





# ARCHITECTURE AS CULTURAL PRACTICE

*ARQUITECTURA COMO PRÁCTICA CULTURAL*

Peter Lynch

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Team 10, a small circle of architects whose core members met as participants in the 9th CIAM Congress in Aix-en-Provence in 1953, and who convened occasionally over more than two decades to critique each other's work, influenced the path of late modernist architecture and urban planning in Western Europe by questioning the principles of CIAM and the values of orthodox modernism. Their view: contemporary architects and planners had forgotten their actual subjects—people, communities, and citizens living in particular places, with specific needs and desires—and replaced them with abstractions. Team 10 offered no manifesto or agenda, with the exception of a few public statements which focused on aspirations and working methods.<sup>1</sup> Rather than challenge one ideology with another, they challenged one type of speech—the authoritative voice of CIAM—with another, discourse. Team 10's critique spread within architecture culture, among architects, teachers, and students. The persuasiveness of their argument rested on the spirit of exploration, curiosity and uncertainty evident in the work, not necessarily on its resolution or demonstration of mastery.

Suggestion and influence are subtle forces: it is impossible to measure to what degree Team 10's main actors were responsible for the loss of credibility of "received modernism", or to point to the

group's specific effect on the practice of architecture. There is no way to know, for sure, if Team 10 was a symptom or an agent of transformation. Like a letter in a bottle, thrown on shore by the tides, architecture is propelled and delivered by general forces of movement and change. If those forces were not already aligned—if a critique was not imminent—how could the future protagonists of Team 10, architects from different cultural circles with very different modes of practice, have recognized each other at the eighth and ninth CIAM congresses and formed a bond so quickly? How could their critique, offered in such a non-confrontational manner, have had such a pervasive effect? Disenchantment with ideology must have been widespread in postwar Europe. In Nigel Hendersen's photos of children playing on the streets of postwar London's East End, part the "grid" Peter and Alison Smithson offered at CIAM 9, one senses an overwhelming need for joy: for a repaired world, one that consciously makes a place for everyday happiness. Looking at these photos, one understands the change that Western Europe was undergoing on a political level, the spread of social democracy. Other transformations of late modernism also ran parallel to political change: consider the work of Louis Kahn and Le Corbusier in East Pakistan and India, throwing off colonial control.

Emergence of social democracy; movements for national independence; these are examples of the tidal forces that propel architecture. Perceived this way, even the changes wrought by digital technology should be considered an expression of political and social values, not forces in themselves. Architecture realigns as the general ideals of society change. This is not to claim that architecture expresses social change, however. Like the letter in the bottle, the work of architecture is not a general message. Every work expresses the understanding of individuals, which

ideas, but in fact they are decades old and formulaic, the opposite of risk-taking.

Contemporary architecture reduces the capacity of its subjects to attend to and take delight in the world, because architects have lost this capacity themselves. The world is a subtle and deep place: as architects we should be curious about this complex reality, take delight in it, and reflect it in our work. We expect no less of painting, poetry, music, or literature. Why do we expect so little of our own creative practice? Despite the bravado and publicity surrounding contemporary architec-

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may be unrelated to, or even contradict, the historical "meaning" of those social forces. One could claim that the loss of faith in modernism provoked by Team 10 and others led to Post-modernism—which, in architecture, was a debacle. But Post-modernism, in architecture, was the work of specific architects with particular sensibilities and inclinations, collectively considered. Things could have ended up quite differently. One should not tar Team 10 with that brush.

Perhaps it is time for a "Team 11" to ask questions about architecture as currently practiced. The obstacle to architecture as a cultural practice, this time, is not ideological control or an insistence on universal rational principles, but a lack of curiosity, nimbleness, and courage. Those who believe the contrary—that architecture is enjoying a golden age of avant-garde experimentation, radical formal invention, and refined technical performance, driven by digital design technology—should wake up. Tropes of contemporary design continue to be served to architecture students, clients, and consumers as avant-garde

ture (or perhaps because of it), our disciplinary aspiration has been diluted. If we continue along this path, what we do will become nothing more than styling plus technique. Strong form, efficient performance, tight detailing... is that all there is to architecture? Our expectations are impoverished.

I would like to describe an aspiration for architecture—a hope that our discipline will reclaim its full capacity as a cultural practice. The architects I admire most, including Alvaro Siza, Carl-Vigo Holmebakk in Norway, Bijoy Jain and Studio Mumbai, OBRA Architects in New York, and historically Mies, Aalto, Asplund, and Lewerentz, can serve as examples. Their aspiration is different from the aspiration of the architects who are the most loudly promoted and celebrated today—although the fame and respect surrounding the work of Siza and Studio Mumbai suggest that the cultural situation is not as bleak as I am portraying. One speaks of sensitivity, subtlety, joy, care, humor, precision, honesty, and other such qualities, encountering their work. Their approach is rare because



se it requires a personal and disciplinary capacity for these things. Today a very different and more expedient idea of architecture, transposed from product design, engineering, fashion, and marketing, has taken hold.

It isn't difficult to determine which approach you follow as an architectural designer. Ask yourself: Is my work based in a **concept**? Do I speak about design in terms of **strategies**? Do I think of work as a kind of **rational problem-solving**? Do I expect my work to be **evaluated in the terms it was conceived**? Are my sketches mostly **diagrams**? Do I speak about **generating form**? Can fundamental aspects of the design process be **optimized or scripted**? If you say yes to most of these you are following a contemporary approach, one that dominates most US schools.

