om *El Croquis* 84 (1997)

# THE CUNNING OF COSMETICS: A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON THE ARCHITECTURE OF HERZOG AND DE MEURON

Jeffrey Kipnis

*During the toasts celebrating the opening of Light Construction, the deep-seated tension . . . broke out in a bristling exchange between Herzog and Koolhaas.*

*El Croquis* 79

How long now—six years? eight?—since I tossed off my first snide dismissal of the work of Herzog & de Meuron. Of course, for a critic such as I, advocate of the architectural avant-garde, intellectual apologist for the extreme, the exotic, the subversive, was it not *de rigueur* to scorn the superficial propositions of HdM? While one branch of the avant-garde proposed exotic form as a vector of architectural resistance, HdM offered flagrantly simple Cartesian volumes. While another branch cultivated event-theory into seditious programming techniques, HdM indulged contentedly in expedient, reductive planning. HdM's fixation on the cosmetic, on fastidious details, eye-catching materials and stunning facades appeared frivolous in comparison with those other more overtly radical experiments. Even worse, the overall cast of their work seemed complicit, if not aligned, with the taste for Neo-Modern Confections that had already begun to emerge as the hallmark of the reactionary New Right in Europe and elsewhere.

The question more to the point, then, is when exactly did my infatuation with HdM's work begin? When did I start returning to publications to gape secretly, furtively, at the Goetz Gallery (figs. 8 and 189), the Signal Box (figs. 17 and 191), Ricola Europe (figs. 187 and 188), or the sublime Greek Orthodox Church (fig. 190), like a schoolboy ogling soft porn? Did my longing for the work grow over time, or was I beguiled from the outset, my oafish snubs but the hackneyed disavowals of one discomforted by the throws of forbidden desire?

In any case, it was not until March 1996 that the utter cunning of HdM's project dawned on me in its full dimension. By then, I had already realized that their architecture's ability to insinuate itself into my psyche was a powerful effect that, like it or not, must be taken seriously. All the more so, when it occurred to me that HdM's work did not, by virtue of any polemic, force itself on me against my will; rather, like a computer virus, it slipped into my consciousness through my will, eluding any and all resistance as it began to reprogram my architectural thoughts and feelings.

In March 1996 I encountered an *Arch-Plus* special issue on HdM. What shocked me into a new awareness was not any particular essay in the issue, though it contained several excellent ones.[1] Rather, the agent of my epiphany was the unceremonious cover title: *Herzog et de Meuron: Minimalismus und Ornament*. As soon as I saw it, I knew something was wrong, very wrong; I could feel it, though I could not quite put my finger on it.

Thumbing through the magazine, I found that Nikolaus Kuhnert had, without comment, separated the firm's work into two sections: *Ornament* held all of the projects with printed surfaces, *Minimalism* everything else—a brute act of blunt taxonomy. The source of the uneasiness spawned by the cover title became apparent. How could such a coherent collection of works by one architectural intelligence lend itself so easily to partitioning into such antagonistic categories as Minimalism and Ornament?

At first glance, the division seemed quite sensible but, as might be expected, it did not sustain closer inspection. For example, Kuhnert placed the Signal Box—a key work in the HdM oeuvre—in the Minimalist section, no doubt in respect of the simple form, the monolithic uniformity effected by the copper banding system, and the functional role attributed. On the other hand, does not the luxurious field of copper bands also fit any non-trivial definition of architectural ornament, even, as we shall see, if it also undermines the concept of ornament at the same time? After all, each band was painstakingly warped to engender a mesmerizing, ephemeral gesture in light, shadow, and form over a large area of the skin, one much larger than required to admit natural light to the few interior spaces. And the functional rationalization of the system as a Faraday Cage is merely a smokescreen.[2] My point, however, is not to contest the details of Kuhnert's partitioning; rather, it is to admire the insidious guile of an architecture able to infiltrate so effortlessly such irreconcilable categories, and, in doing so, begin to dismantle and reform them.

