





Field Trip

A(A) MEMOIR (First and Last...)

AA,¹ London, early seventies.

"Famous" students present megastructures made of sugar cubes to universal approval of grinning Archigramesque² teachers.

Peter Smithson³ walks in—he wears a flowered shirt—winces, and turns back.

Cedric Price⁴ pontificates on architectural modesty from interchangeable cards—early randomized discourse.

Jencks,⁵ a dandy, is seen to assemble—according to amateur terrorist handbook—the first elements of the semiotic explosion.

A sulfurous Boyarsky⁶ exposes Chicago's infrastructural underbelly.

School in upheaval about mystic takeover plot. Theory: there is only a limited amount of knowledge in the world which should *therefore* not be spread homogeneously or democratically—it would get too thin. Knowledge should be communicated to chosen few only.

Elia Zenghelis⁷ perpetually threatens to walk away from it all ...

A monstrously idealistic appearance by Louis Kahn.⁸ Never again... Tschumi,⁹ frequently in periphery of my vision, already a perfectly formed typology—a teacher...

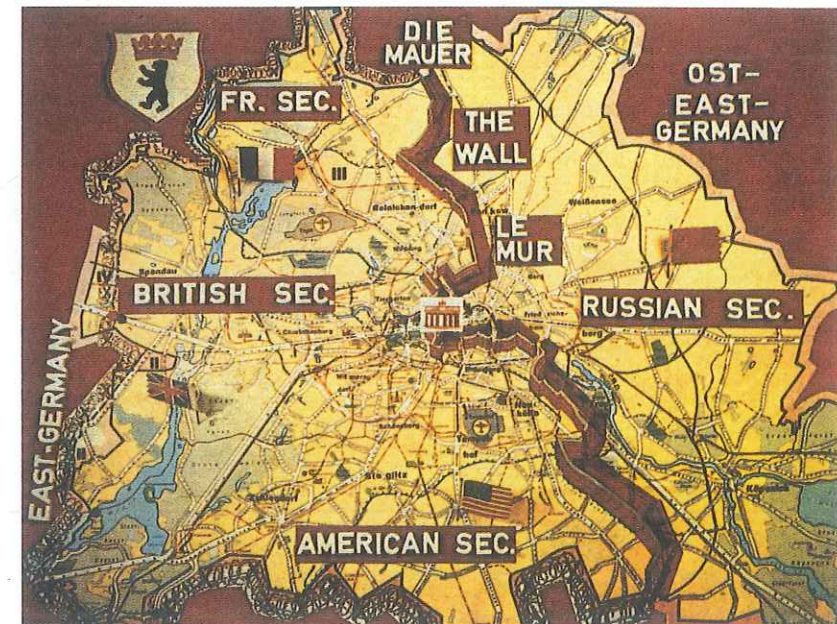
Superstudio¹⁰ appearing on the horizon...

