

POOR FORM

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In what follows, Josh Comaroff and Ong Ker-Shing critique the disavowal of ‘form’ in architectural practice by tracing moments in which failures in form—what they describe as “poor form” – may work as indicators of the historical conditions under which they were produced.

Our paper is somewhat different from the book that we have written, *Horror in Architecture*. In many ways, that work is more an exposition of sources than a meditation on the life of forms. Or rather, it is more a meditation on the life of certain forms, with some speculation about their relation to modernity—that is, why do built forms generated by modern processes come increasingly to embody horror, in one form another. What I’d like to try in this essay is an expansion of that subject theoretically, using the same materials, but with an eye to speaking more generally about the topic.

I will do this by taking a tour through the moments when form fails. That is, when the products of architecture turn out to be—in part or whole—awkward, comical, menacing, or sad. When designers cannot find an apposite expression for their commissions, when they are unable to get a handle on what we call the “program,” on function, on scale, or any of the other myriad elements that make an architect’s life tragically difficult. Or when the values to which the architecture would strive are horridly opposed to the logic of, say, the rentier economies that the building itself embodies.



Solon S. Beman, Washington Park Grandstand, Chicago.
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Of course, this is a kind of sleight-of-hand; what I am about to discuss are not “abject” failures, but articulate ones: moments when we can learn from the precise way in which the form becomes awkward, or fails to suspend its contents in a kind of anodyne or harmonious expression—what architects call a “resolution.” This failure exposes some very telling aspects about the conditions under which it was produced. These aren’t, in any simple sense, “bad” buildings. And they aren’t forms that fail simply because the designer wasn’t good at his or her work; these are the type that emerge under specific historical conditions.

To this end, I’d like to pose this question: what do we learn about the life of forms, when form itself appears to be challenged?

This moment, in fact, is why we chose to write a book about awkward or perverse architectures, in particular—these seemed to be the point when a soothing abstraction began to fail, to wear thin; in

this moment more becomes available to analysis. This will become clearer in our discussion of Mies van der Rohe versus the many lovely oddities of the Chicago Loop.

Now, I should take a moment here to clarify what is meant, in architecture, by “form.” For this is a usage that overlaps with its definition in other fields, but due to the specific nature of architecture as a tradition of aesthetic production, has its own unique historical density. When we talk about form in buildings, we generally refer to the organization of a building’s functional and spatial components into a series of related volumes and masses, produced from a selection of materials, and often including an expression of structure and ornamental elements. Traditionally, this is the “aesthetic” aspect of the building. Put reductively, it is the translation of “functional and technical requirements” into a coherent object, making use of a series of conventions from architectural language. These conventions have long been thought to give the building “form.”

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But while form is clearly a contingent matter, and as arbitrary as it may be in other walks of life, most architects have traditionally resisted the notion that form is a kind of superficial or separable aspect of the building. Until relatively recently, it did not connote a kind of “surface” that might be laid over a buildings “contents.” Architects have long strived, naïve

though it may be, to understand form as an integrated medium in which all elements of the building are united in a common expression. This is to say, an architect like Frank Lloyd Wright—as opposed to say, Denise Scott Brown or Robert Venturi—did not understand his own formal language, as personal and idiosyncratic as it might have been, as a “style” that was larded over a kind of given, unchanging core. Instead, the form of their architecture is understood—true or not—as a medium for shaping all of the parts of the building in concert.

And it is precisely this notion of a holistic formal enterprise that is under strange kinds of pressure, today. And this is felt, in part, because of the global development of architecture in places like China, where the relationship between a building’s form, and its contents seems more contingent than ever. Such architectures have emerged in great quantities in the world today. But of course, we have witnessed their rise over the course of the 20th century, and in rare cases before.

But it is now, again, being claimed, by many architects and architectural theorists, that form is in a kind of retreat. Most famously, recent architecture was marked by Rem Koolhaas’ rejection of form in favor of program. The idea, here, is that our responsibility is not to attempt to control the building in the manner of High Modernism, or Classicism... there should be no effort to provide a “unity” to the building through form. Fundamental changes, in scale, suggest that the architect should instead focus on the choreography of function, letting the form of the building emerge as a side-effect of a principally social experiment.