Already I have touched on the most potent characteristics of HdM's architecture: an urbane, cunning intelligence and intoxicating, almost erotic allure. It is these traits that enable it to go anywhere, to go everywhere, into site and psyche alike, to appear ever fascinating yet ever harmless even as it plies its undermining subterfuges and sly deceits. And while this constellation of themes and its attendant techniques are ancient indeed,[3] the most precise placement of HdM's work in contemporary architecture is simply that it is the coolest architecture around. All that remains for us, then, is to watch it in action, to speculate a bit on its methods, and to begin an audit of its gains and losses.

Let us return to the Signal Boxes. Would it be too much to liken them to sirens, to temptresses that lure the unsuspecting into dangerous territory? The sirens of the Odyssey, if I remember correctly, charmed sailors into hazardous waters with the sheer beauty of their voices, voices that sang but said nothing, meant nothing, promised nothing. Do you not feel the song of the Signal Box? Are you not enticed by it, drawn to a distant train yard to drink in its presence with your eyes? What pulls you there? And why go, when the only thing certain is that there is absolutely nothing for you there, save, perhaps, peril?

In its single-minded obsession with Unspeakable Beauty, the Signal Box series is exemplary of the HdM project at its most radical. To achieve its edgy *à la mode*, HdM brushed aside the Big Questions that such a project would, today, customarily trigger. HdM ignores the fact that the signal station belongs to remote networks and inter-urban infrastructures and, therefore, that its architecture should be conceived more in terms of flows and intensities than in terms that might be likened to the visual niceties that have come to appoint bourgeois travel. Nor does HdM give a moment's thought to the inappropriateness of High Design in the harsh, dirty reality of the site, though the shrill understatement of the Signal Box is as hip to its surroundings as a gangster in colors is to South Central L.A. In that regard, the Signal Box raises doubts about the subtly patronizing fantasy of a context so brutal, so unrelentingly utilitarian that it cannot even broach the cloying frippery of design.

Make no mistake about it, these are not just hypothetical interrogations made in the name of the infrastructuralists and dirty realists. In his published comments to HdM, Rem Koolhaas first remarks on the undeniable beauty of the firm's facades. Then, on the way to framing his final indictment as a question, "Is architecture reinforcement therapy or does it play a role in redefining, undermining, exploding, erasing? [sic]," he begins to signal his misgivings by asking HdM, "Does every situation have a correct architecture?" no doubt with the Signal Box in mind.[4]

For the proponents of exotic form, the signal station series would have been an opportunity of another ilk. Largely free from the demands of human program, unencumbered by historical or formal typology, unobligated to a prevailing contextual language of architectural merit, the signal station offered an ideal prospect to experiment with the very limits of form. Furthermore, because several would be built, the morphological research could have been extended to the fascinating question of non-prototypical serialization. That HdM should adhere so closely to the box, that they should even consider developing a prototype was anathema. To this group of architects, the appearance in the second Signal Box of warped surfaces will surely seem a tacit admission of the futility of the original prototypical ambition and the inadequacy of the Cartesian box. As we shall see, however, nothing could be further from the truth.

In brief, the design of the Signal Box shows no concern whatsoever for flows or event-structures, for realism or new form. Its architecture is entirely a matter of cosmetics, a hypnotic web of visual seductions that emanate entirely from the copper band system, a system, it should be said, that is in fact not the building's actual skin, which lies just beneath; it only poses as the building's skin.

The point here, however, is not to diminish the architectural import of the Signal Boxes by relegating them to cosmetic, but to embrace their irresistible intrigue, to acknowledge their vitality, and in doing so, to assert the transformative power of the cosmetic. Some care must be taken here, for the *cosmetic* is not just another member of the family of decorative architectural appurtenances collectively known as ornamentation. The field of effects of the cosmetic is quite different from those of its relatives, and it is precisely in those differences that HdM's contemporary project is born.