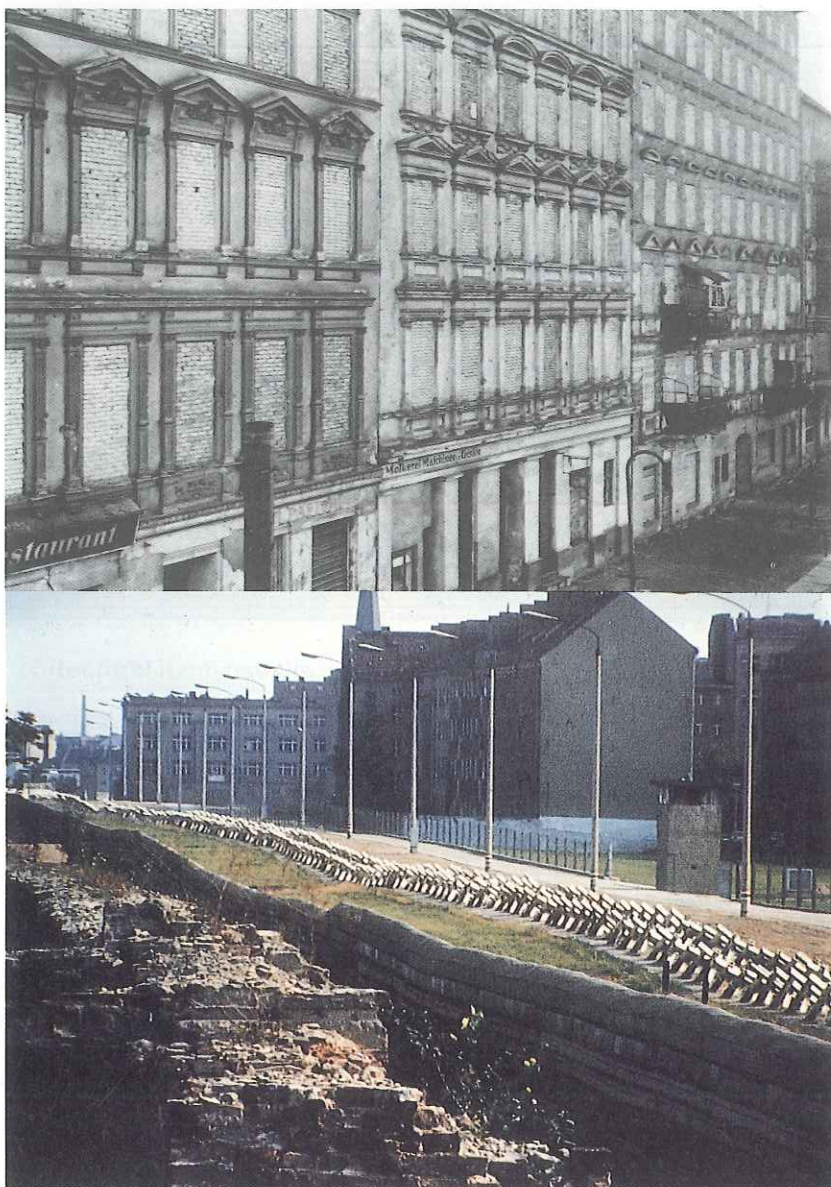
Incomparable mixture, in other words, of Celtic (or is it simply Anglo-Saxon?) barbarism and intellectual ferment. If there is a plot, in any school, it is the eternal one—simple Darwinian imperative maybe—of each generation trying to incapacitate the next under the guise of educational process. Here it is very noticeable and very expensive. (I was writing movie scripts to cover the costs.)

In this anarchic assembly, one of the rare remaining formal obligations for a diploma is so-called Summer Study: the documentation (measured drawings, photographs, analytical studies) of an existing architectural item, usually in a good climate—Palladian villas; Greek mountain villages of complicated, yet to be deciphered geometries; pyramids.

Intuition, unhappiness with the accumulated innocence of the late sixties, and simple journalistic interest drive me to Berlin (by plane, train, car, foot? In my memory, I'm suddenly there) to document *The Berlin Wall as Architecture*.

That year, the wall celebrates its tenth birthday. My first impression in the hot August weather: the city seems almost completely abandoned, as empty as I always imagined the other side to be. Other shock: it is not East Berlin that is imprisoned, but the West, the "open





society." In my imagination, stupidly, the wall was a simple, majestic north-south divide; a clean, philosophical demarcation; a neat, modern Wailing Wall. I now realize that it *encircles* the city, paradoxically making it "free." It is 165 kilometers long and confronts all of Berlin's conditions, including lakes, forests, periphery; parts of it are intensely metropolitan, others suburban.

Also, the wall is not stable; and it is not a single entity, as I thought. It is more a *situation*, a permanent, slow-motion evolution, some of it abrupt and clearly planned, some of it improvised.

As if time is an accordion—a Disney¹¹ archaeology—all of its successive physical manifestations seem simultaneously present in this deserted city (holiday? exile? atomic threat?). In its "primitive" stage the wall is *decision*, applied with absolute architectural minimalism: concrete blocks, bricked-in windows and doors, sometimes with trees—implausibly green—still in front of them.

The scale of this phase is heroic, i.e., urban, up to 40 meters high. In the next permutation, a second wall—this time of rough concrete slabs hurriedly piled on top of each other (by forced labor?)—is planned just behind the first. Only when this wall is finished is the first wall (the old houses) taken down. Sometimes, adding insult to injury, the street level—a portico, forever-empty shop windows, the striped poles of nonexistent barbers—is left as a kind of decorative pre-wall. This second wall is also unstable. It is continuously "perfected" through construction techniques—more and more prefabrication—

that finally give it ultimate form: the smooth, mechanical, *designed* wall taken down 20 years later. Topped by an endless row of hollow concrete cylinders, it is impossible to grip for those who might want to escape.