You may think that I am presenting a caricature of design. It is a caricature, but unfortunately it is also the norm in many places. On the other hand, you might practice in other ways. You may be refining ideas, not concepts. Your design intention may emerge over the course of the work. The form may result from your work, not drive it. Your sketches may require inflection, gesture, dimensions, or scale to be meaningful—in other words, they may be drawings, not diagrams. There may be multiple, radically different reasons why aspects of your design are the way they are. You may consider material to have various kinds of properties, including dimensional and structural limiting characteristics, not only generic or surface properties. You may be inspired by architects from very different times and places and consider your work to be in conversation with them. You may recognize that there are different kinds of precision, depending upon circumstances. Did Lewerentz, Asplund, or Aalto rely upon concepts, strategies, methods, or diagrams?

What we do as architects is difficult, and it's understandable that architects and critics would like to simplify our purpose and methods. But the difficulty, and indirectness, of architecture is inherent in the work. Many architects acknowledge this in their writings about architecture.

#### SCHINKEL:

"I... soon found myself trapped in a great labyrinth where I had to ponder how far the rational principle should be applied in defining the trivial concept of the object, and how far, on the other hand, those higher influences of the historical and artistic-poetic purposes should be allowed in order to raise it to a work of art. In this regard it was not difficult to recognize that the governing relation of such different principles had to be different in each concrete case, and it was equally clear to me that in this regard we can speak of architecture only where the true artistic element assumes its place in this art, and that in all other cases it is and remains and objective handiwork. Therefore here, as everywhere else in the fine arts, an effective theory is difficult and reduces itself in the end to the cultivation of feeling. From what was said above it should also be evident that feeling in architecture certainly embraces a very wide circle, and... should be cultivated from the most varied and different sources..."<sup>2</sup>

#### GIO PONTI:

"I think I am not the only one to have reached suddenly one fine day certain obviously rational results and to have reached them not through logic—as would appear natural and intellectually right—but through a strange and tiring sequence of deviations, mistakes, tentative approaches, and mere chance.

There seems to exist an episodic logic, a logic that is basically illogical and proceeds along difficult roads, not by a priori reckonings as in glorious, directly logical thought but rather by a posteriori recognitions and recoveries—a logic that is empirical. The a priori logic leads by logical processes to indisputably logical results. Through its byways and imaginings, empirical logic leads us to conclusions of which we finally recognize the logical substance."<sup>3</sup>



**ALVAR AALTO:**

"When I personally have to solve some architectural problem I am constantly—indeed, almost without exception—faced with an obstacle difficult to surmount, a kind of "three in the morning feeling." The reason seems to be the complicated, heavy burden resulting from the way that architectural design operates with countless, often mutually discordant elements. Social, humanitarian, economic, and technical requirements combined with psychological problems affecting both the individual and the group, the movements and internal friction of both crowds of people and individuals—all this builds up into a tangled web that cannot be straightened out rationally or mechanically. The sheer number of various demands and problems forms a barrier that makes it hard for the basic architectural idea to emerge."<sup>4</sup>

**ALVARO SIZA:**

"An architectonic proposition, whose aim is to go deep into the existing transformation trends, into the clashes and strains that make up reality; a proposition that intends to be more than a passive materialization, refusing to reduce that same reality, analyzing each of its aspects, one by one, that proposition can't find support in a fixed image, can't follow a linear evolution...It is more vulnerable as it is true."<sup>5</sup>

The intractability of our work isn't a problem at all, it is actually something marvelous. As the saying goes: to whom much is given, much is expected. Architecture gives form to our shared human life. It is provisional because all the expectations and demands that bear upon a project cannot be rectified in a formulaic way. The architect seeks a resolution, but the criteria, and therefore the outcome, are never simple. Limitations, obstructions, regulations, and requirements push us to a formal solution that had no previous existence. Gio Ponti explained that the architect's thinking is a posteriori, not a priori. The difficulty of our work forces us to invent

new relationships, to speak new words. In this way architecture does justice to life.

"If we are not afraid of life, of this irreducible world, we would be thirsting for such architecture, one that recognizes strange and unfamiliar order, balance, and harmony as well as simple orders and forms. Familiarity, comprehensibility, clarity, and spectacle can be desirable qualities, but are they sufficient in the end? "After all," Antoni asked, in response to a critique of his films, "this difficulty of reading, this lack of clarity, aren't they—how shall I put it—a quality?"<sup>6</sup>

Modern life is shaped by abstract institutions (finance, food, religion, law, politics, science, industry, medicine, education...). They are disembodied forces, but each of them does have a physical outpost which we call bank, farm, church, court, congress, laboratory, factory, hospital, and school. Each of these architectural programs is the visible outcropping of an invisible conceptual iceberg. If we, as architects, want to shed light on the institutions that define and control modern life—if we want to do more than house, facilitate, and cover up for them—what is the best design approach?

A work of architecture, in my opinion, does not comment on anything, although it may allude to or elicit many things. Architecture does not denote: is not a semantic system. A work of architecture doesn't symbolize anything. Victor Hugo was right, the book killed architecture as a symbolic system, and we should be grateful for that. The only disembodied representations, the only ideological messages, which architecture continues to specialize in telling are myths and lies. Telling lies is a large part of what architecture does: the 9/11 memorial in New York is a good example. If a story isn't accepted as true, make it bigger, heavier, and more expensive: maybe then people will believe it. But even this "brute force" ideological application of architecture seems obsolete today, contrasted with the power of digital images, so much more persuasive, with so much less physical effort.