Of course, Koolhaas himself is a brilliant formalist, and this is one of those false “rejections” that are

a staple of radical architecture. The Dutchman is famous for his forms, precisely, which have changed the world of design. Form is rejected, only to be smuggled back through a narrow defile, as the apparent “effect” of other operations. Form is, in fact, recuperated through exile.

This is only one variant, though. We see form, also, relegated to being generated by computer programs. This is what the younger, hipper students, call “scripted” architecture, as it is generated by code in softwares such as Rhinoceros. In other cases, form is proposed to become simply “mimetic of nature.” Or to be a blunt by-product of other “requirements” in the commercial or functional life of the building. Most recently, the Danish architect Bjarke Ingalls, as well as Gurmeet Sian, a designer in London, suggested that the architects’ role be transformed to that of a “midwife,” who simply assists in the delivery of the clients’ own goals and ideas. Apparently, architecture doesn’t need architects. At least, if there are no more “formalists.”

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This should be taken with a great heap of salt. The same computer programming that would seem to make of form an “effect” has assisted in the production of some of the most formally exuberant architecture in history. Technology is, if anything, the midwife, in the re-casting of architecture as a commodity spectacle.

But the idea, at the level of architectural culture, is that the gravitational center of our profession, and of our responsibility—and, maybe most importantly, in the hierarchy of the architectural object—has

moved suddenly away from form.

I bring up this moment in the life of forms, because it contains within itself two important theoretical consequences. The first is the notion that form is somehow separate from the rest of the artistic enterprise. At least in producing buildings, form-making is simply an aspect, as opposed to the essential undertaking of the architect. Contrast this, in your minds, with the High Modernist architect, for whom form is the intimate and determinate expression of the building as a totality, at a particular moment in history. Is it possible, in the same way, to imagine form as an independent element in the architecture of Mies van der Rohe—as simply one aspect among many?

Recent arguments, such as Koolhaas’, would put what we might call the “core” of the modern building—its organizational and technical requirements—at odds with form, and suggest a very clearly schizophrenic nature to the modern building. I will argue that this is not unique to architecture, merely more evident in it. But in the building a highly exaggerated schism has come to pass, one that is only now being digested through design theories and practices.

But there is a second consequence, of theoretical import. In the dispensation of this divorce, this internal break, *form is always poor*. It becomes a kind of second-class citizen within the complex of the artistic product, a sort of dubious or tiresome (if necessary) fellow-traveler. Gone are the days when form is seen as a total medium, for giving the building expression, for articulating it.

But again, strangely and ambiguously so. Form remains a special site for the production of the spectacular; it remains, in spite of its disavowal, the driver (or articulator, perhaps) of the building’s



Abandoned room at second storey, Bonn.
Photo: unknown.

fetishism. But, ironically, form always comes up short. It is never quite up to the job. The formal aspect of the commodity must remain temporary, promissory, unsatisfying. Iterative, provisional, and anxious.

This is most acute when the building is currency in a rentier economy. The more that the building becomes engineered toward the production of wealth, the poorer it becomes as a formal proposition. Here, as we will see, form must be continually renewed; it will always fail, sooner or later, to meet the needs of the commodity in its development, in its quest for renewal.

We read this rather clearly in the built environment, because the means and methods of architecture are continually struggling to recuperate, to express—or simply to come to terms with—typologies of building that are always growing and developing past the point of their control. Shing and I, too, believe that form is in crisis, but we believe that it is in long-term historical crisis, for reasons that can

be identified in architecture dating from the second half of the 19th century. Architects were articulate about this predicament, both in their works and in their statements about them.

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The potential for awkwardness in the dynamism of the modern is nowhere clearer than in architecture. We have new typologies—think, for example, of the shopping mall, the condominium, or the mixed-use development, among many others—that are, in fact, born long before they are given a pleasing formal expression.

In architecture, the awkward form—and with it, by the way, the horrible or the *unheimlich*—frequently appears at the historical interface of language and type. In such a moment, the resources of an existing formal vocabulary are put under pressure by changes in scale or composition, required by accelerated socio-economic development. The transitional building appears ill-formed, as its devices are maladapted to its task. The good old tricks no longer work. The architect is forced to deploy conventions in ungrammatical assemblages, as a new language has not yet arisen that is capable of solving the aesthetic problem of the new type. That is to say: form appears “poor” when the techniques of one historical moment are applied to the needs of another.