Directly behind the second wall: sand, treated like a Japanese garden. Below the sand: invisible mines. On the sand: antitank crosses—concrete intersections of the three-dimensional axial cross—an endless line of Sol LeWitt¹² structures. Beyond this zone: an asphalt path, barely wide enough for a jeep. (Do they avoid each other in the mined zone?) After that: a residual strip where German shepherds pace back and forth, patrolling the “park,” baying at non-events. Beyond that, Gehry-like¹³ chain-link fencing.

Those are the linear elements. Closely spaced together are natrium street lamps, their orange glow turned toward the West; then, wider apart: the architecture of the standardized doghouses. Still wider apart: guard towers emanating a visible military presence even when apparently unmanned; guns poking through narrow slits. Finally, inevitably at irregular intervals: the sections through the entire system represented by the border crossings.

This was the schematic profile. But in acts of obvious realism, it was not imposed on the city as consistent formula. The wall swelled to assume its maximum identity wherever possible, but along more than half its length, its regularity was compromised in a series of system-

atic adaptations that accommodated existing urban incidents or dimensional conflicts. Sometimes the parallel layers of the wall would separate, swallowing, for instance, a church. Sometimes the fencing would surround, like a tiger cage in a circus, a forlorn satellite of Westernness so that a nine-year-old could bicycle to school every morning.

That was not all; there was a “high” wall—as in “high” culture—and a “low” wall. The first was manifest at the most “urban” locations (mostly on the line that divided the former center in two). There it was at its most confrontational, at its most consciously symbolic in its shameless imposition—on a Western enclave that bristled with pseudo-hypervitality—of a linear ruin infinitely more impressive than any artificial sign of life. Along other, forgotten (forgettable?) sections, the wall assumed a casual, banal character (shades of Hannah Arendt?).¹⁴ Its architecture relaxed. I had not seen such a textbook demonstration of dialectics since witnessing the drill of the guards at Lenin’s tomb on Red Square: a fantastically intimidating goose step—legs lifted higher than those of chorus girls—that disintegrated meters in front of the Kremlin gate into a motley group of loose-limbed Petrushkas.¹⁵

On each side, the wall had generated its own sideshows/paraphernalia; on the Western side, a regular series of viewing platforms (early models for Hejduk’s¹⁶ masques?) brought the public as close as possible to the wall. Sometimes these rickety wooden structures

were all that remained of a former urbanistic apotheosis like Alexanderplatz; sometimes their positioning seemed utterly random, dissociated from any recognizable *point* of the city.

On the other side, the wall seemed the frontline of a slow, gangrenous erosion of the good (Eastern) part of the city.

