

# OF POLITICS, HISTORY AND PLEASURE:

*Owen engages theoretical architecture at the site of pedagogy, at the school, the so-called typology of thought, projection, conjecture. Unbounded by the ethics of architecture as a practice, as public service, the school of architecture houses the juvenile delinquents of a pragmatic discourse, the unrepressed tenants of marginal architecture. It is at this site of the school, as a seamless floor slab of pure representation, that he surveys a volatile contribution to theoretical architecture.*

G R A H A M O W E N

## THE THEORETICAL PROJECT AS EXCAVATION OF THE MODERN

Recent work at the Carleton School of Architecture provokes reflection on the nature of the theoretical project (as distinct from the merely unbuilt), and on the connections among Carleton and several other loci of theoretical inquiry: the schools at Cranbrook, Cooper Union and the Architectural Association, and certain practitioners in Britain and Austria. The Carleton projects also suggest a more general reappraisal of current theoretical concerns, insofar as these define themselves in terms of politics, history and pleasure.

Two exemplary projects illuminate these issues particularly strongly because of the intensity with which they pursue certain themes. Both based on a programme for an experimental opera house in Montreal, the schemes by Heather Cameron and Edward Webb explore, to varying degrees, questions of narrative, of non-rational process as method, of revitalized abstraction, and of aleatoric space.

Webb's project is meditative, eschewing a faith in programme as a basis for design, and instead following an idiosyncratic method, described in Figures 1-4. In the way it "piles up" disparate programme elements, it resembles Koolhaas' pseudo-rational point grids in OMA's Parc de la Villette, used to create a graphic texture of "tectonic confetti". Webb's method, though, is deliberately a-rational, and where Koolhaas' is tongue-in-cheek, Webb's process, in its a-rationality (compared to functionalist or typological methods, for example) is as polemical as the dense and mysterious object it produces.

Cameron's project is structured around several parallel narrative concerns. "Front-of-house" and "back-of-house" programmatic areas, normally segregated in the conventional theatre or opera house, are spatially interwoven in such a way that the public are exposed to the backstage workings of the opera as they move towards the performance space. These backstage activities are arranged around the curvilinear public route in a didactic narrative sequence intended to parallel the production sequence of the opera itself.

At the same time, another sequence, whose theme is escalating sensory experience, is followed. After passing through the initial orientation areas inside the main entrance, the visitor moves between a photo gallery and a library, and next, rising up to the second level on a curving ramp, between a cinema and audio-visual booths. "This stage of the building is intended to reveal the frozen form of opera... for the study of previous performances" (Cameron). The expressive performance space, encountered next in the plan, "introduces the beginnings of the physical movement — a thawing of the frozen image". The culmination of this sequence is the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk itself, the opera performance. These parallel narratives are represented by a simultaneous development of the building in plan, section, elevation, and massing towards the volume of the auditorium (Figure 6).

While Cameron's scheme is clearly the more pragmatically "architectural" of the two, and Webb's more metaphorical and oneiric, what they have in common as reference and inspiration is the work of Daniel Libeskind. Libeskind in fact personifies several links: trained in architecture under John Hejduk at Cooper Union; a student at Essex University, like Alberto Perez-Gomez, who was

until recently Director of the school at Carleton; teaching colleague of Perez-Gomez at the AA and Toronto in the late seventies; contemporary at the AA of Dalibor Vesely (who was at that time also teaching in the postgraduate programme at Essex); and, until recently, Head of the Architecture Department at the Cranbrook Academy.

Within an ideological and intellectual framework laid out by Vesely and Joseph Rykwert (then also teaching at Essex), and more recently elaborated by Perez-Gomez in *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, Libeskind set out to explore, in a series of theoretical projects, certain themes of the early twentieth-century avant-garde that had fallen into neglect or disrepute. The *Collage Rebus* series of 1970, *Micromegas*, of 1979, and *Chamber Works*, of 1983, are the most closely related to Webb's and Cameron's work; *Theatrum Mundi* (1985) less so, but still significant.