If an architect wishes to "tell truth to power," to represent, in his or her work,



the reality of the institutions he or she is serving, including unfavorable aspects, he or she must resort to irony and give the work a double face. An ironic gesture may have a virtuous motive—it may puncture the lie, point out the falseness of something that is widely accepted as true. But irony is corrosive in architecture. Irony goes against the fundamentally affirmative aspect of construction. Something that is meant to last a long time should be positive, life-affirming. Irony is a personal stance—an individual's opinion is expressed by it. The architect's or artist's view is emblazoned on an ironic work. In fine art, authorship is central; irony can play a powerful role. In architecture an emphatic assertion of authorship is an obstacle to the work. Ronchamp is a better chapel, one that better serves its purpose of devotion, for pilgrims who have no interest in Le Corbusier. At the ribbon-cutting of a new public building, or when new construction is reported in the popular press, the architect often goes unmentioned, at least in the US. I used to think this was disrespectful; now I think it is very interesting.

There is a positive but critical stance that architecture can take vis-à-vis institutions. Each of these institutions exists to serve us. When the buildings that embody these institutions are capacious, beautiful, and well built, we affirm that basic fact. Architecture does not exist to serve institutional clients; institutions exist to serve human beings. In each type of building there are specific bodily attitudes, movements, stances, and mental/emotional states that are beneficial, that best support the action taking place. For example, in a church a state of reverence and reflection corresponds to certain positions of the body, certain ways that sound reflects, and so on. The architect's design should anticipate and receive that way of occupying a space. In a library one should feel concentration, rumination, intellectual solidarity, daydreaming; these qualities correspond to particular positions and movements of the body, and to certain conditions of light, space, sound, color, and material. Our job is to create the framework for this appropriate emotional encounter.

Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contra-*

*diction in Architecture*, first published in 1962, speaks eloquently in favor of a complex, non-schematic architecture.

"I speak of a complex and contradictory architecture based on the richness and ambiguity of modern experience, including that experience which is inherent in art... today the wants of program, structure, mechanical equipment, and expression, even in single buildings in simple contexts, are diverse and conflicting in ways previously unimaginable. The increasing dimension and scale of architecture in urban and regional planning add to the difficulties...

...I like elements which are hybrid rather than "pure," compromising rather than "clean," distorted rather than "straight-forward," ambiguous rather than "articulated," perverse as well as impersonal, boring as well as "interesting," conventional rather than "designed," accommodating rather than excluding, redundant rather than simple, vestigial as well as innovating, inconsistent and equivocal as well as direct and clear. I am for messy vitality over obvious unity. I include the non sequitur and proclaim the duality."<sup>7</sup>

His position is convincing—how could one disagree? But "by their fruits ye shall know them," and the fruits of the architectural Post-modern movement were spoiled. So to uphold my argument I feel that I must make a distinction between Venturi's position and my own.

For Venturi, as I understand him, the value of an architectural work lies in the play of associations and meanings. A work of architecture that is complex, for example one that combines unity and polyvalence, simplicity and multiplicity, is better than one that is less complex. His interests are fundamentally formal, as he admits in the book,<sup>8</sup> and, I would suggest, rhetorical: for him architecture seems to convey meaning in a linguistic way. Elements gather significance through their presence, absence, association, disassociation, distortion, and so on. For Venturi, architecture is capable of creating complex and contradictory propositions. If a tectonic



assembly or architectonic composition is not able to convey the meaning, the project may employ symbolism, conventional associations, written words, or ironical juxtaposition of elements of different types and classes.

Venturi has confidence, intelligence, wit, and a remarkable depth of historical references. One walks away from his book as one walks away from a very persuasive, literate person at a dinner party. I met a student like that at Cranbrook: he always had something apropos to offer—a sharp citation or reference. I was impressed and did what I could to support him—writing letters of recommendation and inviting him to critiques. But the last review he attended was a disaster. He used his wit to disguise his ignorance of the subject we were addressing. I couldn't help thinking, he seems to know everything but he really doesn't know the most important thing. The value of a conversation, or of a work of architecture, does not lie in the play of references and associations. This becomes obvious when someone crosses a line that should not be crossed—makes a pun about a family tragedy, for example. When that happens our shocked reaction reveals the existence of something unspoken below the level of conversation.

In *Complexity and Contradiction* Venturi advocates using "conventional elements in an unconventional way." Non-architectural elements, like a television antenna, are composed in relationship with traditional elements, like a pediment. The result is shocking and troubling. Before knowing anything about architecture, I saw a picture of Venturi's Guild House in an old issue of *Life Magazine* and felt uneasy about it. Even if architecture were a symbolic system, that does not mean that different kinds of signs can coexist in one proposition.

The significance of architecture does not reside in the play of allusion, reference, paradox, etc. It is the other way around. The meaning does not lie in the presence of the paradox; the paradox holds (or rather withholds) the meaning. I would like to give an example. I was in Finland in the summer of 2003. One evening I was

invited to a sauna with a friend's family. After the sauna we jumped into the lake. It had a muddy bottom; the mud oozed between our toes. I asked my friend's seven-year-old if he liked the sensation. He puzzled over the question for a little while and then told me that he both liked and disliked it. He told me that there is a word in Finnish, with no English translation, which describes this state of both liking and disliking: *ristiriitainen*. I thought that his response was remarkable: it is still the only Finnish word I know. Back in the US I asked a Finnish friend; he told me that "ristiriitainen" in fact does have an English equivalent, "contradictory." Somehow I hope that the young person's understanding was right—that the word is fundamentally untranslatable.