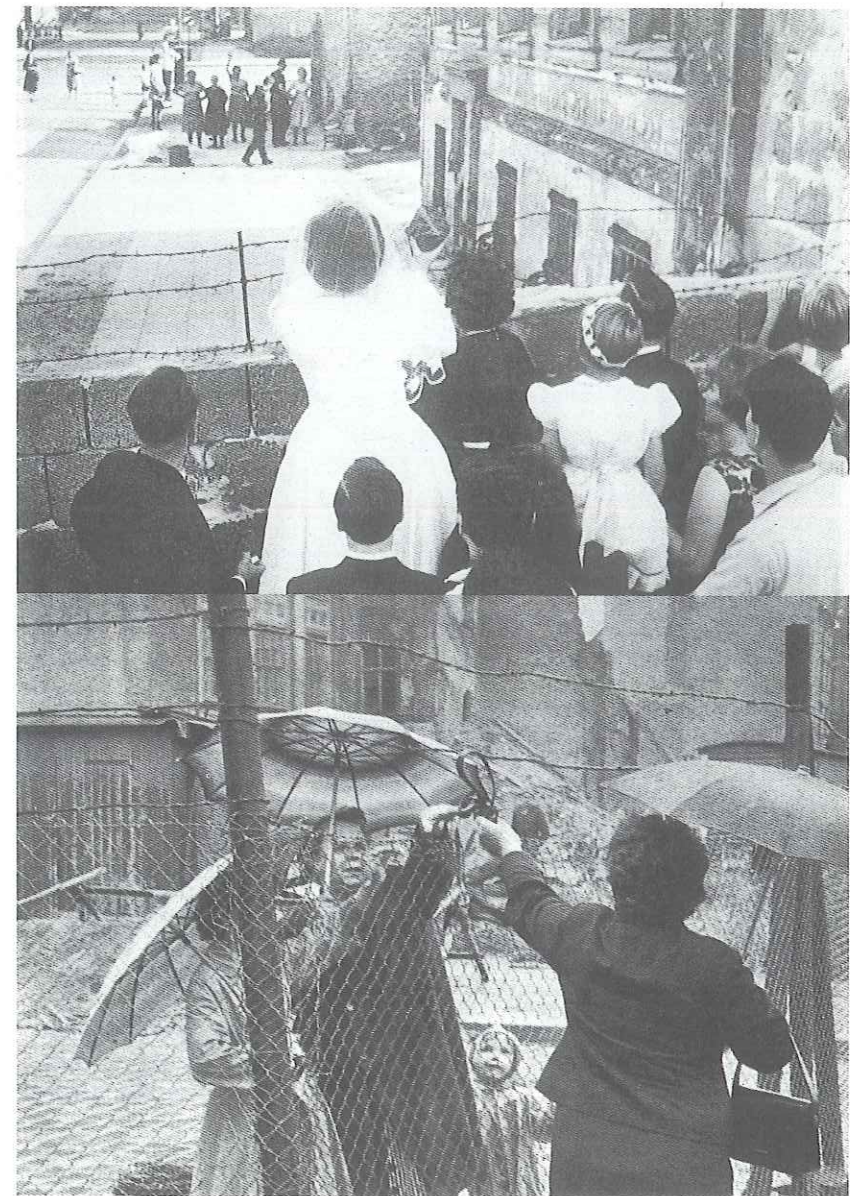
But in this desultory year—1971—the wall was normalized, its apparent permanence dulling part of its former touristic glamour; the platforms—thrusting voyeuristic positions of ideological gloating—were mostly empty.

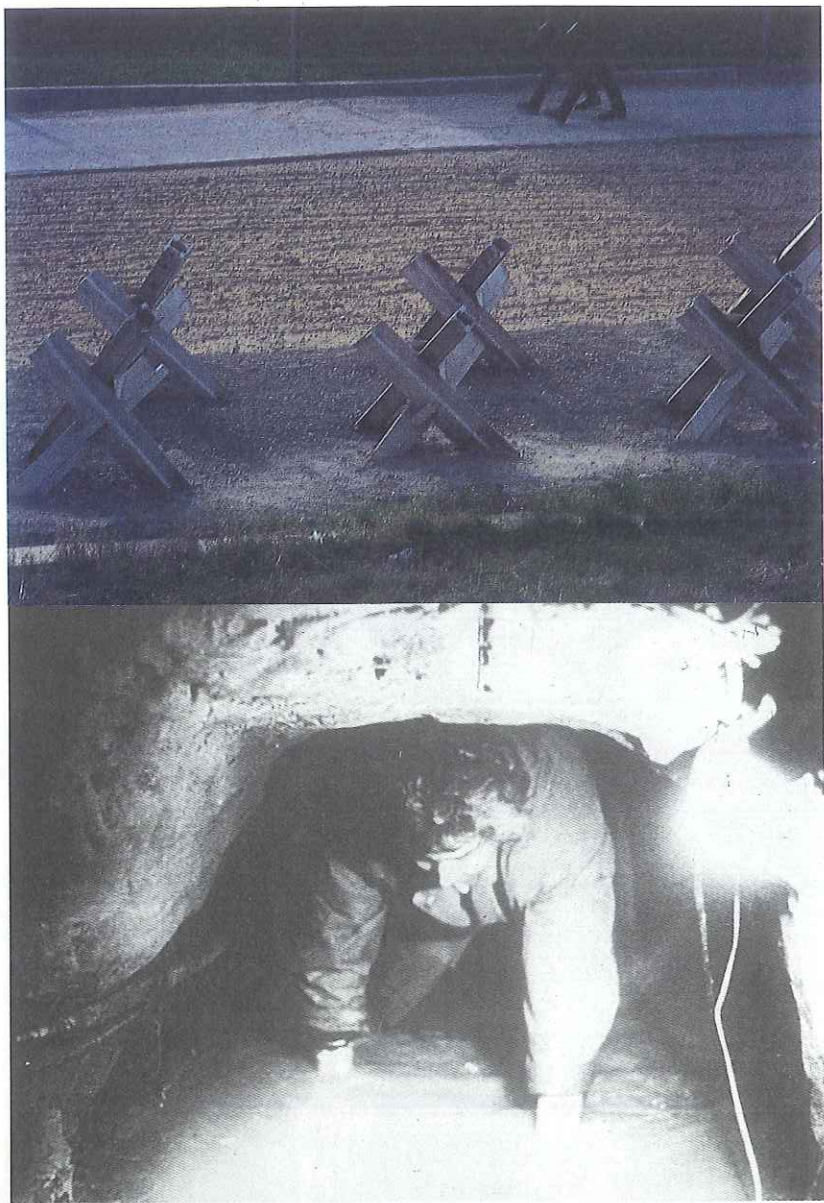
The greatest surprise: *the wall was heartbreakingly beautiful*. Maybe after the ruins of Pompeii, Herculaneum, and the Roman Forum, it was the most purely beautiful remnant of an urban condition, breathtaking in its persistent doubleness. The same phenomenon offered, over a length of 165 kilometers, radically different meanings, spectacles, interpretations, realities. It was impossible to imagine another recent artifact with the same signifying potency.