*Collage Rebus II* dates from the time of Libeskind's studies at Cooper Union, and reflects John Hejduk's concerns with Corbusian language and the meaning of the axonometric abstraction in relation to the experiments of the Cubists. But already, where Hejduk's House 10 concerns itself with the play of free-plan walls within a rigorous grid of columns and brises-soleil, Libeskind had introduced an element of randomness: the plan from which his axonometric is generated has come about through the cutting-up and reassembly of a previous plan. While *Collage Rebus II* in axonometric represents, like Hejduk's Houses, a possible space, unlike them it tends to slip and glide along graphic fault lines in and out of spatial legibility.

The *Micromegas* series includes a drawing titled *Maldoror's Equation* (Figure 7), and in this way a connection is revealed with Surrealism, Lautréamont's *Maldoror* being a literary touchstone of the Surrealists. The *Micromegas* drawings still employ a Modernist architectural language of abstracted elements and graphic conventions, but these fragments, as dense as if El Lissitzky's *Prouns* had multiplied virus-like, now whirl and explode in a space that defies conventional comprehension. Robin Evans traces the lineage of *Micromegas*, seen as investigations of "fluctuating representations of space and surface", not only to El Lissitzky but also to Synthetic Cubism, Joseph Albers' drawings and the paintings of Al Held.<sup>1</sup> Yet in their extreme agitation, their overwhelming density of fluctuating readings, the *Micromegas* drawings also suggest the presence of some derivative of the Surrealist technique of automatic writing. Vesely quotes Andre Breton on the basic principle:

"In the unfathomable depth of the unconscious there prevails, according to Freud, a total absence of contradictions, a release from the emotional fetters caused by repression, a lack of temporality and the substitution of external reality by psychic reality, obedient to pleasure principles and no other. Automatism leads us straight to these regions."<sup>2</sup>

While the Surrealists' use of automatism proper led to unprecedented juxtapositions in imagery and text, Libeskind seems rather to employ a "stream-of-line" technique more directly comparable to the phonetic poems of the Dadaists. In so doing he releases the architectural and graphic conventions that are his raw material from their quotidian role of representation. As former tools of documentation that have come to exist for themselves, they are

1. Edward Webb, Montreal Opera House, generative theatre section.

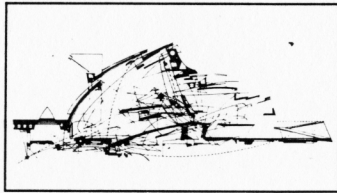
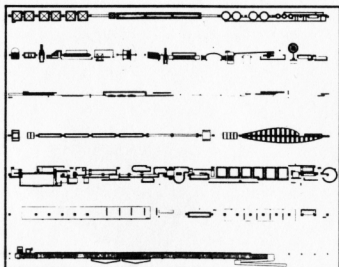


Figure 1 — Webb, generative theatre section.

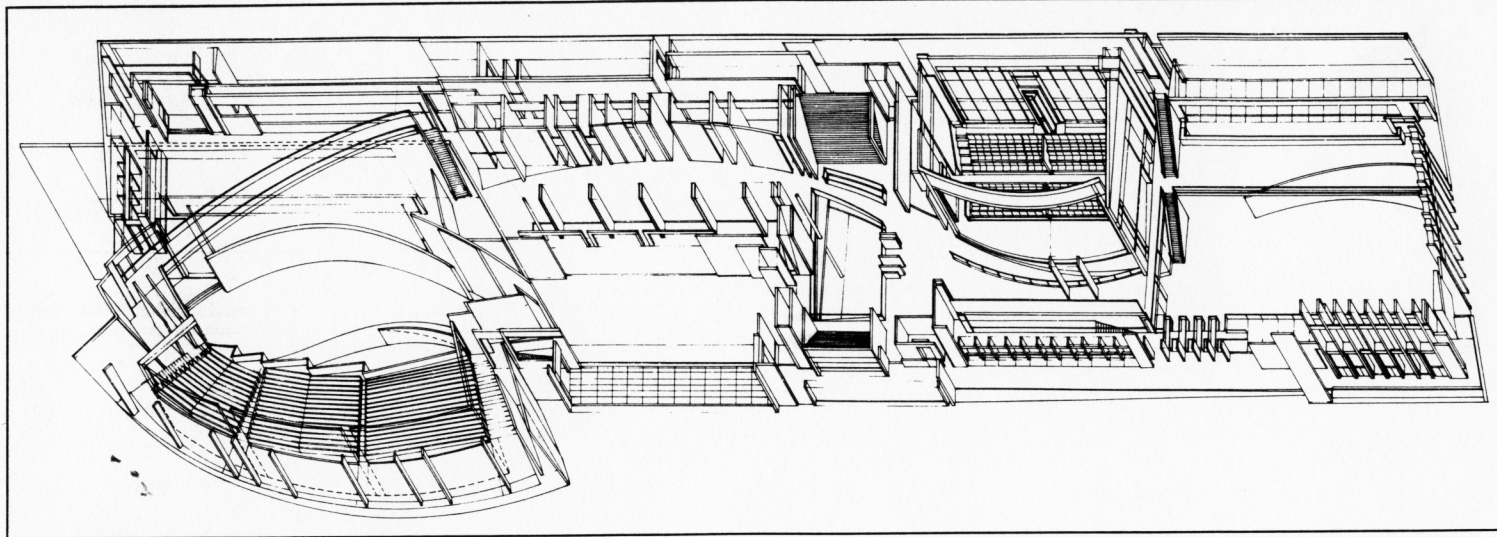
The performance hall is generated by "acoustic participation and movement vectors" (Webb). Some of the traces are then emphasized by poché to suggest components of a building cut in section. A plan is generated by a similar method.