It is not the presence of a paradox per se, but that feeling of liking and disliking at the same time, the feeling of mud between the toes, which we can bring forward as architects. Emotion and intuition manifest themselves in a form, and form offers itself to emotion and intuition.

I would like to offer a few examples from music. In the first movement of the Mendelssohn *Violin Concerto*, Anne-Sophie Mutter, who is a bravura performer, pushing the orchestra, relents.<sup>9</sup> For a moment the confidence is withdrawn. Her playing becomes weak and scratchy, like a child practicing Wohlfahrt exercises. This lasts for a few phrases, and then her playing returns full-force with a crescendo. The result is very playful: she makes herself vulnerable, and when her authority is restored, her strength becomes playful in turn.

Another example: the *Goldberg Variations*. Listen to Gustav Leonhardt play the aria and the first variation.<sup>10</sup> Bach's aria is filled with ornaments, whose main purpose, I think, is not to decorate and embellish the theme, as the word ornament would imply. It is to destabilize the meter, to put the tempo divisions into play. Where do the beats fall in the second phrase of the aria—before, during, or after the ornaments? Often it is impossible to say. The ornaments allow Bach to shape the tempo without rubato, without sentimentality,



the way a Tai Chi master moves his energy around.

In both examples the music establishes something perfect, simple, or direct, with a clear intention, which the composer and performer, working with shared understanding, unravel for a time. Listening, we understand this falling away and recuperation of structure as something significant, and we evaluate the performer by how sensitively this is done (and also by his or her technical perfection). An inflection that is natural and unstudied is always the rarest and most precious. For a connoisseur, inflection is significant because it is difficult. For a music lover it is important because it acknowledges something we understand deeply—it points to an emotional truth. As Alvaro Siza wrote in the quote above, "It is more vulnerable as it is true."

A few examples from architecture. Why does this ceramic figurine, a smiling man riding a hen, terminate the ridges of the palaces in the Forbidden City? One official explanation, which I read in a tour guide, is that he represents a historical figure—an insurrectionist who was hung from the eaves of an official building, reproduced in terra cotta as a warning to others. That doesn't make any sense. This guy, and the other mythical creatures that are on parade with him, are as intimidating as teddy bears. What are these cute figures doing in a landscape of power—of total control—a landscape so strict that symmetry is absolute along the main axis, and plants and trees are excluded? I think that their function is the same as the function of the uplifted roof eaves: without these details the space would become oppressive, unbearable. They give levity, a breath of life. A Manchu children's toy sits on the eaves of the center of power, leading us to the clouds, in compensation for the strict control established by the rest of the architectural program—symmetry, modularity, regularity, and so on. Through a kind of double reflection, the state gains more authority by this silly and charming figure. It's like the wigs in the House of Parliament and Old Bailey.

Mies' Barcelona Pavilion, which might be

the most pure, crystalline, and perfect work of modern architecture, is the abstraction of a villa. Most of the functionality of a house, including enclosure and heating, is missing. Only one event was choreographed to take place there: a reception for the King and Queen of Spain. On the back wall of the largest space, which would be the living room if this were a house, where the King and Queen held their reception, is an onyx wall with flamboyant veining. This arrangement is repeated in the Villa Tugendhat. At Tugendhat the onyx veining is even more flame-like. In both places, the onyx wall is located where the fireplace would be, if there were one. The veining is a surrogate for fire, as my friend the architect Chris Bardt, principal of Studio 3Six0 and professor at RISD, pointed out. Mies has given us fire and withdrawn the heat. It would be beside the point to call this a paradox. One feels the cold intensely, sitting and looking at the marble, because the fire is trapped in the stone. And by extension, the entire life of the Pavilion, an immanent life, is trapped on the surfaces of the walls and floors in reflections and shadows.

In these examples we see playfulness, vulnerability, transmutation, wit, allusion. These are possible because the architect has gone to great effort to define and resolve a field of spatial relationships. The field can be "homotopic," characterized by an overriding singular order, as in Mies, or it can be "heterotopic," established by the coming-together of dissimilar elements, as in Aalto. These are Foucault's terms, which Dimitri Porphyrios uses in his remarkable book on Aalto, *Sources of Modern Eclecticism*. Within these highly resolved fields, unexpected qualities and relationships are planted and discovered. All these qualities, taken together, give the work its necessary emotional and intellectual range—sensitivity, subtlety, joy, carefulness, complexity, precision. These are the qualities I mentioned at the beginning of the lecture. Architecture of this kind is still possible—it is just difficult.

I would like to show you projects by me and my design partners that are recently completed, or still in construction. Hopefully you will see them as substantiation of





Fig. 1. House for a Classicist and Antiques Restorer, Sea Cliff, Long Island

the position I am putting forward. If you feel that my work is not a very good example, if it falls short, that doesn't mean that such an architecture as I'm describing isn't possible and worthwhile.

### **HOUSE FOR A CLASSICIST AND ANTIQUES RESTORER,** Sea Cliff, Long Island

The clients, retired schoolteachers, asked me to help them transform their small summer cottage, substandard and falling apart, built in 1917, into a year-round residence. The house was a tiny gable-roofed box on a very small lot, with ad hoc additions, at the bottom of a slope, surrounded by tall trees and neighbor's houses. The clients are very cultured. She teaches and researches Latin and Roman history, received a Rome Prize, and is working on a book about Rome in the Gilded Age. He collects and restores American antiques.

