

[182] E.g., "All beauty is heightened by unity and simplicity, as is everything which we do and say." J.J. Winckelmann, 1776. "My perception of building is so very simple." *Mies van der Rohe, 1925.* "I would like to think that our work is not simple." *James Stirling, 1984.* Excerpted in Adrian Forty's *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 249, 252.

[183] Evans, p. 268.

not altogether unpleasing situation.[184] The Rembrandt, the Munch, the wall of Matisse bas-relief backsides — nothing too dangerous here.

Indeed, the genteel delicacy of Kahn's exterior design recurs on the building's interior, with its comforting internal courtyards, warm brown wood detailing, sheltering concrete skies. Again, this is not a complaint; I applaud Kahn for creating a veritable oasis on the north Texas prairie, an alluring and mysterious outpost that seamlessly merges the modern with the classical. Yes, I think, traversing the lobby with its shimmery wall of glass, its minimalist pleasures, I would call the Kimbell a bang-up exemplar of silence at play with architecture. But I would also acknowledge the eternal tease that accompanies the brash, dare we say presumptuous, use of apparatuses as slippery as *words*. Silence, after all, is a deeply complex phenomenon, forever contested and malleable, less a prescription for architecture than a liminal whisper of the stirring possibilities that exist in a

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[184] As a site of, in essence, worship, the Kimbell recalls the placid, oddly soothing atmosphere of a graveyard (in this case, one especially well-groomed and overseen by invaluable artworks rather than a rustic stone angel). In his mid-century novel *The Power and the Glory*, Graham Greene describes the poignant wonder of chancing upon the stillness of a Mexican cemetery, its gateway marked by a sign that reads 'Silencio': "There was a sense of intimacy — you could go anywhere and see anything. Life here had withdrawn altogether." Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (London: William Heinemann & The Bodley Head, 1971), p. 52.

world by turn chaotic and orderly, cacophonous and still.

Leaving the Kimbell Art Museum, I flash on the reminiscences of architectural scholar Colin Rowe, a British native who spent a fruitful couple of years in Texas. With the knowing acuity of an outsider, he remembers the American West as a place where "the strata of historical activity are so few and where time has contrived to erode so little of the little past that exists, that there will sometimes be experienced a feeling of inextinguishable antiquity."[185] On this still-brilliant fall afternoon, with Kahn's Roman-tinged vaulting behind me and the ticky-tack skyline of Ft. Worth on the near horizon, I sense the illusion of ancientness and time-worn wisdom that Rowe alludes to, odd given the city's recent provenance and rather blatant clashes of high-brow and low-. But certainly, there is something inexplicable, or unutterable, about this Lone Star mystique; and the Kimbell revels in it most commandingly.

I am reminded, too, of the impressions of another commentator who has spent time in the region, the contemporary American novelist Marilynne Robinson. In

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[185] Colin Rowe, "Lockhart, Texas," from *As I Was Saying: Recollections and Miscellaneous Essays, Volume One* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 56, first published in *Architectural Record*, 1957.

writing of the West and all its spacious silence, she celebrates a particularly private form of reverie, a quality she describes as "a secret told to me, which I keep because I cannot find words to tell it."[186] I like this very much, this locating of satisfaction or awareness (or simply grit) in what cannot be codified or pinned down. This, I suspect, is part of the Kimbell's potency and perhaps that of other buildings steeped in silence, including my archetypes from two continents: a trust in the intangible, a sense that anything more — any attempt to explain — would be superfluous. Or ultimately less than true.

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I have one more mission on my Ft. Worth itinerary, a visit to the city's Modern Art Museum, directly across the road from the Kimbell. This new structure, which opened just over a year ago and was designed by Japanese architect Tadao Ando, replaces an earlier museum of modern art located on the other end of the Cultural District. Now, the close proximity of buildings by Kahn and Ando promises to create a show-stopping interplay of

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[186] Marilynne Robinson, reflections from Deborah Clow and Donald Snow, eds. *Northern Lights: A Selection of New Writing from the American West* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

Modernist sensibilities (albeit one from the mid-twentieth century and the other from the early twenty-first). At best, it could be a one-two punch of iconic mastery, Kahn leading with concrete and Ando following, most evidently, with steel and glass.

I have read a few popular critiques of the Ando building, proclaiming that the architect has paid homage to his predecessor by crafting an edifice as spare, elegant and instantly monumental as the Kimbell. It is hard to tell as I walk slowly across the parking lots that separate one institution from the other. From the southwestern façade, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (MAMFW) could be the anonymous headquarters of any global corporation; it is a mammoth edifice of opaque metal skin and steel columns, more anachronistically suggestive of the International Style than Kahn's own period piece next door. The only clue to something unexpected (or a discordant note, if you will) is the towering, twisted sculpture by Richard Serra that graces one corner of the parking lot,[187] though even this arguably glamorous touch is roughly redolent of a 1970s industrial park landscape.