So what does such a building look like? One can see this, for example, in the architecture of the so-called “American Commercial Renaissance” (approx. 1840-1929). Many of the first great palaces of trade—mushrooming arcades and office towers—rose during this period to meet the practical needs of the new industrial class, as well as to express the self-image of American financial power. New orders

of retail and recreational space came to prominence in burgeoning urban areas: department stores, auditoria, and museums. These were of unprecedented size, sprawl and height.

The resulting aesthetic—one of “crowding,” is seen throughout much urban American architecture of the period. But it is also seen elsewhere, in the new press of humanity around the *locus horribilis* of the commercial. As E.L. Doctorow later described it, in the novel *Ragtime* (1975), “there seemed to be no entertainment that did not involve great swarms of people.” In essence, the social problem of the age was one of unprecedented numbers, sizes, and densities; in architecture and wherever the moderns gathered. As such, the regnant language of neoclassicism collided violently with the hyperbolic proportions of the modern. The accommodation of architecture to new problems of scale and scope required prolonged experimentation and produced many rank failures; a menagerie of suggestive creatures sprang up along the way.

Architects of the period experimented wildly with the application of historical styles and compositional tricks to this problem. While a stubborn conundrum, the large and complex structure nonetheless created opportunities for innovation. This was particularly true of the tower. Raymond Hood, designer of many significant examples, “felt that the skyscraper problem was still a relatively new phenomenon in American architecture, lacking any established traditions or strict formulas.” Hood, for one, “was quite happy with the prevailing mood in which everyone could try out whatever idea came into their head.”⁵⁴ This was likewise the case with other emergent typologies.

This is not unique to the tower, however. This is

a period in which many of the nascent commercial typologies of the buildings are being born. There are many others. Take, for example, the grandstand of the thoroughbred racetrack at Washington Park, Chicago (1884). The latter illustrates precisely that moment in which a fundamentally new challenge faces vernacular conventions. This question is quite straightforward: how does one design a very large building? The answer is far from clear. Huge surfaces and volumes test the ability of the architect to create a coherent, harmonious composition.

In order to tackle the dilemma of scale, Solon S. Beman chose to replicate the configuration of a normal construction. He did so by scaling everything up, by enlarging all constituent pieces proportionally. Beman attempted to solve the problem of the large building by applying to it the familiar composition of something much smaller. In fact, the grandstand is not a great edifice, so much as it is a modest one inflated. Its massing and disposition of parts clearly suggests a more diminutive object.

In order to maintain this illusion, all the ingredients of a pitched roof were up-sized simultaneously; turrets, chimneys, and gables all acquired extraordinary dimensions so as to appear visually consonant with one another. The illusion might have worked, perhaps, if one were to see the stands unoccupied. The image is alarming precisely because it is inhabited; the expanse of Beman's super-roof is read against the crowd beneath. With visitors on the verandas, the grandstand looks like the product of trick photography, some clever photo-montage in which it has been populated by Lilliputians. The fact that one can read the massive gables against the human form contributes to the impression of the roof as a great looming behemoth. It looks as if Piranesi

designed a country club.

The illusion of a giant roof, and the artifice employed in its production, suggests an architectural folly. It is a kind of "special effect" used in circumstances where the normal rules do not apply: in whimsical garden pavilions, pleasure palaces, Vegas and the Vatican. The Grandstand's unique scalar expression creates a formal instability. It appears to be two things at once: a new typology that occupies (problematically) the skin of its forebear.

Beman's odd result was not due to lack of inventiveness or skill. Beman was, in fact, a brilliant architect. But the post-Victorian architect produced his work within a language dedicated to the articulation of specificity. In the lingering pre-modernist vocabulary, exceptions were the dominant object of architectural attention.

This language combined none too easily with a nascent architecture of repetition, system, and number. This did not merely have to do with questions of scale. The techniques of the pre-20th century designer were likewise strained by the tendency of the modern building to move away from the singular and the exceptional, in favour of the aesthetics of mass quantity.