Ornaments attach as discreet entities to the body like jewelry, reinforcing the structure and integrity of the body as such. Cosmetics are indiscreet, with no relation to the body other than to take it for granted. Cosmetics are erotic camouflage; they relate always and only to skin, to particular regions of skin. Deeply, intricately material, cosmetics nevertheless exceed materiality to become modern alchemicals as they trans-substantiate skin into image, desirous or disgusting. Where ornaments retain their identity as entities, cosmetics work as fields, as blush or shadow or highlight, as aura or air. Thinness, adherence, and diffuse extent are crucial to the cosmetic effect, which is more visceral than intellectual, more atmospheric than aesthetic. Virtuosity at ornamentation requires balance, proportion, precision; virtuosity at cosmetics requires something else, something menacing: paranoid control, control gone out of control, schizo-control.

Though the cosmetic effect does not work at the level of the body, nevertheless, it requires a body—or at least a face—as a vehicle. Like veal for the saucier, or the gaunt, featureless visage of choice recently for make-up artists, the ideal vehicle for the extreme cosmetician is a body, face, or form denuded of its own ability to engender affect. These days, the effects of form as such are just too obtuse to be cool.

If the attitude of the cosmetician toward the body is a minimalism, then it is of a very different sort than the Minimalism spawned by the art world more than two decades ago. While the two share a desire to collapse the time of impact of a work to the immediate, the former pursued that goal by distilling form and material into an essence that radiated (spiritual) affect through unmediated presence. The reductions of cosmetic minimalism, on the other hand, are anorexic, a compulsion to starve the body until it dissolves into pure (erotic) affect, like a Cheshire cat in heat. Witness the necrophilic charge of the anemic Kantonsspital Pharmacy, or speculate on the rejection of HdM's dazzling Greek Orthodox Church by the bishop. Was it because he grasped the conversion of its space from the spiritual to the erotic?

Thus, Kuhnert's bipartile distribution missed the decisive achievement of HdM's work thus far, the sublimation of the antithesis between ornamentalism and minimalism into a new coherence. The most famous example of this synthesis to date is Ricola Europe, with its renowned flourish, walls patterned with translucent tiles silk-screened with leaf images. When backlit, as seen in the interior during the day, the leaf pattern takes on an empty, numbing, camp fascination of a Warholian wallpaper. On the exterior, the images are rarely visible, emerging only fleetingly as hallucinations when hit at exactly the right angle by glancing light. Photos (actually, photographers) of this building tend to exaggerate the leaf image to the point of kitsch; its presence on the exterior is actually much rarer and more ephemeral. But in any case, this slick, eye-catching device belies the range and depth of technique HdM exercised in realizing the full cosmetic sophistication of the work.

As usual, the form is starved to skin and bones and gutted of any distracting conceit in plan. The silk-screened panels tile the two long walls; starting on the underside of the cantilevered awning, the strip paneling turns to wrap down the wall. The effect of the wrap is to subvert the integrity of the two distinct formal elements of the building, the facade and the soffit, blurring them into a single field. Ironically, this leaves the thin strip of clear glass revealing the terminal truss of the roof extensions as, strictly speaking, the only actual facade.

To further distance the thin, weightless leaf field from a wall, even a curtain-wall, it is edged like a draped veil. The edging causes the long, thin strips to seem to stream from the top to the ground, trickling so gently that the slight thickness of the upper track of the horizontal glass doors breaks the flow.

This streaming illusion on the panels blurs the front, translucent fields into the side concrete walls. On those sides, roof water flows over the concrete, causing it to reflect like glass when wet and leaving a field of parallel vertical tracks, the residue of evaporated flow. In the same device at the wraith-like echo of Ricola Europa, the Remy Zaugg studio, iron on the roof dyes the rainwater rust red to create a more dramatic if somewhat disconcerting effect. At Ricola Europe, these flow tracks and the pattern of widths they delimit reiterate uncannily the field of translucent tiles and seams in form and proportion.

For all of its modes of assertiveness, its blatant use of images, its indulgence in materiality, and the bluntness of its form, the genius of the Ricola Europa is that the building, in itself and as such, is never there. Its promise of stark presence withdraws to leave pure allure, a tour de force of architectural cosmetics.

As with other critical treatment of HdM's work, e.g., as neo-modernism or as applied minimal art, the question of cosmetics with all of its allusions to make-up and scents, to skins and bodies, would have only the force of analogy were it not for the matter of HdM's technique.