Sea Cliff was founded in the 19th Century as a summer colony for Methodist religious revival meetings. In the next wave of settlement, merchants built rambling Queen Anne houses with towers and irregular roofscapes. In the 1950's professionals built a few Modernist houses. Artists moved there in the 1970's and brought a counterculture element. So there has always been something different, eccentric, and not-quite-real about the town in

the context of suburban Long Island. If every house is a mind, then the houses of Sea Cliff are daydreaming. They dream varied dreams, from pompous to meek, but most of the houses believe that they are someone else, somewhere else, in some other time. I wanted to give the clients a house that had such a fairy-tale quality. Part of the way I tried to achieve this is the site plan: the path to the house slopes and winds. For such a small lot, the arrival sequence is quite drawn out. One must travel the S-shaped path to the end before one sees the entrance. But the most important aspect of the design, in terms of the fable quality, is a two-story addition. On the second floor is a studio for the classicist, with an irregular faceted skylight. I thought of this element geometrically, architecturally, and allegorically—as a cylinder, tower, and broken column. Considered geometrically, the skylight slices the cylinder along two planes—the setback plane of the zoning envelope, and a plane perpendicular to the sun's rays at noon on winter solstice. Architecturally considered, these planes are a-historical. They make the tower less nostalgic. This goes back to an insight that arose from earlier projects, methods of constructions for domes. Almost every dome profile has a historical association: it is impossible to look at an out-bulging dome and not think of an Iranian dome, for instance. Even a purely hemispherical dome is historical. But I discovered that



if a hemisphere dome is dented—if there are flat spots on the surface—it has no historical association, it becomes just the thing itself, like bruised fruit in a still life. Considered allegorically, the addition is a broken column, like the famous ruined column folly at Desert de Retz: a symbol of time passing, hubris, or fortitude. The classicist/scholar who uses the studio was delighted at the association—and so was the local architectural review board, since, one block from the house, in a public park, is a Civil War monument in the shape of a broken column. In my opinion, the relationship between the house and the monument is nonsensical. On the interior of the studio the 3x6 joists framing the skylight are exposed, painted white. The effect is at once crude and sophisticated. I was inspired by the work of Smiljan Radic, who used this idea for a house in Vilches, Chile. Because of the compound miters, this was the most difficult part of the house to construct: the carpenters had to rebuild it three times. No one would touch the skylight—I had to build it myself.

The original house was built non-reflectively in an ad-hoc manner. It was not very beautiful, as vernacular buildings generally are. In its ugliness the house raised a question I have been pondering for a while: why are vernacular buildings usually so beautiful? One reason, which I first heard expressed by the architect W.G. Clark, is the fitness arising from correction and adjustment over time. In architecture, design requires a long gestation period. There is no way to speed up thinking, even if the production of drawings, forms, and buildings can be accelerated. An arc of thought takes a certain length of time to complete. No one wants to hear this—not architects, clients, or contractors—but it is inescapable. Traditional vernacular buildings, subject to modification over time, eventually receive their necessary span of attention. Why, then, was the cottage in Sea Cliff ugly? Perhaps it needed one more “turn of the wheel” for the accumulated ad hoc decisions to fall into place. I wanted the addition to be, not something extra and aberrant, but rather a way to gather all the elements of the house together into relation and resolve

them compositionally. The planes of the skylight are important because they allow the tower to be integrated compositionally with the roof planes of the rest of the house.

### **VILLA FOR AN INDUSTRIALIST,** Shenzhen (2006-2008)

The project is an interior renovation of a cast concrete villa, one of hundreds of developer houses in a gated community. The three floor plans and the roof structure were designed in a “picturesque” way, independent of each other. This means that the structural system is irregular. To carry the loads from floor to floor, the engineer was forced to introduce concrete columns and transfer beams in seemingly random locations. The developer presumed that this structure would be hidden by *poché* and drop ceilings. When my partner, Ahlaiya Yung, and I visited the house we told the client that we would be happy to take the project if she was willing to expose the columns and beams in certain places.

On the first and second floors we approached the design as a series of installations: each of the rooms has a special ceiling, a meditation on pattern and order. Many ceilings are domes. I thought of the project in a musical way: one encounters a series of domes and patterns as one moves from the entry vestibule to the lobby, living room, and the dining room, and upstairs to the second floor hall (which has a collapsible dome hanging like a ghostly bell within the pre-existing structure). From the hall one can overlook the vestibule dome that one first encountered. Vaults in the bedrooms conclude the sequence: these are made of white plaster with seamless corners. The effect is impossible to photograph: lying in bed it is difficult to see how deep the vault is.

On the lower level there is a hexagonal mosaic floor made of shattered tiles: I asked the contractor to arrange the tile fragments to create the illusion of curvature. In this way the story of the domes is brought to an end, flattened like a fossil.