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[187] The piece, *Vortex* 2002, was commissioned by MAMFW specifically for the site.

Then I make my way over to the museum's front door. Instantly, the impression of impenetrability gives way to a flood of the opposite: lucidity, light, yawning space. Stepping into the museum atrium, the building opens out through its sheer back wall to the sight of a reflecting pool that hugs the northestern periphery and a garden panorama that gives way to the big Texas sky. The interior of the MAMFW is high, bright, as cleanly buffed as that of the Kimbell; the galleries are immediately evident to the left, a double-decker trinity of very large exhibition spaces stretching back alongside one edge of the reflecting pool. It is clear from inside that the museum's steel-and-glass façade is essentially a burly shell surrounding interior walls of beautiful pale gray concrete, creating internal walkways that both reveal the lovely contrast of modern materials and allow the visitor a sense of being suspended on the water.

Now I can grasp the multiple ways that Ando is tipping his hat to Louis Kahn: the repeating pattern of adjoining galleries, the use of stunningly smooth concrete, the skillful interplay of water. In a building of otherwise crisply orthogonal geometries, he has even included one vaulted ceiling above the primary

staircase, with thin clerestory windows to permit a wash of natural light. I can't help but agree with architectural photographer Werner Blaser, who has documented numerous Ando buildings and writes, with unabashed awe, "Tadao Ando has transformed architecture into silence and transparency…. His characteristic form is founded in a concentration so absolute it creates an aura."[188] This *aura*, or reverberation of solemnity, is what Kahn himself may have dubbed the "Unmeasurable," or "Wonder," as in his typically pithy jotting: "I think what you felt was just Wonder, not knowledge or knowing…. Wonder is the closest intouchness with your intuitive."[189] At the MAMFW, I sense Ando's sympathy with this notion of architectural intuition and, ultimately, find his new museum a remarkable fusion of innovation and familiarity. It is a building that certainly does display tender respect for its famous neighbor, the Kimbell.

It is also enchanting to consider the ways in which the two buildings differ. I walk back and forth for a while, slipping between centuries, thinking of Ando's stated interest in crafting structures that encourage

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[188] Werner Blaser, *Architecture of Silence* (Basel, Switzerland: Birkhauser – Publishers for Architecture, 2001), p. 19.
[189] Louis Kahn, "Wonder," from *John Lobell, Between Silence and Light: Spirit in the Architecture of Louis I. Kahn* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1979), p. 10.

stillness, of Kahn's exhortations on Silence (and light). Strangely, considering that Ando is from Japan and hence even more of an outsider than Kahn in the Lone Star state, it is the MAMFW that feels more integrated with its Texas site. Ando's museum evinces a ruggedness, an indestructability, an openness through its transparent skin to the rigors of the elements and the sprawl of the wide Western land. It feels intensely American, big and proud. The Kimbell, by contrast, feels self-contained, modest, indifferent to its Ft. Worth locale, or perhaps just supremely assured of the rightness of its setting.

Correspondingly, the art in the modern museum is starkly exposed; in the Kimbell, it is cosseted, cared for, guarded. The MAMFW is angular, the Kimbell curvaceous. One is brawny, the other soft. I find this a fascinating pair of buildings, at once a collision and a communion of cultures and architectures. I also find Ando's museum no less *silent* than Kahn's, if silence can be defined as a quality that reflects the presence of grace as much as the absence of sound. And in fact I think it can: no less an expert than musician John Cage taught us that *something* and *nothing* are coexistent, and silence as ever-potent as the lack thereof.

Contemplating the two Ft. Worth museums, I am reminded of another distant redoubt of art, the exquisite Chinati Foundation in the far west Texas town of Marfa. There, too, as at the MAMFW, the presentation of modern art is abetted by the reverberating spareness of the surroundings, by the sheer magnitude of the land and its corresponding infrastructure. But Chinati, an abandoned nineteenth-century military fort now adapted into permanent gallery space, bears similarities to the Kimbell as well: the museum seems as rooted and preordained as Kahn's, unlikely as that may be. My thoughts still trolling through the West, I also alight on the eerie earth-sky projects of artist James Turrell; the contextual modernities of present-day architects of the American West like Antoine Predock, Lorcan O'Herlihy, Rick Joy; the comparable quietude said to resound in the region's vernacular architecture and landscapes. I can only marvel at the forces that conspire — the combustive power of intellect, intuition, site, circumstance — to create such constructs of elegance and repose. To conjure up these built forms at once plangent, peaceful, soulful and silent.

