

Visions' Unfolding: Architecture in the Age of Electronic Media

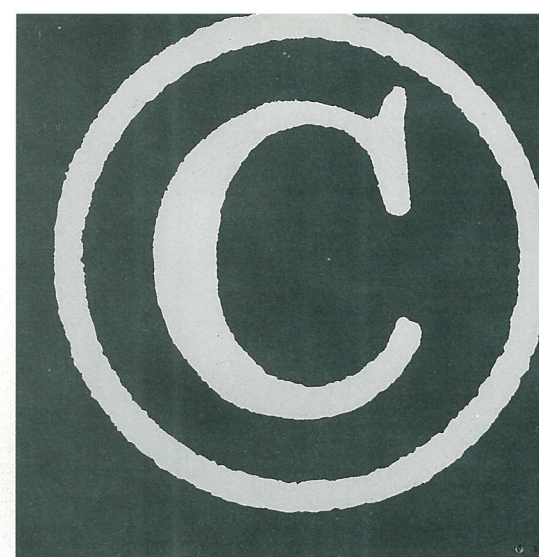
Peter Eisenman

During the fifty years since the Second World War, a paradigm shift has taken place that should have profoundly affected architecture: this is the shift from the mechanical paradigm to the electronic one.?! This change can be simply understood by comparing the impact of such primary modes of reproduction as the photograph and the fax on the role of the human subject; the photograph within the mechanical paradigm, the fax within the electronic one.

In photographic reproduction the subject still maintains a controlled interaction with the object. A photograph can be developed with more or less contrast, texture or clarity. The photograph can be said to remain in the control of human vision. The human subject thus retains its function as interpreter, as discursive function. With the fax, the subject is no longer called upon to interpret, for reproduction takes place without any control or adjustment. The fax also challenges the concept of originality. While in a photograph the original reproduction still retains a privileged value, in facsimile transmission the original remains intact but with no differentiating value, since it is no longer sent. The mutual devaluation of both original and copy is not the only transformation affected by the electronic paradigm. The entire nature of what we have come to know as the reality of our world has been called into question by the invasion of media into everyday life. For reality always demanded that our vision be interpretative.

How have these developments affected architecture? Since architecture has traditionally housed value as well as fact one would imagine that architecture would have been greatly transformed. But this is not the case, for architecture seems little changed at all.?! This in itself ought to warrant investigation, since architecture has traditionally been a bastion of what is considered to be the real. Metaphors such as house and home; bricks and mortar; foundations and shelter, attest to architecture's role in defining what we consider to be real. Clearly, a change in the everyday concepts of reality should have had some effect on architecture. It did not because the mechanical paradigm was the *sine qua non* of architecture; architecture was the visible manifestation of the overcoming of natural forces such as gravity and weather by mechanical means. Architecture not only overcame gravity, it was also the monument to that overcoming; it interpreted the value society placed on its vision.?! The electronic paradigm directs a powerful challenge to architecture because it defines reality in terms of media and simulation, it values appearance over existence, what can be seen over what is. Not the seen as we formerly knew it, but rather a seeing that can no longer interpret. Media introduce fundamental ambiguities into how and what we see. Architecture has resisted this question because, since the importation and absorption of perspective by architectural space in the fifteenth century, architecture has been dominated by the mechanics of vision. Thus architecture assumes sight to be pre-eminent and also in some way natural to its own processes, not a thing to be questioned. It is precisely this traditional concept of sight that the electronic paradigm questions.

Sight is traditionally understood in terms of vision. When I use the term 'vision' I mean that particular characteristic of sight which attaches seeing to thinking, the eye to the mind. In architecture, vision refers to a particular category of perception linked to monocular perspectival vision. The monocular vision of the subject in architecture allows for all projections of space to be resolved on a single planimetric surface. It is therefore not surprising that perspective, with its ability to define and reproduce the perception of depth on a two dimensional surface, should find architecture a waiting and wanting vehicle. Nor is it surprising that architecture soon began to conform itself to this monocular, rationalising vision – in its own body. Whatever the style, space was constituted as an understandable construct, organised around spatial elements such as axes, places, symmetries, etcetera. Perspective is even more virulent in architecture than in painting because of the imperious demands of the eye *and* the body to orient itself in architectural space through processes of rational perspectival ordering. It was thus not without cause that Brunelleschi's invention of one-point perspective should correspond to a time when there was a paradigm shift from the theological and theocentric to the anthropomorphic and anthro-



Rob Scholte, Self Portrait, 1988

?! Why do you say 'should have'? In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Thomas Kuhn shows that knowledge is not simply and linearly accumulating towards a final truth, but that it evolves around paradigms, which encompass a corpus of knowledge till too many facts no longer correspond to its inner logic. Then a paradigm shift takes place, and the apocryphal facts help constitute a new paradigm. So it's an epistemological notion whereas you seem to regard it as a set of morals to go by lest you want to be included in the contemporary Zeitgeist. The shift you mention seems to be a historicistic view on the future in which any intellectual backwardness is moralised in the name of subjective definition of the present day.