With form, planning, structure, and construction, even with materials, HdM's technique is architectural to the point of fanaticism. In the firm's entire body of work to date, there is not a single use of form, structure, or material that does not belong to the strictest canon of the architectonic. Every experiment is an effort to reanimate and update that canon, never to augment it with new entries, certainly not with new forms or programs, but not even with new materials. Even the stained water tracks and the algae, lichens, and molds that grow on old surfaces have belonged to the canon, albeit as nuisances, for centuries.

What makes the firm so interesting is that, unlike the avant-garde, HdM derives its critical edge from an assumption of architecture's basic adequacy and an ease with the controversial proposition that architecture has no other more profound project than to fabricate a new sensibility from its own palette. In that it pursues the new not as a matter of ideology or as a condition of marginality, but as a forthright, even aggressive assertion of the center, it is perhaps the most *au courant* practice.

If the notion of the cosmetic has any deeper purchase for HdM than mere analogy, it is because the firm does not apply cosmetics to architecture as theory or borrowed practice. HdM unleashes the destabilizing power of the cosmetic as a moment and a movement already residing within architecture's orthodoxy. In so doing, it often accomplishes timely effects *en passant* that other practices grounded more in applied theory have pursued with less success.

By working steadfastly within the protocols of architectural materiality, HdM achieves a far more convincing realization of architectural dematerialization than Peter Eisenman, who has pursued that idea in his architecture for over two decades. Eisenman, steeped in a post-structural account of architecture as an endless system of references by immaterial signs, theorized that the tradition of materiality in architecture was a perversion manifest either as fetishism or nostalgia. Accordingly, he sought to render his forms as pure signs by constructing them as empty shades in indifferent materials, e.g., EIFS or gyp-board. As a result, more often than not, his buildings fail to insist themselves and are easily dismissed as irreal, like stage sets or amusements parks.[5]

By beginning with more traditional and tactile material such as glass, wood, or concrete and then manipulating them in non-traditional ways, HdM is able to insist on the reality of the building while never allowing it to settle as a reliable and persistent presence. In other words, they do not dematerialize a concrete form by replacing the concrete; they dematerialize the concrete itself.

The forthcoming Kunstkiste Museum for the Grohte Collection should provide an acute study in this aspect of HdM's work. As published, the project promises to be nothing short of an essay in extreme concrete, one whose rude materiality should make Ando's renowned use of the material seem hopelessly genteel, as the building will certainly do to the saccharine confections by Schultes and Peichl nearby.

The top-heavy proportions of the vertical slab make the form of the Kuntskiste seem poised to topple, the threat further intensifying the insistent weight of the materiality. But the roof water, now destined to stain every surface with its vertical striations of rust and algae, will transform the appearance of the concrete box into that of a viscous liquid in an aquarium, the image confirmed by the blackened windows floating at random like objects at neutral buoyancy. Heavy or light? Solid or liquid? Essential presence or imagistic illusion?

But as intriguing as the project is in its published form, Jacques Herzog reveals that HdM entertained an even more astonishing thought for the project. At one point they considered printing exactly positioned, full-scale photo-images of the interior of the galleries on the concrete. The photo-printing surfaces would, in effect, make the concrete appear transparent! As if the phenomenal dislocation were not enough, the idea also carried a deconstructive implication, perhaps its downfall. The photographer would have been a young artist of note from Berlin, whose presence on the surfaces would have marked his absence from the collection and raised questions about the collection itself. For whatever reason, the idea seems to have been abandoned. Nevertheless, it was a brilliant thought, and one that indicates just how aware HdM is of the eruptive force of their cosmetic techniques.

[1] *Arch-Plus* 129–30 (December 1995). Included in the volume is a reprint of Alejandro Zaera's excellent "Between the Face and the Landscape," from the first *El Croquis* (no. 60, 1993) on HdM, and Rem Koolhaas's "Architectures of Herzog and de Meuron," republished in *Arch-Plus* under the new title "New Discipline," as well as insightful comments by Mark Taylor, Terry Riley, and Hans Frei.