And there was more: in spite of its apparent absence of program, the wall—in its relatively short life—had provoked and sustained an incredible number of events, behaviors, and effects.

Apart from the daily routines of inspection—military in the East and touristic in the West—a vast system of ritual in itself, the wall was a *script*, effortlessly blurring divisions between tragedy, comedy, melodrama.

At the most serious level of “event” the wall was deadly. Countless





people—mostly young men—had died in more or less disorganized attempts at escape: shot dead beyond the barbed wire, the sand, the mines; caught theatrically at the top of the wall.

A particular cruelty in the wall's permanent transformation from line to zone was that the distance that had to be crossed became longer and longer, exponentially increasing the risk, provoking ever more premature attempts at escape.

On a more premeditated level, there had been more fantastic attempts that relied either on hiding in vehicles that would cross the wall at the notorious checkpoints (eerily, it seemed that the most famous metropolitan crossings, such as Checkpoint Charlie, exercised the greatest attraction for those with the least interest in being discovered) or on circumnavigating the wall itself—either in the air or, in a more traditional vocabulary of prison escape, underground—using sewers, digging tunnels, starting from living rooms that seemed unchanged since the Third Reich.

(What architect—however Bataille-soaked¹⁷—could boast of its transgressive performance, of the sheer radicalism of its existence?)

The wall was the transgression to end all transgressions.

Reverse Epiphanies

This was a field trip that spoiled the charms of the field; tourism that left a kind of scorched earth. It was as if I had come eye to eye with architecture's true nature.

1.

In the early seventies, it was impossible not to sense an enormous reservoir of resentment *against* architecture, with new evidence of its inadequacies—of its cruel and exhausted performance—accumulating daily; *looking at the wall as architecture, it was inevitable to transpose the despair, hatred, frustration it inspired to the field of architecture.* And it was inevitable to realize that all these expressions—the fanaticism of the tunnel diggers; the resignation of those left behind; the desperate attempts to celebrate conventional occasions, such as marriage, across the divide—were finally all too applicable to architecture itself. *The Berlin Wall was a very graphic demonstration of the power of architecture and some of its unpleasant consequences.*

Were not division, enclosure (i.e., imprisonment), and exclusion—which defined the wall's performance and explained its efficiency—the essential stratagems of *any* architecture?

In comparison, the sixties dream of architecture's liberating potential—in which I had been marinating for years as a student—seemed feeble rhetorical play. It evaporated on the spot.

2.

The wall suggested that architecture's beauty was directly proportional to its horror.