?! Just as literature, or music, or ballet, etcetera, could change without losing their formal characters as words in a book, sounds in time or movements in space, architecture can lose its metaphorical capacity of the eternal meaning without becoming obsolete altogether. One cannot deny that architecture has already changed its narrative during the post-Nietzschean shift in social and philosophical thought, although it didn't change its basic characteristics, being shelter, meaning, fundament, occupation and so on. Since architecture is much more than art, science and language, it's not so vulnerable to the paradigm shifts you speak about. Being linked to the biological, anthropological and phenomenological dimensions of life, some aspects of it stay outside any cultural paradigm. Now, whereas classical thought annexed the supra cultural aspects of architecture, exactly because of their lasting qualities, and their rich potential to represent the classical world view, you seem to fight against a metaphor, and not against the intrinsic logic of a cultural medium itself.

?! Suppose we say: architecture was not only the monument of overcoming gravity, it really overcame it. Then we have another story. You seem to present architecture only as a medium of cultural reflection but it also is bricks and mortar. Maybe because of its wider meaning than only being art, it resisted your paradigm shift for so long. Because this shift took place in the modalities of culture, i.e. the modes of experience, and not so much in the daily life and the social structure. You seem to suggest that your paradigm shift is a 'fête accomplie' but if we dig into the structure of the social organisation, we find a lot of very lasting things, transcending personal lifetime. We understand your desire to give your existence a wider historical meaning, more or less stating that after the Holocaust and the Gulag, all survivors can 'simply' pass away, is unbearable. But should that desire really moralise daily life?



Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, Columbus Ohio, 1989



Koizumi Sangyo Building, Tokyo, 1989

Nunotani Headquarters Building, Tokyo, 1992



po-centric views of the world. Perspective became the vehicle by which anthropocentric vision crystallised itself in the architecture that followed this shift.

Brunelleschi's projection system, however, was deeper in its effect than all subsequent stylistic change because it confirmed vision as the dominant discourse in architecture from the sixteenth century to the present. Thus, despite repeated changes in style from the Renaissance through Post-Modernism and despite many attempts to the contrary, the seeing human subject (monocular and anthropocentric) remains the primary discursive term of architecture.?!

The tradition of planimetric projection in architecture persisted unchallenged because it allowed the projection and hence, the understanding of a three-dimensional space in two dimensions. In other disciplines – perhaps since Leibniz and certainly since Sartre there has been a consistent attempt to demonstrate the problematic qualities inherent in vision, but in architecture the sight/mind construct has persisted as the dominant discourse.

In an essay entitled *Scopic Regimes of Modernity* Martin Jay notes that, 'Baroque visual experience has a strongly tactile or haptic quality, which prevents it from turning into the absolute ocular centrism of its Cartesian perspectivalist rival.' Norman Bryson in his article, *The Gaze in the expanded Field* introduces the idea of the gaze (*le regard*) as the looking back of the other. He discusses the gaze in terms of Sartre's intruder in *Being and Nothingness* or in terms of Lacan's concept of a darkness that cuts across the space of sight. Lacan also introduces the idea of a space looking back which he likens to a disturbance of the visual field of reason.

From time to time architecture has attempted to overcome its rationalising vision. If one takes for example the church of San Vitale in Ravenna one can explain the solitary column almost blocking the entry or the incomplete groin vaulting as an attempt to signal a change from a Pagan to a Christian architecture. Piranesi created similar effects with his architectural projections. He diffracted the