In such examples, one can oppose the disturbing form of the early modern building with the cool towers of Mies van der Rohe that were later to come to the Loop. Mies' works solve the problems of size and repetition by assimilating everything into an aesthetics of system. Herein, all components of the facade are subsumed within the expression of the grid. The Miesian building signals the historical retreat of specificity into pattern. The lines of the window extend vertically and horizontally to the edge of the facade; the window thus appears merely as an

interpolation of continuous horizontal and vertical lines.

By contrast, early high-rises had a problematic multiplicity, a kind of schizoid or doubly-inhabited form. Still today, they present an anachronism. In scalar terms they are modern, in language they are neoclassical, "Saracenic," Gothic, or Romanesque.

This is not merely the quandary of a certain moment of American architectural history. Quite the contrary. Awkwardness, in architecture, asserts itself whenever the established language of building is overtaken by the historical rate of change, and by the consequent requirements of new typologies. It is a chronic symptom of modernity's violent and cyclical dynamism, its expansions and convulsions and metamorphoses. For this reason, unease remains endemic in the built environment.

The Chicago examples are strange, and articulate. But of course, they are simply a phase in an ongoing development—the logic of the commercial megastructure, as a typological evolution, has been ongoing. And the scale and complexity of its contents have recently taken a quantum leap forward.

This manifests in the contemporary iteration of the very large building, or "megastructure." Recently, the production of vast enclosures has shadowed a new cycle of commercial consolidations—beginning, perhaps, with the construction of buildings such as the Merchandise Mart in Chicago (which, when it was built, enclosed 4 million square feet of floor). It continues, though, to a radical degree in the sprawling mall, expo center, and airport complex of the late twentieth century.

I think we are all familiar with malls, they really need no introduction. But the sheer disorder of this globular totality becomes clear when it is studied as

architecture. Viewed from above, the modern behemoth is defined by modes of organization that appear at once locally systematic and generally incoherent. Its contents are loosely held by a compositional device, or diagram: a malleable grid of columns, perhaps, or a Benthamite branching of pinwheels.

The very complex building is characterized by an unnatural plasticity, within and without. Its body is elastic, or cartilaginous. It can stretch, bend, rearrange itself, migrate its limbs and organs at will.

Architecturally speaking, it is in direct contrast to buildings that are understood as consistent; that is, to have a formal language that defines all of their constituent spaces. It is the polar opposite, for example, of the Werkbund ethos of Henry van de Velde or of the Arts and Crafts movement, in which the idea of a *gesamptkunstwerk*, a “total work” of art or design, dominated. It can be opposed, likewise, to a product of mid-century institutional modernism—a school, for example—where all areas are treated to a common material standard. Instead, the megastructure is the landscape of exaggerated disparity, the architectural equivalent of a swollen GINI coefficient. The fact that the public only occupies specific portions, carefully staged areas and sequences within the plan, leads to a proliferation of “goo.” This is a sort of technical medium, a back-of-house. The latter contains support functions, storage, secondary circulation, what we call HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning), kitchens and staff rooms, and the like. Presentable areas are suspended in this medium; the two exist within a common envelope, as in the “upstairs downstairs” of the English manor house.

The organic development of the megastructure culminates in facilities such as the West Edmonton

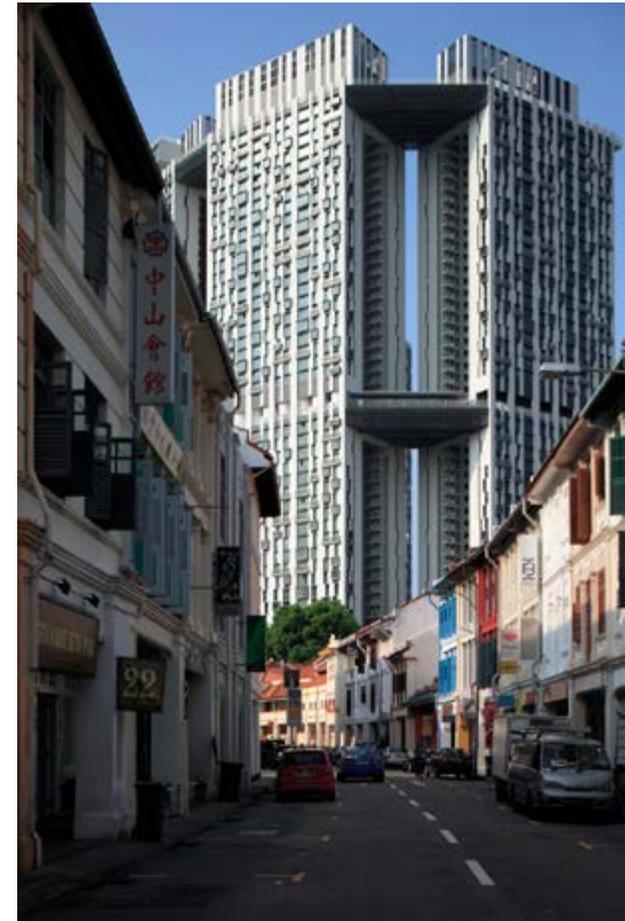
Mall or Mall of America. These have absorbed everything under their roofs: the roller coaster, the water-park, and the submarine ride, as well as the sports field and the hockey rink. Here, the concept of the exterior has become largely notional. What the vast scale and interiority of these projects appears to suggest is the diminished relevance of the outside world, particularly in barely inhabitable environments such as Ontario and Minnesota. This can be read in the impoverishment of their facades.