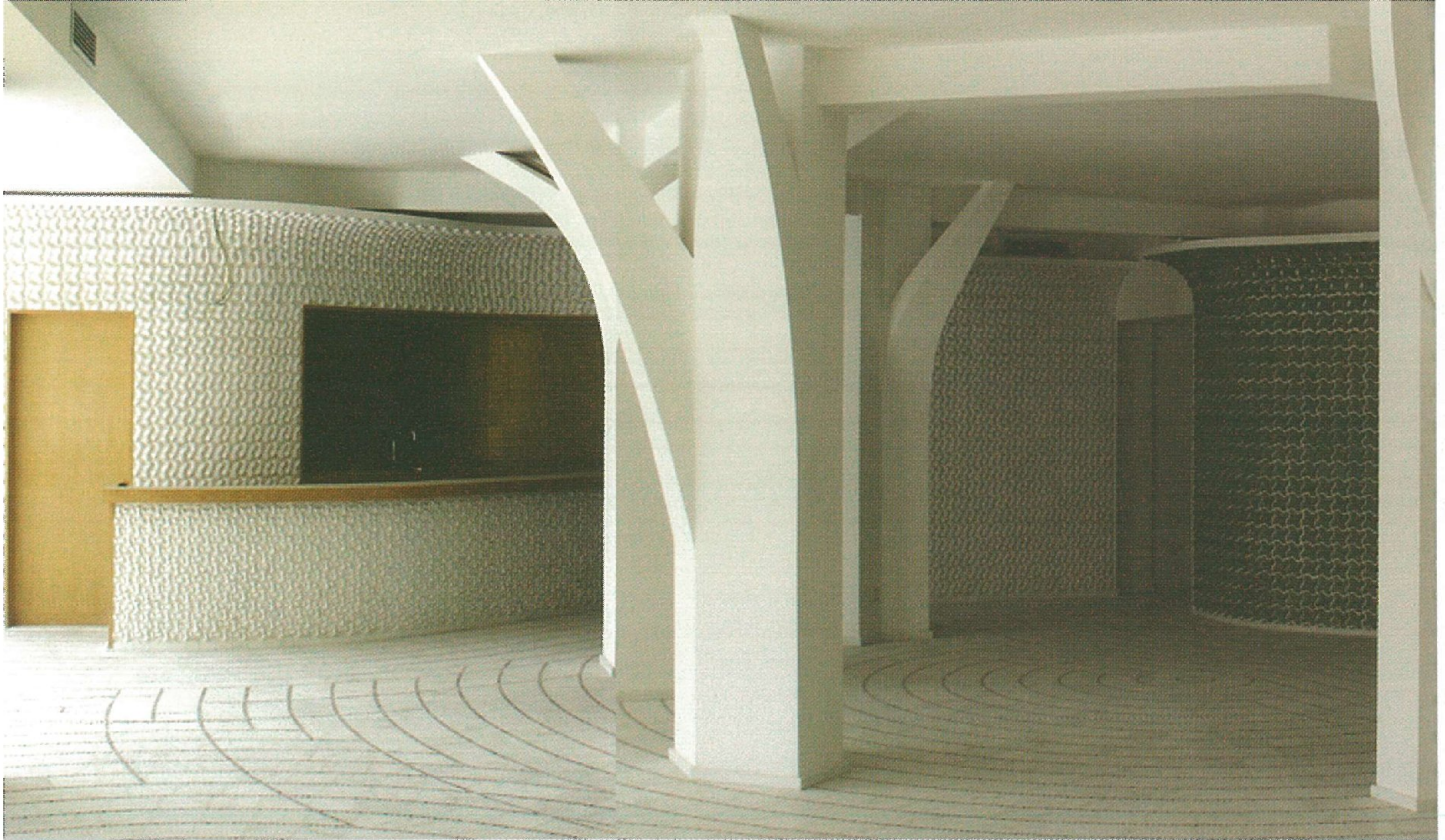


Fig. 2. M & C Gallery, Hong Kong

One passes through a pair of doors into a different type of space: if this were a musical composition it would be the scherzo. Wall tiles are custom-made, slip-cast out of porcelain with very high relief. These walls are capped by a cove that is doubly curved—which means that it is impossible to lay a regular grid of tiles on the surface. So as the tiles are laid on the cove, each course is rotated clockwise a little more. That allows the tiles to accommodate the curving surface. There are also  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{1}{4}$  tiles: here the regular grid pattern breaks down. The floor is covered in marble tiles with glass tile strips in an intersecting ripple pattern. The branching columns, which incorporate structural columns required by the ill-fitting dining room above, have integrated light fixtures. The house has many more details and ideas about pattern and order. It took a few years to complete: there are custom furniture pieces as well. China has a reputation for building quickly, so it is at first surprising, but then perhaps understandable, that the client was willing to support such slow work. We seem to attract clients who have become disenchanted by the expediency of the environment that surrounds them. They want someone to work attentively on their own projects.

### **M & C GALLERY, HONG KONG**

(to be completed late November 2012)

The clients are collectors and dealers in Chinese antique sculptures, artifacts, and paintings, who have run a well-established antiques gallery at this location on Hollywood Road for many years. One partner plays the guqin, the traditional Chinese harp. The project isn't commercial in a conventional sense—it isn't a shop: they have made only one sale to a walk-in client in 17 years. The gallery is their cultural site. They want to reacquaint contemporary Chinese with their own tradition, and show them how many aspects of ancient Chinese culture are relevant today and can contribute to a cultured and fulfilling life. The furnishings are antique, the working teacups and kettles are ancient. The clients wish to show people how to live in continuity with their history. They are trying to sway China from its unsustainable path, which will end in environmental disaster unless something changes radically.