Figure 2 — Webb, occupied walls plan.

Most of the remainder of the project is below-grade support space. Seven "occupied walls", distinguished according to function, are set out in plan, projected in 90-degree axonometric, and then compacted to produce a drawing of extraordinary density.



2. Webb, occupied walls, plan.



**Figure 5** Cameron, 2nd level axo.  
The narrative begins with audition spaces near the main entrance (at the right hand end of the plan) and continues through an “expressive performance space” (centre of plan), large warm-up area, and main backstage area, traversed by a sweeping catwalk before the auditorium itself is entered.

to have no other option if his intention is to gather in his work authentic, intersubjective meanings”.<sup>8</sup>

Libeskind travels close to the edge, and takes the risks associated with such a route. As Vesely observed with regard to the Surrealists:

“Left to himself with his own imagination, the artist was almost absolutely free but at the same time almost absolutely bound to his own desire. He never knew if his images manifested his own desires or just the caprice of their own spontaneity.”<sup>9</sup>

Webb and Cameron choose to remain closer to architecture, but their work still raises the issue of representation.

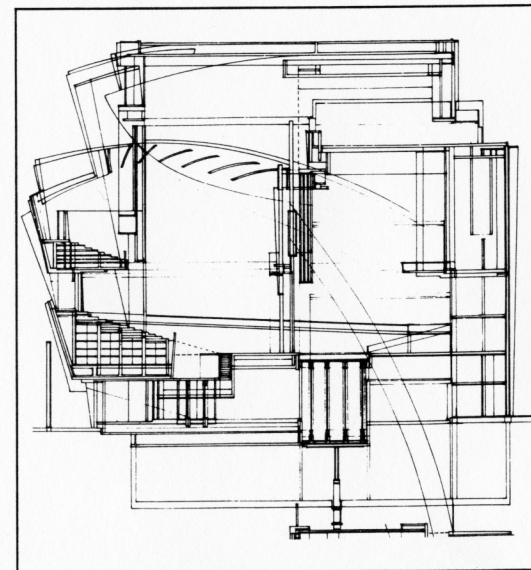
In each case, the choice of a specific mode of non-perspectival representation still carries a certain content. Cameron employs a 60-degree projection in axonometric, while Webb uses a more ambiguous 90-degree projection, where plan and elevation are parallel. As Kenneth Frampton has observed, the diagonal projection, as typically used in the Cooper Union Nine-Square Problem, “reveals the full development of three-dimensional space”, whereas the 90-degree axo, typically employed in Hejduk’s Juan Gris Problem, “compresses the artifact into a layer or layers of shallow illusionistic space. Where the one proffers the conceivable object of a modernist architecture, the other intends architecture as illusionistic space, i.e., ultimately as painting”.<sup>10</sup> In the Juan Gris Problem, the 90-degree axo tends to generate the spinal wall or armature “as the essential surrogate of the synthetic Cubist picture plane”. Webb escapes this pictorial imperative to some extent through his devices of multiplication of the walls, their compaction and subsequent expansion; nevertheless the issue of the

intended spatiality of the result remains, and will be dealt with at a later point.