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But this is not the entire story of the building as commodity. The stresses placed on form are not merely about accounting for size or for density. There are other forms of buildings as commodities, and these place different (although no less intense) pressure on inherited architectural languages. These have to do with problems not of size but of repetition. In particular, these have to do with the somewhat queasy status of the house, in a moment where it makes economic sense to subject it to reproduction on an enormous scale.

In our book, the question of the mass repetition of the home is discussed with respect to cloning, as a preoccupation of horror and fantasy media. The horror of cloning clearly raises issues of mass repetition that, in both architecture and the broader culture, deserve special consideration. As Benjamin and others have noted, reproduction—of people and objects, fake and real—is a pressing subject of late, and no less in modern architecture. For this reason, the clone remains a touchstone of the uncanny.

Just as much, perhaps, cloning is inherent in the productive matrix of modern architecture. Buildings, and their components, have come to be



ARC Studio, Pinnacle@Duxton housing project, Singapore.
Photo: Darren Soh.

replicated on a mass scale. Architects have made a virtue of necessity, often embracing repetition with a kind of religious fervor.

The placement of duplicate segments in horizontal, vertical, or gridded arrays has remained, for years, the basic DNA of construction. Images of Hilberseimer façades have perhaps been over-used in representing this vocabulary. Regardless, such buildings exist—not least, in “public” housing everywhere: the lugubrious slab of the Parisian *banlieu*, the London council estate, the Singaporean “HDB,” or the high-rise priapolis of São Paulo. Some instances have taken this to almost sardonic lengths, as in the anthills of Hong Kong, or Saenz de Oiza’s kilometer-long “El Ruedo” complex along Madrid’s M-30 (1986).

The other great example of cloned housing, the “terrace,” faces a similar problem. This type is now global. It remains a compact option for the development of low-rise urban parcels, and strange new versions continue to arise. The streetscapes of Chicago’s Old Town and Lincoln Park, for example, have been unhappily transformed by the “prairie po-mo” terrace, which exhibits a forced play of surface treatments and eccentric pediments.

The terrace must attempt to resolve the hairy predicament of the proto-house: a gathering of pieces, defined by adjacencies. The rowhouse (like the semi) struggles in the limen between one and many. It is often too narrow to be expressed as a house in its own right. Rather, as its frontage is compressed, it appears as a component of one.

As urbanism, the terrace attempts to collect a busyness of house-fragments into a whole. Unification has been attempted, via a range of techniques: a defining material or color, an unusual

roof form, a repeated element or iconographic theme. Such is the case at FAT’s Lindsay Road housing in Sheffield, UK, where outsized ornament incorporates a collection of small homes.

Large-order massing gestures provide another partial solution, as in the curves of Herzog and de Meuron’s Pilotengasse housing in Vienna. These work hard to overcome an awkwardness inherent to the type—a pull between family and collectivity, “indivisibility [and] individuality.” The worst cases present urbanism as proximity without society, the very notion of *anomie* in built form.