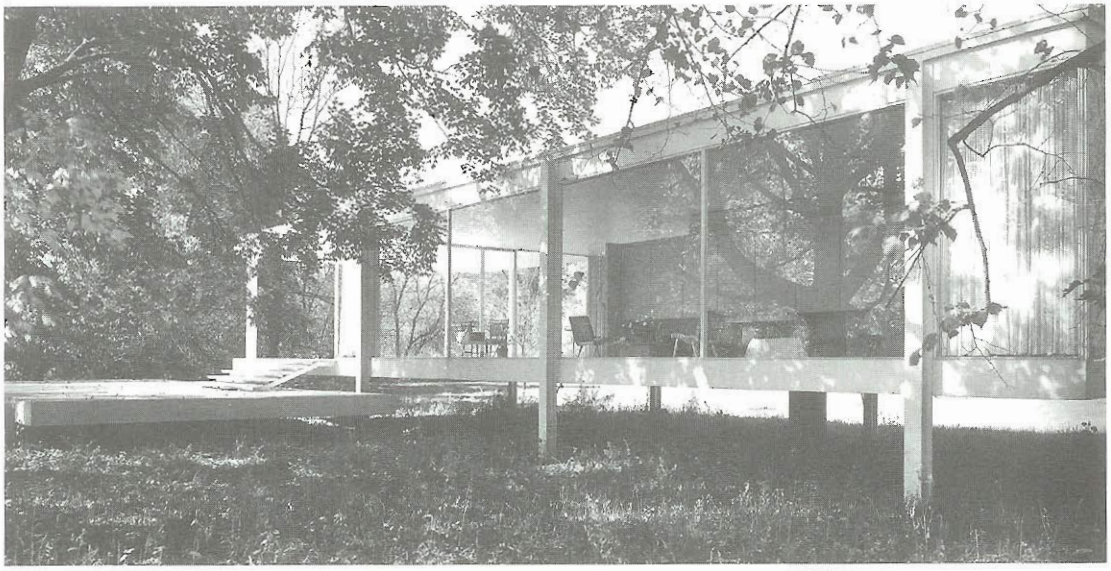
[2] The electronic equipment in all facilities such as switching stations is adequately shielded interference. Thus, though the copper banding system does indeed technically produce a Faraday Cage, it is far from a functional necessity.

[3] Cf. M. Detienne and J.P. Vernant, *Ruses de l'intelligence: la métis des Grecs*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1974), translated into English as *Cunning Intelligence*.

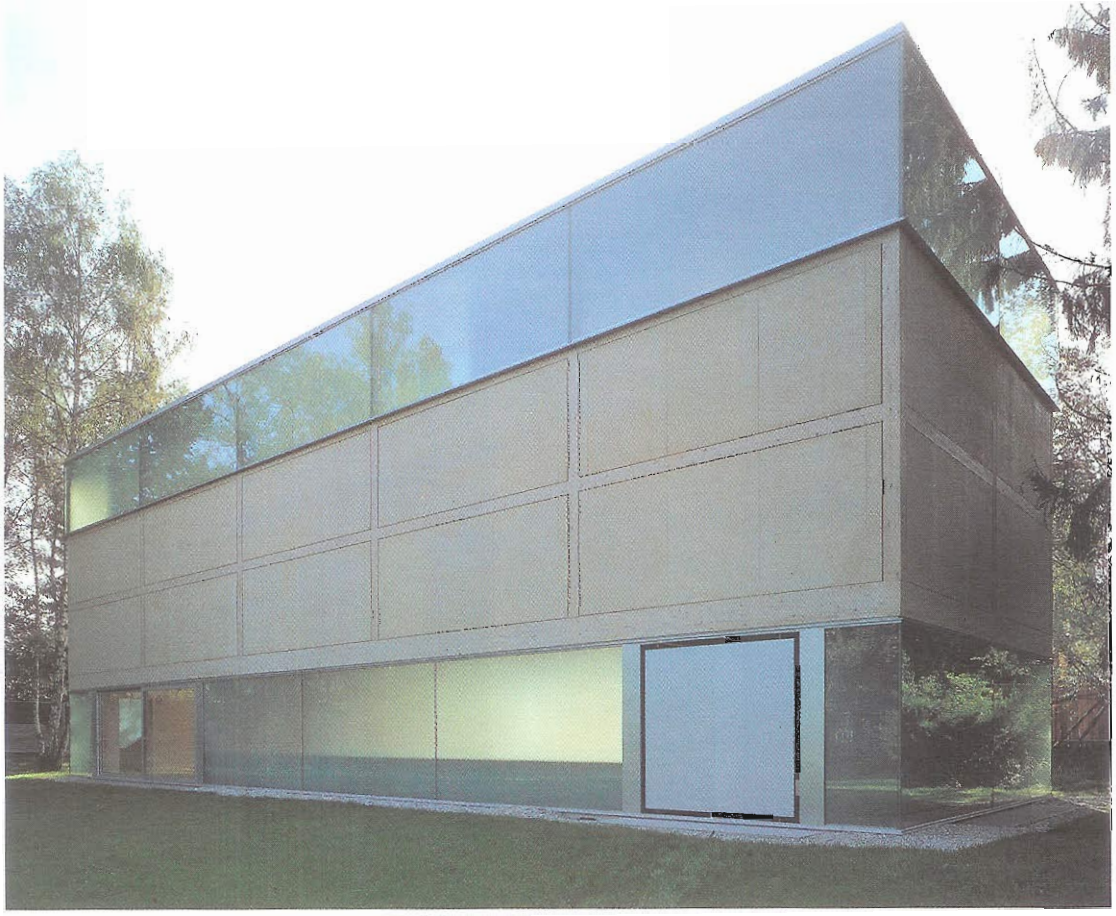
[4] From *Arch-Plus*, 129–30.