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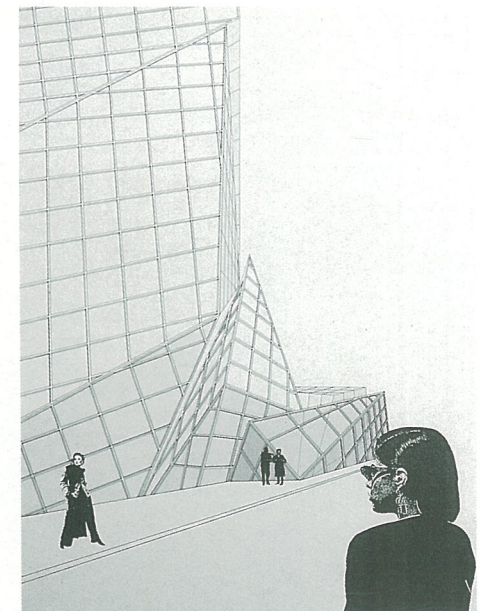
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monocular subject by creating perspectival visions with multiple vanishing points so that there was no way of correlating what was seen into a unified whole. Equally, Cubism attempted to deflect the relationship between a monocular subject and the object. The subject could no longer put the painting into some meaningful structure through the use of perspective. Cubism used a non-monocular perspectival condition: it flattened objects to the edges, it upturned objects, it undermined the stability of the picture plane. Architecture attempted similar dislocations through Constructivism and its own, albeit normalising, version of Cubism – the International Style. But this work only looked cubistic and modern, the subject remained rooted in a profound anthropocentric stability, comfortably, upright and in place on a flat, tabular ground.

There was no shift in the relationship between the subject and the object. While the object looked different it failed to displace the viewing subject. Though the buildings were sometimes conceptualised, by axonometric or isometric projection rather than by perspective, no consistent deflection of the subject was carried out. Yet Modernist sculpture did in many cases effectuate such a displacement of the subject. These dislocations were fundamental to Minimalism: the early work of Robert Morris, Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson. This historical project, however, was never taken up in architecture. The question now begs to be asked: Why did architecture resist developments that were taking place in other disciplines? And further, why has the issue of vision never been properly problematised in architecture??!

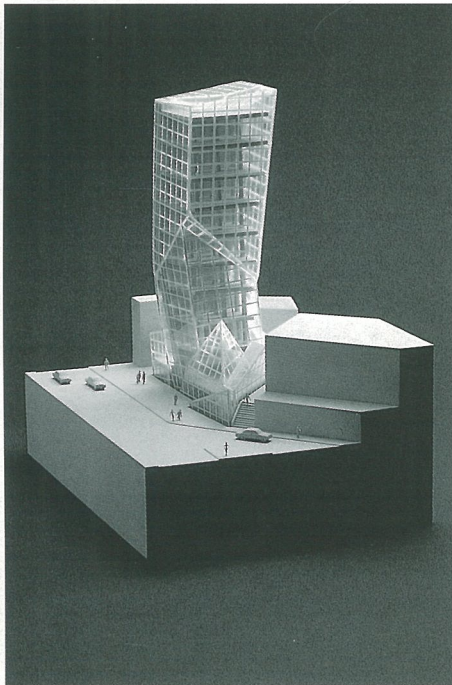
It might be said that architecture never adequately thought about the problem of vision because it remained within the concept of the subject and the four walls. Architecture, unlike any other discipline, concretised vision. The hierarchy inherent in all architectural space begins as a structure for the mind's eye. It is perhaps the idea of interiority as a hierarchy between inside and outside that causes architecture to conceptualise itself ever more comfortably and conservatively in vision. The interiority of architecture more than any other discourse defined a hierarchy of vision articulated by inside and outside. The fact that one is actually both inside and outside at architecture, unlike painting or music, required

?! There is however an absolute difference between the perspective ordered by God Himself through the Platonic and Pythagorean rules in the world of the Ancients, and the post-Perraultian subjectivism from the eighteenth century onward. After the first introspective revolution, exemplified by the work of figures such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Soane and Lawrence Stern, architecture and its perception never was derived again from eternal principles. The Moderns cried victory. From then on we see the rising preoccupation with space, and the movement of the individual in that space. To the Modern Movement this subjectively experienced space, notwithstanding Corbusian Purism, was the Leitmotiv of any architectural design with social pretensions. So, apart from the Benthamite monocularism, there is yet another pattern in history that reflects on you, whereas you present radical subjectivism as a real breakthrough.



Alteka Office Building, design, 1991

?! Because architecture is not only an art. Your thought seems quite exclusivist in the way that architecture as such is either willing to respond to or denying the contemporary cultural condition. But, whereas it responds in its narrative and metaphorical capacity, possibly it doesn't as a functional object or as a métier. As a consequence of your opinion, one could ask humankind why, after the debunking of the cognitive powers of Homo Sapiens, he still walks as a homo erectus. Your Alteka Tower reflects a wrong posed problem and emanates from a confusion of categories.