We can see this clearly at Corona Court in Singapore, from 1984. It is poignant that this terrace, an object defined by the act of living together, should be expressed as a symphony of boundaries. Party walls stand proud of the façade, and frontages are staggered such that they do not align. This makes them appear to resist incorporation within a unified block. Paradoxically, these are intended to work as a motif, a repetition that makes the complex read as a whole. They both join and separate.

This discomfort reaches a kind of apex in our last example, the semi-detached house. The interest of the semi is due to the fact that this typology is always-already a deviant being, born of modern compromise: the oddly forced intimacy of the “two-family house.” The dwelling looks bigger than it is, and lends an impression of upper-class gentility to an object defined by lower middle-class spatial possibilities. These might seem preferable to the crass repetition of the terrace or suburban subdivision. But while the latter appears uncannily de-personalized, it nonetheless avoids the press of two parties—dwelling instead in the modern anonymity of the masses.

The prototypical form of these demi-houses suggests a failure to osmose. “Semi-detached” is a funny negative. It implies a sort of inability to achieve, completely, the status of the individual—to free oneself from social dependencies. Houses, we would believe, strive toward a moment of disengagement; semis remain trapped within the entanglements of a socio-typical privation. By the norms of bourgeois aspiration, they are “halfway” homes.

In former British colonies such as Australia and Singapore, the semi-detached house is a special site of interaction. In many cases, owners on either side exercise their right to self-expression without concern for their neighbor. The result is a kind of mirroring. Anything can be placed along the horizon between the two halves: Classicism meets Mediterranean, modernism encounters Asian Village Baroque.

The inherently problematical nature of the semi is exacerbated in this context by a tendency to insist upon difference—the “warring” nature of the conjoined twins. The British version articulates a desire to disappear into the larger social order. Not so the Singapore semi-dweller, who creates, instead, a visual antipathy, a recoil from the architectural remnants of a shared history: common floor levels, dimensions, window positions, and the like.

Some of the best English examples were clever enough to present the double-home not as a mirroring, but as a single, eccentrically disposed composition of bays and setbacks, turrets and secondary masses. Although each half is given an equal allotment of floor area, their organizations vary to reinforce the illusion of dissymmetry. With the Asian example, this internal division—and the desire to hide

behind a shared image of one house—turns quite radically in the opposite direction.

These awkward forms—that provisional avant-garde in which the language of a given type is either finding itself, or failing to do so—show, in a rather stark way, is the effect of market logic on the formal proposition. And here, I hope, the notion with which I began might be clearer. In these examples, the resolution of buildings that have begun to come face to face with quantities which appear almost sublime—where sheer scale and number beggar the ability of the architect to express anything but quantity itself.

I'd like to close with two images. They show very clearly the violence that value asserts on the built environment, on the wholeness of a formal proposition; but interestingly they do so in completely different ways. The first example appears to be an abandoned room. In fact, this room is situated above a buzzing high-street in Bonn. The ground floor is at the peak of German property values. At the street is an expensive retail boutique. In fact, this room is a victim of the precision of such valuation. The ground-floor space, per square foot, has in fact become so high that the footprint of the stair (at the ground floor) is worth more than the entire second floor. The landlord then does what only someone with a purely rentier view of the world would do: he or she demolishes the stair, rents the space that it used to take up on the ground, and abandons everything above to a state of ruin.

I'd like you to compare that with an image of Singapore's new wave of public housing. This complex seems to approach a limit of maximization in architecture, a moment in which housing could not get more dense or more vertical. And it is the result of another extreme form of valuation—the

production of economically viable, publically-subsidized housing on a piece of Asia's most expensive real estate. This leads to a radical pressure toward maximization. There are five massive towers, more than five thousand units. And in a moment straight out of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), these buildings are made yet more incredible by their unification through a series of sky bridges, in fact linear parks, which link them.

I would like to close with this thought—in a sense, about the richness of “poor” forms—of forms that are struggling to domesticate the types and the contradictions thrown up by paroxysms of urban value. For all their strangeness, buildings such as these cannot help but to expose the problems of their making. The predicament is naked, and the urgency is not hidden behind the anodyne skill of the abstractionist. These two images would seem to show an inexorable march away from anything resembling an architecture of specificity, of humanism in a traditional sense. Within this, though, what exists comes, rather surprisingly, to serve another purpose—as a heuristic device. That is, our struggles as architects and of our architectures, come to resemble something like an analytical technique.