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In the mid-eighteenth century, the French theorist Marc-Antoine Laugier (who many, including Summerson, call the "first modern architectural philospher"[190]), conjoined the notions of "simplicity" and "nature" with the positive attributes of classical architecture, thereby laying the groundwork for a revival of the ancient architectural orders and, later, a wholesale rejection of them. He was arguing for a "pure" architecture, stripped down and liberated, free even of walls. A passage from Laugier's *An Essay on Architecture* (1753), in which he imagines a "rustic cabin" (or primitive hut) emblematic of this supposed purity, reads: "An architect is drawn to superfluities only because he lacks genius; he only overloads his work because he lacks the wit to make it simple."[191] In other words, according to Laugier, the attainment of simplicity is a matter of great precision – an inspired undertaking perhaps akin to the quest for "a language beyond language" so achingly described by writers

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[190] John Summerson, *The Classical Language of Architecture* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1963), p. 35.

[191] Marc-Antoine Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture*, 1753; 1755, W. and A. Herrmann, trans. (Los Angeles: Hennessey and Ingalls, 1977), excerpted in Adrian Forty's *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 251.

Malcolm Quantrill and Bruce Webb in their aforementioned anthology *The Culture of Silence*.[192]

These speculations, spanning several centuries, invariably link silence in all its maddening elusiveness with the overall project of modernity, itself a multifaceted enterprise in pursuit of a quixotic goal: that of a salubrious, more equitable, elevated way of life. By the early decades of the twentieth century, the effort to craft a new architecture reflective of an enlightened age and forged through the expanded possibilities of new technology had led to a passion for the unadorned, functional, clean-lined aesthetic of the machine (however mythic the concept).

Yet this very stylistic muteness, this attempt to streamline, was accompanied by the ramifications of industrial mass production, including hierarchy, alienation, *noise*. "And the heavy breathing, the murmuring, the clangor, and the roar!"[193] wrote Frank Lloyd Wright at the turn of the twentieth century, in a memorable polemic on the modern city as a maelstrom of palpable, oozing, shrieking mechanization, with humans

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[192] Malcolm Quantrill and Bruce Webb, *The Culture of Silence* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 1998), p. xii.

[193] Frank Lloyd Wright, from *Selected Writings on Anarachism and Revolution*, Martin A. Miller, ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1970), excerpted in Aaron Betsky, *Building Sex* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1995), p. 134.

ever more indistinguishable from machines. Others, of course, find equanimity, even ecstasy, in the thrum of modern urban experience –

> *The blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot soles, talk of the promenaders*
> *…the clank of the shod horses on the granite floor.*[194]
>
> Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" (1882)

– yet the paradox prevails. The desire for a civilizing modernity, direct and stripped bare, did not necessarily translate to a calming, serene, more stately world.

Nevertheless, modern architecture emerged from an impulse towards a common nobility, a new freedom, a rejection of Victorian-era excess and ornament in favor of a vigorously clean and "honest" expression of form and function. The grammar of Modernism, as elucidated by Summerson, entails a principle stemming back to the classical architectural orders: citing Laugier, Summerson calls this principle the "pure essence of architecture."[195] In other words, Modern Movement aims were no less focused on a desire for harmony, discipline and repose than those of their classical forerunners,

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[194] Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," lines 154-55, excerpted in *The Quiet Hours*, Mike Melman, photographer (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 5.
[195] Summerson, *The Classical Language of Architecture*, p. 37.

but for the added imperative to allow industrial forms to speak for themselves. The resulting modern buildings of the twentieth century may then be, in effect, more "quiet" than those of earlier epochs, in their lack of symbolic thrust, but they are no less rich in expression and the surrounding environs no less clamorous. The same could be said for the work of neo-modern practitioners of the present day, who plumb a contemporary take on "pure essence" amidst the pluralistic, increasingly digital jumble of the post-postmodern era. This is an enduring conundrum that encompasses the very contradictions enmeshed in the notion of silence, and reflects the irresolvable longing evinced by juxtapositions of old and new. It is fitting, perhaps, that I conjure these Mobius strip musings while visiting a structure by Louis Kahn, an enigmatic preacher of Silence who, in striving for the Unmeasurable, sought always to honor the ancient in his resolutely hushed evocations of the modern-day.

I pull out of Ft. Worth on another flawless afternoon, the sky once again a vast canopy of blue. I have had the opportunity to balance the clean impressions of book learning with the messy inconclusiveness of a face-to-face encounter with

architecture. The Kimbell Art Museum lives up to its billing, surpasses it even, offering visceral proof of the smooth elegance of modern materials, the supple power of understatement, the aching immediacy of site and landscape. It is a masterwork of the delicate touch, in this case, knit from concrete, dignity and delight. The building also defies absolutist pronouncements; it holds on to its secrets. I find this more comforting than aggravating, more an invitation to embrace the unknown than a stance of exclusion or attitude. The silence of the Kimbell is an offering. I am grateful to explore, firsthand, what I have heretofore – for this project – scared up in dreams and images and words: how a particular building reveals its palpable spirit, how a particular setting works to lend a demonstrable harmony. I leave with the voluptuous inconsistencies of the American West on my mind, trailed by an echoing silence, a force almost tactile in its resonance.

sunflower alley
clouds puffy and plentiful
silos on the plain

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