Alteka Office Building, design, 1991

?! Well, just wait for the real paradigm shift, instead of prescribe the phenomenon. If the mental equipment of men is simply correspondent to the new cultural condition you suggest, it will be very easy to dislocate vision. As a matter of fact, in the new paradigm there will be no more perspectival vision taken seriously. However, your very question implies all but a complete shift. (So architecture doesn't drag its feet.) Now, if we accept that yours is a historicistic (in Popperian terms) rather than a paradigmatic analysis, then your questions are valid. The problem still is that you try to project a metaphorical form, derived from culture, into architectural practice of the future again. This is reification. This is also the reason why a form that illustrates the so-called electronic paradigm is only entertaining for a moment, and should be updated all the time.

vision to conceptualise itself in this way. As long as architecture refuses to take up the problem of vision, it will remain within a Renaissance or Classical view of its discourse.

Now what would it mean for architecture to take up the problem of vision? Vision can be defined as essentially a way of organising space and elements in space. It is a way of 'looking at', and defines a relationship between a subject and an object. Traditional architecture is structured so that any position occupied by a subject provides the means for understanding that position in relation to a particular spatial typology, such as a rotunda, a transept crossing, an axis, an entry. Any number of these typological conditions deploy architecture as a screen for looking-at.

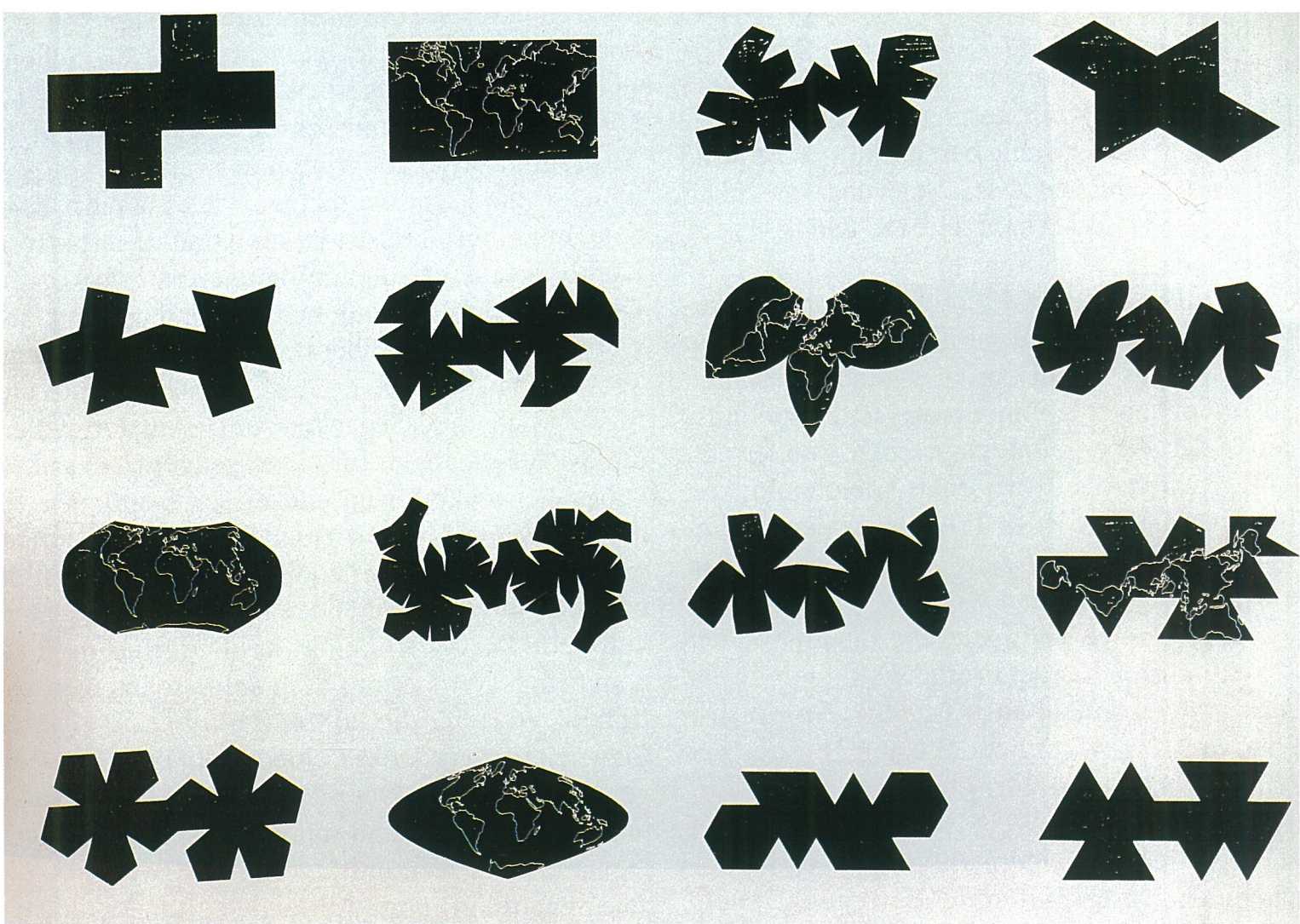
The idea of a 'looking-back' begins to displace the anthropocentric subject. Looking back does not require the object to become a subject, that is to anthropomorphosize the object. Looking back concerns the possibility of detaching the subject from the rationalisation of space. In other words to allow the subject to have a vision of space that no longer can be put together in the normalising, classicising or traditional construct of vision; an other space, where in fact the space 'looks back' at the subject. A possible first step in conceptualising this 'other' space, would be to detach what one sees from what one knows – the eye from the mind. A second step would be to inscribe space in such a way as to endow it with the possibility of looking back at the subject. All architecture can be said to be already inscribed. Windows, doors, beams and columns are a kind of inscription. These make architecture known, they reinforce vision. Since no space is unscribed, we do not see a window without relating it to an idea of window, this kind of inscription seems not only natural but also necessary to architecture. In order to have a looking back, it is necessary to rethink the idea of inscription. In the Baroque and Rococo such an inscription was in the plaster decoration that began to obscure the traditional form of functional inscription. This kind of 'decorative' inscription was thought too excessive when undefined by function. Architecture tends to resist this form of excess in a way which is unique to the other arts, precisely because of the power and pervasive nature of functional inscription. The anomalous column at San Vitale inscribes space in a way that was at the time foreign to the eye. This is also true of the columns in the staircase at the Wexner Center. However most of such inscriptions are the result of design intention, the will of an authorial subjective expression which then only reconstitutes vision as before. To dislocate vision might require an inscription which is the result of an outside text which is neither overly determined by design expression or function. But how could such an inscription of an outside text translate into space??!