[5] Cf. my remarks in the recent *El Croquis* volume on Peter Eisenman (no. 83, 1997).

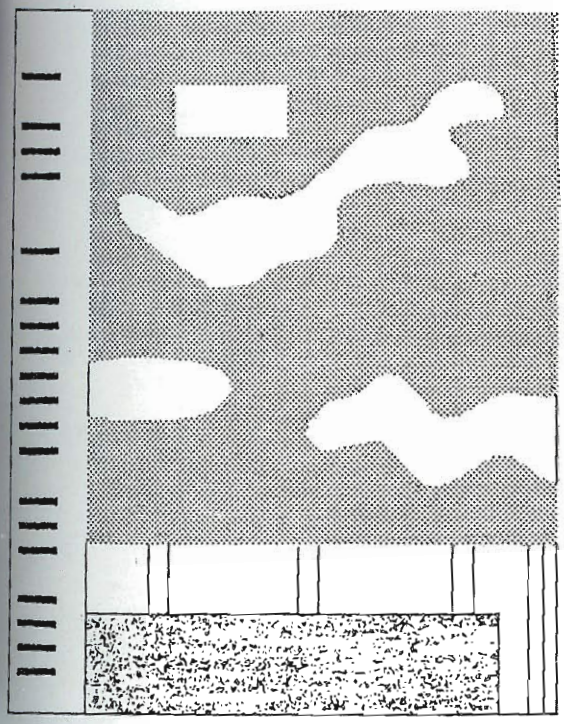
7



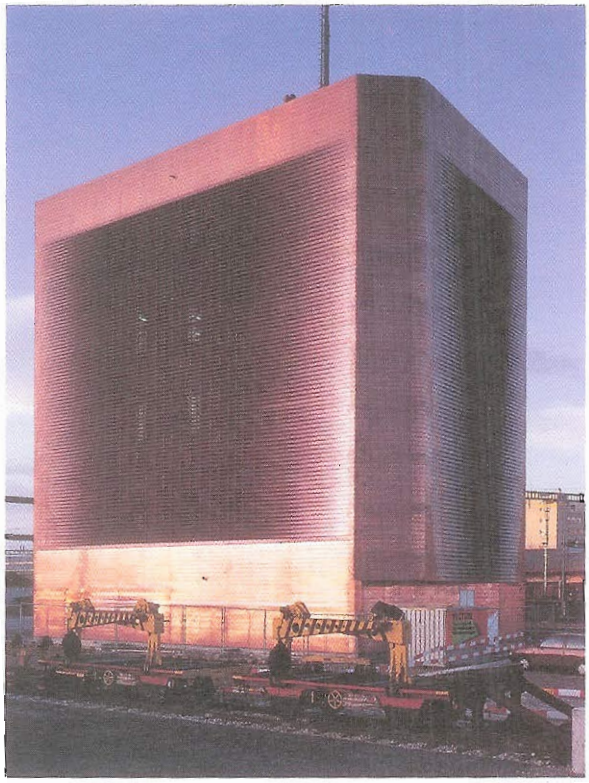
8



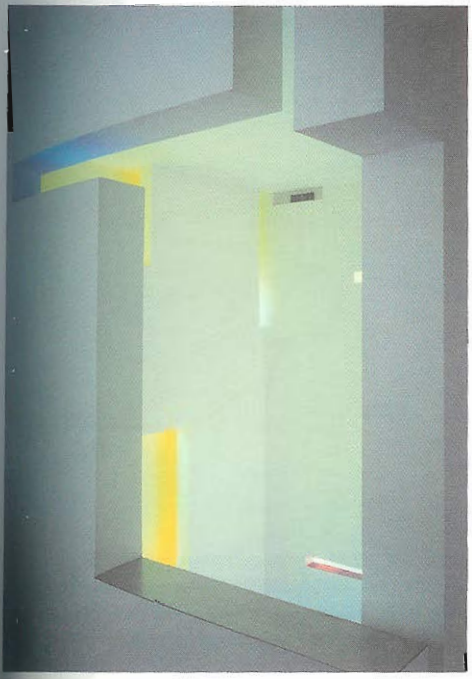
14



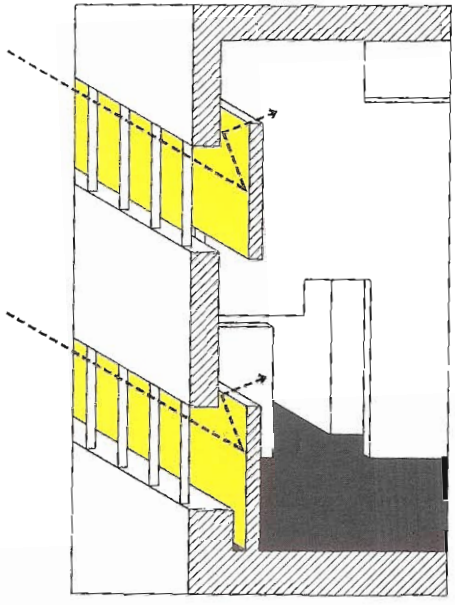
17