This brief meant that a normal commercial approach was not appropriate. For example, the clients told us that they do not want to see any products in the space—no



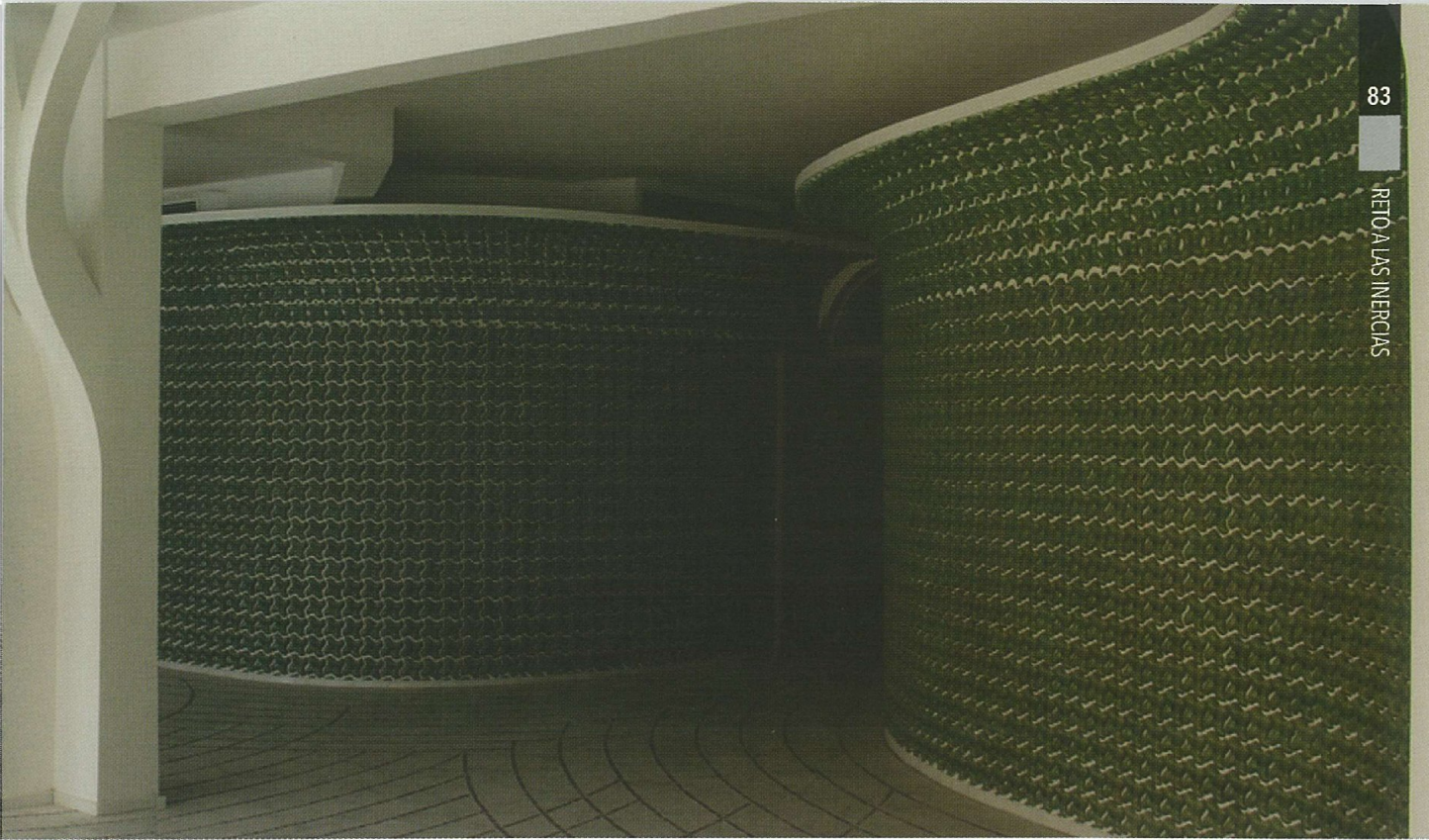


Fig. 3. Chinese ornament



commercial light fixtures, hardware, air conditioning grilles, etc. Not even an electric doorbell.

My business partner Lydia Song had a clear intention for the façade: it should be like an eye. Since the clients' goal is not to sell things to passers-by, they don't need to fill the storefront with objects. They want to display only one item at a time—which Lydia located in the pupil of the eye. The store window is ringed by a hammered brass frame, enclosed by a stone cove frame. The door has two peepholes, one at the height of each of the clients. There are storage cabinets and closets everywhere: in the entrance gallery, under the guqin pavilion (a sound-insulated room with glass doors where the client practices and performs), in the main meeting place, the salon, and in the service spaces at the back of the shop. As with every renovation project, there are many limitations and shortcomings to the raw space. Despite the obstacles and irregularities, our goal was to create an interior that was dimensionally resolved. As Aalto once said, famously, the design module is the millimeter, or less. Dimensional resolution is not esoteric: it means that cabinet divisions align with floor joints, baseboards align, cabinet doors are well proportioned, and so on. It turns out that that perfection is impossible to achieve. But this is not a problem. The most unexpected and precious qualities arise when regularity must give way. For example, Lydia made the floor tiles in the entrance gallery and salon slightly rectangular, not square. The folding glass doors on the north and south sides of the pavilion have different widths. The ceiling coves do not align with cabinets below. I think that these irregularities will be the most subtle and important aspects of the design. For example, looking to the end of the space from the entrance door, through the layered doors of the guqin pavilion, the differing widths of the doors will create a subtle perspectival illusion. There are many other details that I could describe about the design. For example, in place of an electric doorbell, a door knocker imbedded in the entrance alcove pulls a cord which rings brass "butler's bells" deep within the space.

It is more pleasurable to operate, and more beautiful-sounding, than a buzzer. The light fixtures for the salon are, at the same time, very abstract—made of geometric solids connecting corner-to-corner, in what the architect John Hejduk, my teacher, called a "pointal touch"—and tactile, speckled with exposed fasteners and wires. The clients are grateful that we are working so carefully. The trust that they placed in us is humbling.