Suppose for a moment that architecture could be conceptualised as a Moebius strip, with an unbroken continuity between interior and exterior. What would this mean for vision? Gilles Deleuze has proposed just such a possible continuity with his idea of the fold. For Deleuze, folded space articulates a new relationship between vertical and horizontal, figure and ground, inside and out – all structures articulated by traditional vision. Unlike the space of classical vision, the idea of folded space denies framing in favour of a temporal modulation. The fold no longer privileges planimetric projection; instead there is a variable curvature. Deleuze's idea of folding is more radical than origami, because it contains no narrative, linear sequence; rather, in terms of traditional vision, it contains a quality of the unseen.

Folding changes the traditional space of vision. That is, it can be considered to be effective; it functions, it shelters, it is meaningful, it frames, it is aesthetic. Folding also constitutes a move from effective to affective space. Folding is not another subject expressionism, a promiscuity, but rather unfolds in space alongside of its functioning and its meaning in space – it has what might be called an excessive condition or affect. Folding is a type of affective space which concerns those aspects that are not associated with the effective, that are more than reason, meaning and function.

In order to change the relationship of perspectival projection to three-dimensional space it is necessary to change the relationship between project drawing and real space. This would mean that one would no longer be able to draw with any level of meaningfulness the space that is being projected. For example, when it is no longer possible to draw a line that stands for some scale relationship to another line in space, it has nothing to do with reason, of the connection of the mind to the eye. The deflection from that line in space means that there no longer exists a one-to-one scale correspondence.

My folded projects are a primitive beginning. In them the subject understands that he or she can no longer conceptualise experience in space in the same way that he or she did in the gridded space. They attempt to provide this dislocation of the subject from effective space; an idea of presentness. Once the



Claude Gaçon, Objektive Weltsicht I, silk screen print, 1992

University of Cincinnati, College of Design, Architecture and Planning, design, 1991