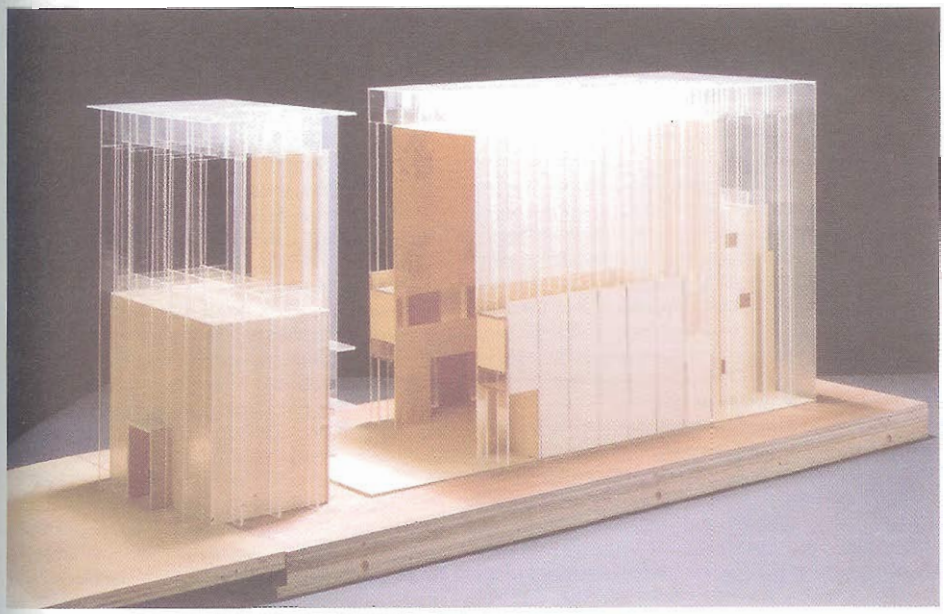
16



15

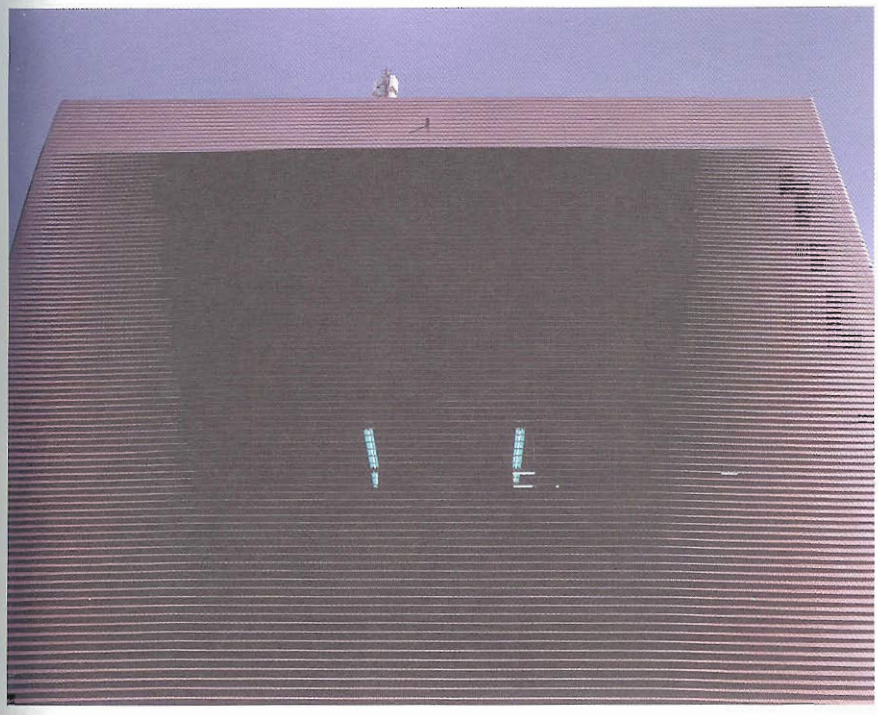


190

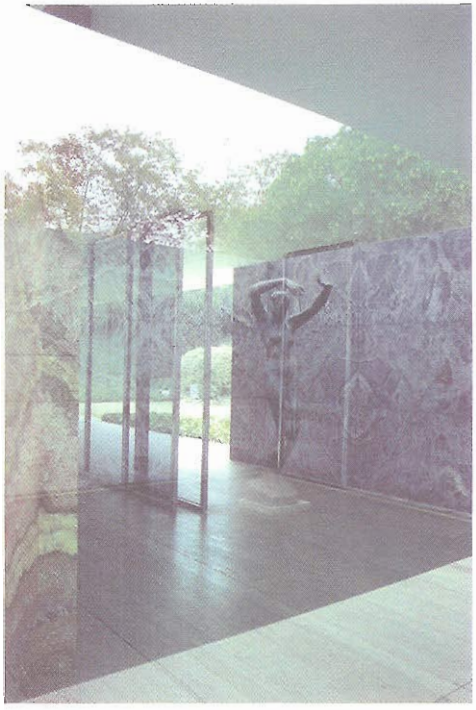


192

191



193



189 Herzog and de Meuron, Goetz Collection, Munich, Germany, 1992. Interior view.

190 Herzog and de Meuron, Greek Orthodox Church (project), Zurich, Switzerland, 1989. View of model.
191 Herzog and de Meuron, Signal Box auf dem Wolf, Basel, Switzerland, 1995. Exterior view.

192 Tattoo Art.
193 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona Pavilion, Barcelona, Spain, 1929. Interior view.