### **KWAN KEE RESTAURANT,**

Sanlitun Village, Beijing  
(2012, opening June 2012)

This project, a restaurant on the second floor of Nali Patio in Sanlitun district, Beijing, will be completed in a month or two. It will be open 24 hours a day, serving traditional Cantonese food for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. This means that the space will be occupied in all light conditions. Our goal was to make a space that had the sense of drama and encounter of a grand public concourse, like a train station. Daylight is necessary for this experience. We added as many windows as possible on the south wall; enough sunlight streams in to eliminate the need for electric light during most of the day. We added a mezzanine on the south, glazed wall. When you enter on axis from the north side, you are confronted with two layers, a double frieze, of people, benches, and tables, strongly backlit. At night, seen from the outside, the tableau of diners on two levels will be very dramatic. Our goal is to create a space that people will look very attractive in. As architects know, certain architectural elements, like curving grand stairs, and certain spatial angles, like diagonal views from above, are great for people-watching. The effect is theatrical and cinematographic. As you enter, the space opens in a fan shape: there are stairs to left and right, slightly different. To the northwest and northeast the mezzanine level is raised higher than along the south side. Diners sitting on the higher mezzanines feel like they are pressed up against the ceiling: they have a privileged outlook (a trick I learned from Philippe





Fig. 4. Light fixture



Starck's Paramount Hotel lobby in New York). The view seems like a dramatic camera angle, for example the last scene of *Citizen Kane*.

This project also required careful dimensional control. The size and spacing of the battens on the curving walls, the alignment of soffits and edges, the slender steelwork; controlling all these details was the most critical aspect of the construction process. For example, the contractor built the mezzanine an extra 10 cm deep, measured from the south wall. 10cm was enough to ruin the sense of openness of the main central space. He obliged us by cutting down the framing and rebuilding it. The ceiling was an important surface to tame: as you know ceilings in most commercial spaces are out of control, covered with air conditioning grilles and units, down-lights, sprinklers, exit lights, alarm lights, and who knows what else. We designed the ceiling as a series of vaults. All the service elements are located within, or hung from, gaps between the vaults. The main light fixtures are custom-made plaster medallions with wood hoops, hanging from the ceiling. They function as indirect light sources—a ring of LED lights shines upward onto the ceiling vaults. Some light also passes through a baffle to illuminate the sculpted lower surface of the medallion.

The thinking of the architect, and therefore the work of architecture which traces that thought, moves back and forth from the specific to the general, from concrete to abstract, from the definite to the elusive. There are different tracks for this back-and-forth movement. One is the relationship of means and ends: in the light fixtures at M&C Gallery, the fasteners are needed to create the abstraction of the "pointal touch." Another track runs between fact and allusion or association. The faceted skylight of the Sea Cliff House is the consequence of a zoning setback plane plus the winter sun angle—an equation of two completely different types of facts—and it is also something allusive, the truncated face of a broken column. One must also consider the repartee between precision and error. Because architecture is a human artifact, and because it is an attempt

to resolve completely different, ultimately irreconcilable forces and requirements, it is always imperfect. But architecture, like a human life, is a kind of sublation: contingency and error are transformed into their opposite—intention and perfection. In a great work of architecture, things are exactly as they should be. If one is not at home with this kind of thinking, the meaning of architecture is restricted to the satisfaction of aims and the achievement of effects.

## P

#### PETER LYNCH

Peter Lynch graduated from Cooper Union in 1984, worked for Steven Holl Architects from 1984-1990, and opened his office Peter Lynch Architect, PLLC in New York in 1991. With Lydia Song he also co-directs Lynch+Song, a Beijing-based studio dedicated to spatially and technically inventive, detail- and material-oriented work at all scales, from furniture and interiors to buildings and district-scale mixed-use development [[www.lynchandsong.com](http://www.lynchandsong.com)]. He taught hand drawing at Harvard Graduate School of Design; architectural design at The City College of New York, Rhode Island School of Design, and Parsons the New School, New York; and history/theory at City College and Parsons. He was External Examiner for the Dalhousie University Faculty of Architecture from 2003-2012. He directed the graduate architecture program at Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI from 1996-2005. He has led international urban design workshops in Tokyo, Cordoba Argentina, Mokpo Korea, and Santander Spain, and has exhibited, lectured, and participated in reviews at over 40 architecture schools throughout the world. He was chosen as an Emerging Voice in Architecture by the Architectural League of New York in 2003, received a Progressive Architecture Award in 2005, won a Rome Prize in 2004-05, and was a finalist in the Young Architects Program sponsored by PS1/Museum of Modern Art in 2008 (with Gustavo Crembil). Recent projects: Gallery for Chinese antiques in Hong Kong (2013), Restaurant and casino in Sanlitun Village, Beijing (2013), House in Sea Cliff NY (2012). Selected publications: "Villa for an Industrialist" published in Marc Kristal, *Re:Crafted* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2010). Peter Lynch (Bristol, England: Telos Art Publishing, 2003), and "No Resistance", *Journal of Architecture Education* 62:4, May 2009 (with Gustavo Crembil), which received the 2009-2010 JAE "Best Design-as-Scholarship Award."



## NOTES

1. Dirk van den Heuvel and Max Risselada, "Introduction: Looking into the Mirror of Team 10", <http://www.team10online.org/>
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3. Gio Ponti, *In Praise of Architecture* (New York: F. W. Dodge Corp., 1960).
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7. Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), p.16.
8. Note to the Second Edition: "I now wish the title had been *Complexity and Contradiction in Architectural Form...*" Ibid, p. 14.
9. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faoYIW1Hrvs&feature=related>
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