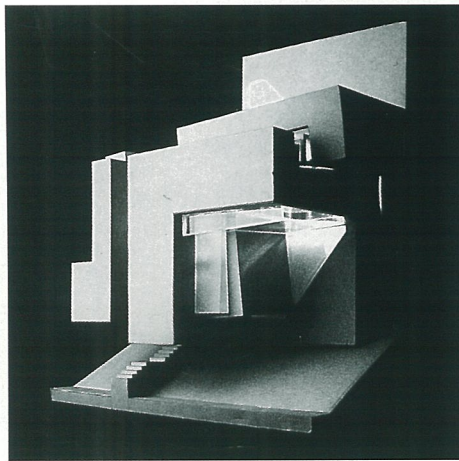


environment becomes affective, inscribed with another logic or an ur-logic, one which is no longer translatable into the vision of the mind, then reason comes detached from vision. While we can still understand terms of its function, structure and aesthetic (we are still 'four walls') somehow reason becomes detached from the affective condition of the environment itself. This begins to produce an environment that 'looks back' that is, the environment has an order that we can perceive even though it does not seem to mean anything. It does not seek to be understood in the traditional way of architecture yet it possesses some sense of 'aura' logic which is the sense of something outside of our vision that is not another subjective expression. Folding is only one of perhaps many strategies for dislocating vision dislocating the hierarchy of interior and exterior that preempts vision.

The Alteka Tower project begins simultaneously with an 'el' shape drawn in both plan and section. Here, a change in the relationship of perspectival projection to three) dimensional space changes the relationship between project drawing and real space. In this sense, these drawings would have little relationship to the space that is being projected. For example it is no longer possible to draw a line that stands for some scale relationship to another line in the space of the project, thus the drawn lines no longer have anything to do with reason, the connection of the mind to the eye. The drawn lines are folded with some ur) logic according to sections of a fold in René Thom's catastrophe theory. These folded sections in turn create an object, which is cut into from the ground floor to the top.

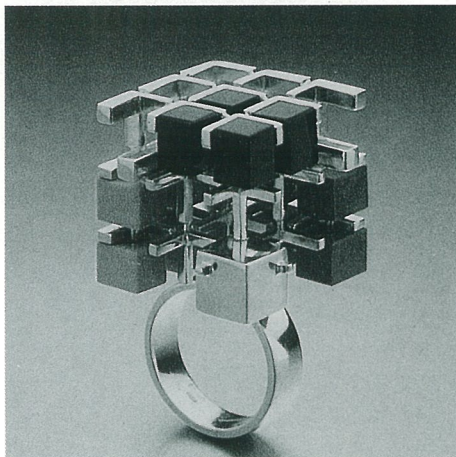
When the environment is inscribed or folded in such a way the individual no longer remains the discursive function; the individual is no longer required to understand or interpret space. Questions such as what the space means are no longer relevant. It is not just that the environment is detached from vision, but that it also presents its own vision, a vision that looks back at the individual. The inscription is no longer concerned with aesthetics or with meaning but with some other order. It is only necessary to perceive the fact that this other order exists; this perception alone dislocates the knowing subject.

The fold presents the possibility of an alternative to the gridded space of the Cartesian order. The fold produces a dislocation of the dialectical distinction between figure and ground; in the process it animates what Gilles Deleuze calls 'a smooth space'. Smooth space presents the possibility of overcoming



Guardiola House, design, 1987

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Jewellery (Ring), 1986

or exceeding the grid. The grid remains in place and the four walls will always exist but they are in fact overtaken by the folding of space. Here there is no longer one planimetric view which is then extruded to provide a sectional space. Instead it is no longer possible to relate a vision of space in a two-dimensional drawing to the three-dimensional reality of a folded space. Drawing no longer has any scale value relationship to the three-dimensional environment. This dislocation of the two-dimensional drawing from the three-dimensional reality also begins to dislocate vision, inscribed by this ur-logic. There are no longer grid datum planes for the upright individual.

Alteka is not merely a surface architecture or a surface folding. Rather, the folds create an affective space, a dimension in the space that dislocates the discursive function of the human subject and thus vision, and at the same moment creates a condition of time, of an event in which there is the possibility of the environment looking back at the subject, the possibility of the gaze.

The gaze according to Maurice Blanchot is that possibility of seeing which remains covered up by vision. The gaze opens the possibility of seeing what Blanchot calls the light lying within darkness. It is not the light of the dialectic of light/dark, but it is the light of an otherness, which lies hidden within presence. It is the capacity to see this otherness which is repressed by vision. The looking back, the gaze, exposes architecture to another light, one which could not have been seen before.

Architecture will continue to stand up, to deal with gravity, to have 'four walls'. But these four walls no longer need to be expressive of the mechanical paradigm. Rather the walls could deal with the possibility of these other discourses, the other effective senses of sound, touch and of that light lying within the darkness.