There was a dreadful "serial" beauty to the wall's systematic transformation from an invisible line on a map to a solid line of soldiers (that

made it manifest), to barbed wire dropped on the line, to the first cementing of blocks: a fatality of "development" that perversely echoed, for instance, the sophistication of Schinkel's¹⁸ thematic variations on architectural themes at Schloss Glienicke.

3.

On the same level of negative revelation, the wall also, in my eyes, made a total mockery of any of the emerging attempts to link form to meaning in a regressive chain-and-ball relationship.

It was clearly about communication, semantic maybe, but its meaning changed almost daily, sometimes by the hour. It was affected more by events and decisions thousands of miles away than by its physical manifestation. Its significance as a "wall"—as an object—was marginal; its impact was utterly independent of its appearance. Apparently, the lightest of objects could be randomly coupled with the heaviest of meanings through brute force, willpower.

There was no point in constructing the grammar of this new type of event. Yes, one could look at the first sections of the definitive wall, read into them a style or a language—a kind of Olivetti¹⁹ aesthetics—connect them to modernism, declare them boring, imagine frantic layers of mimetic devices as compensation. *But on the eve of postmodernism, here was unforgettable (not to say final) proof of the "less is more" doctrine ...*

I would never again believe in form as the primary vessel of meaning.

4.

In my eyes, the wall also forever severed the connection between importance and mass.

As an object the wall was unimpressive, evolving toward a near dematerialization; but that left its power undiminished.

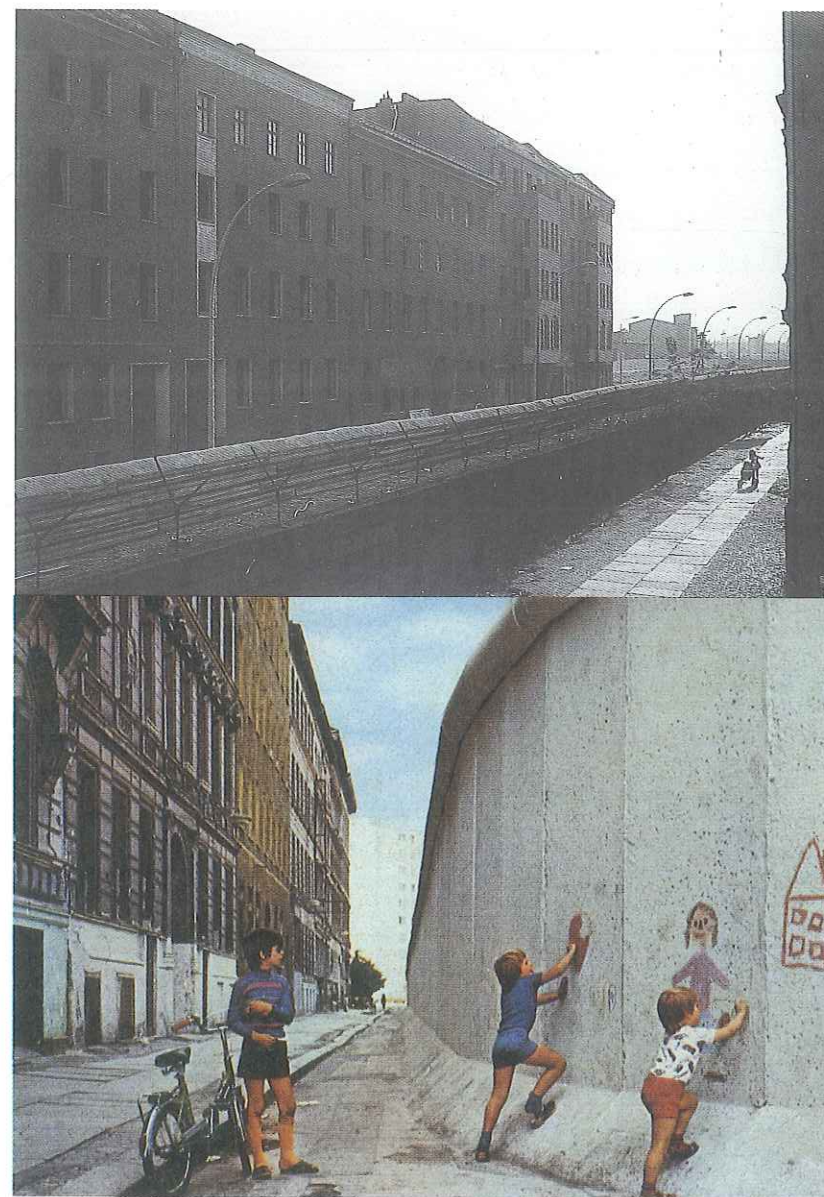
In fact, in narrowly architectural terms, the wall was not an object but an erasure, a freshly created absence. For me, it was a first demonstration of the capacity of the void—of nothingness—to “function” with more efficiency, subtlety, and flexibility than any object you could imagine in its place. It was a warning that—in architecture—absence would always win in a contest with presence.