The immediate visual result is an image of great density. Indeed, the extraordinary graphic density of both projects, and the fact that it does not represent a rational one-to-one depiction of things, again indicates the presence of a quasi-automatistic method. Here there is a curious and not incidental relationship to the imagery of the technophilic popular culture. The science fiction “city of the future” and its props typically display a highly articulated texture that gives an impression of aggressive purposefulness while remaining generally illegible (Figure 9), and such escapist fantasies of exaggerated functionality are central to the popular mythology of technocracy. Webb’s drawings in particular appropriate this texture, adopting conventions of engineering drawing as well as those of architecture (Figure 10). The imagery of technique, and of the exposition of the power of technique, its inevitable truth (as in the automotive cutaway) has been appropriated in Webb’s project, as material for an operation that has more the character of alchemy or magic than of science. This is not quite the same as a reintegration of poesis and *techné* such as Perez-Gomez might call for, but rather a “poetic” use of the imagery of detached *techné* so as to put the conventional meaning of that imagery in tension, in contradiction and ambiguity.

In Cameron’s work, texture is more abstract, more neutral, still more to do with line itself even while the project as a whole is more conventionally “architectural” in its overall concerns. The use of undifferentiated line weight, the absence of *poché* in plan or section and of rendering in elevation, all these contribute to an inflected texture of linearity, intuitively composed (like Webb’s,

**Figure 6**  
“The seating area (of the auditorium) is to be read from the outside of the building as an expression of the climax of the final production — as it explodes and rotates with continual motion — breaking out over the streetscape releasing itself from the regularized structure of the building frame”.



**6. Cameron, section performance space.**

involved in a meditation on the significance of representation.

In the Carleton projects, the use of the axonometric, rather than the perspective, to imply spatiality embodies Hejduk’s concern that, under Modernism, “architectonic representation... before all else be representation of the object from the object, not of the object from the observer”.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, the drawing

“is not the reproduction or the reduction of another reality which has, or would have, larger dimensions. ...The drawing should seek those attributes of form which characterize the object, without losing, however, its character of an object with its own complete life; in other words, the drawing is not what the spectator sees, but should rather be what the object architecturally is.”<sup>4</sup>

The *Micromegas* drawings have taken the next step: they have left the architectonic object behind, and become objects in their own right, with their “own, complete life”. They have not abandoned the absent subject of representation entirely, though; their former role remains apparent even as it is denied, and in this lies their tension and meaning.

*Chamber Works* (Figure 8) go further still. Their *materiel* is no longer architectural convention but line itself, and the question raised is not whether convention should represent but whether line should signify at all. As Evans puts it, *Chamber Works* consists of “lines which on occasion more or less accidentally deposit geometrical figures in the same way that they occasionally engender signs”.<sup>5</sup> The drawings evidently share with *Micromegas* a dependence on quasi-automatistic method, but now the spatiality as an issue has become ephemeral: “the space is thought into them by (the observer), not projected out of them by the draughtsman”.<sup>6</sup>

The linear traces of *Chamber Works* closely resemble the generative “vectors” of Webb’s performance hall, but there is also an important difference. While Webb achieves a relatively even graphic density across his project, unhierarchal and “featureless”, Libeskind’s work exhibits strong inflections, produced by variations in line weight, type or spacing. It is, like Webb’s project and Cameron’s, obviously *composed*, and has been subject to deliberate editing. In their inflections, though, *Chamber Works* are more like Raoul Hausmann’s optophonetic poems than the earlier phonetic poetry of Scheerhart or Morgenstern.

It is Robin Evan’s interpretation that Libeskind means to redefine architecture in these works:

“Architecture, which has always involved drawing before building, can be split into prior and subsequent activities: design and construction. The building can be discarded as an unfortunate aftermath, and all the properties, values, and attributes that are worth keeping... retract back into the drawing.”<sup>7</sup>

What may at first seem to the sceptic to be a facile retreat from reality is intended to be more of a philosophical discourse, undertaken through the medium of the theoretical project. Perez-Gomez has given it voice, arguing that architecture has ceased to play the role that once made it central to human existence: that of embodying intersubjective collective rituals, “revelations of the world and being”. He proposes that “for the modern architect, personal making is the ritual, making as a form of self-knowledge. He seems