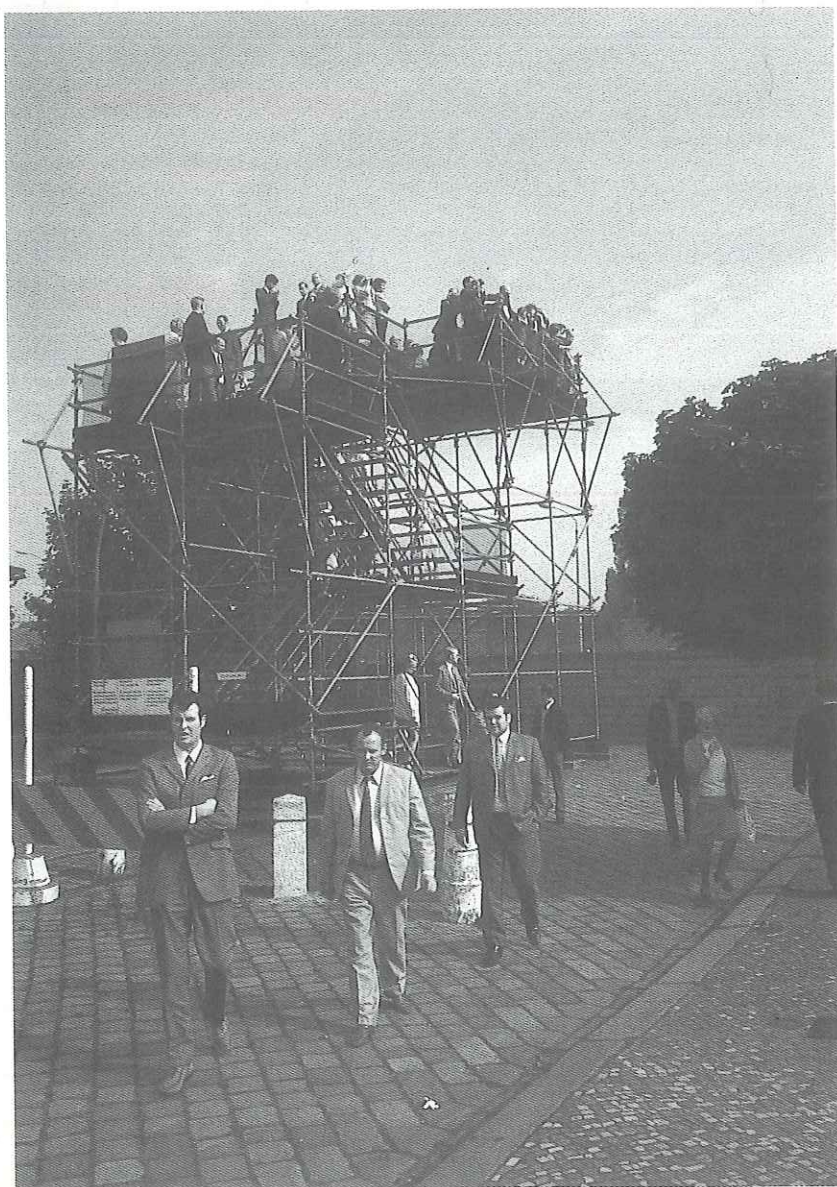
5.

The wall had generated a catalog of possible mutations; sometimes the new object/zone slashed mercilessly through the most (formerly) impressive parts of the city; sometimes it yielded to apparently superior pressures that were not always identifiable.

Its range from the absolute, the regular, to the deformed was an unexpected manifestation of a formless “modern”—alternately strong and weak, imposition and residue, Cartesian and chaotic, all its seemingly different states merely phases of the same essential project.

I had not known what to expect on this journey. I had hoped to “do” the wall in a day and then to explore the rest of the cit(ies). It was so





endless, I would say, that it could not be measured. But its attraction was hypnotic. It made me a serious student.

Three months later: my first public presentation. They were all there: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7, in a mood of semifestive, semicynical expectation (this school was nothing if not fun). The images that appeared on the screen—former conditions, concepts, workings, evolution, “plots”—assumed their positions in a sequence that was gripping almost beyond my control; words were redundant.

There was a long silence. Then Boyarsky asked ominously, “Where do you go from here?”

1993

Notes

1. Architectural Association School of Architecture (founded 1848): the “oldest and largest” architecture school in the UK; notoriously independent; student body: 450 (76% from over 50 foreign countries); staff: 125.

2. Archigram (founded 1961, London): group of English avant-garde architects (Peter Cook, Ron Herron, Dennis Crompton, Michael Webb, Warren Chalk, David Greene).

3. Smithson, Peter (b. 1923) and Alison (1928–93): former AA teachers; founders of Team X; they had just published *Action and Plan* (London: Studio Vista).

4. Price, Cedric (b. 1934): architect of Potteries Thinkbelt, which insinuated a new university in a derelict zone of redundant Victorian infrastructure; also of “No Plan.”

5. Jencks, Charles (b. 1939): Ph.D., London University; worked with Georges Baird on “Meaning in Architecture,” an early exploration of architecture and semiotics, memorable for its format, in which each contributor could comment in the margins on the speculations of the others.

6. Boyarsky, Alvin (1928–90): after a “revolution” was chairman of the AA from 1971 until his death and was most responsible for the school’s prominence.

7. Zenghelis, Elia (b. 1937): AA teacher; later OMA partner (until 1986).

8. Kahn, Louis I. (b. 1901, Baltic island of Sarema; 1905, immigrated to Philadelphia;

d. 1974, Penn Station, New York): American architect and teacher; professor at Yale and later at University of Pennsylvania; had just completed the Phillips Exeter Academy library and the Kimbell Art Museum.

9. Tschumi, Bernard (b. 1944): Swiss-French architect of Parc de la Villette, Paris; dean of Columbia University School of Architecture.

10. Superstudio (founded 1966): Italian avant-garde architects (I had been very impressed with their Continuous Monument and had organized lectures for Adolfo Natalini at the AA).

11. Disney, Walter Elias (1901–66): 20th-century genius; creator of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, etc.; planner of Disneyland, Anaheim, California (opened 1955), and Walt Disney World, Orlando, Florida (opened 1971).

12. LeWitt, Sol (b. 1929): American conceptual artist known for his wall drawings and structures; once worked as a draftsman for I. M. Pei.

13. Gehry, Frank O. (b. 1929, Toronto, Ontario): California architect who became world famous when he fenced in his LA house and dismantled it behind the new, notional enclosure.

14. Arendt, Hannah (1906–75): German-born US political scientist and philosopher known for *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), which related the development of totalitarianism to 19th-century anti-Semitism and imperialism, and for *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), which emphasized what she viewed as the cooperative role of Jewish community leaders in facilitating Nazi extermination of the Jews during World War II.

15. Petrushka: Russian marionette who in Stravinsky's ballet (1911) leads his own life, independent of the puppet master.

16. Hejduk, John Q. (b. 1929): New York Five architect who became increasingly interested in allegories; director of Cooper Union, the "other" architecture school.

17. Bataille, Georges (1897–1962): French philosopher, novelist, poet, and critic influenced by surrealists, Aztecs, Nietzsche; developed theories on "profane" human world of order vs. "sacred" animal world based on disorder, cruelty, excess.

18. Schinkel, Karl Friedrich (1781–1841): German architect who invested eclecticism with intellectual rigor—an ability that would later resurface in the architect O. M. Ungers.

19. Olivetti (founded 1908): Italian typewriter and computer factory known in the 1960s for its irresistible designs.

Film still: Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí,
Un Chien Andalou, 1929.

