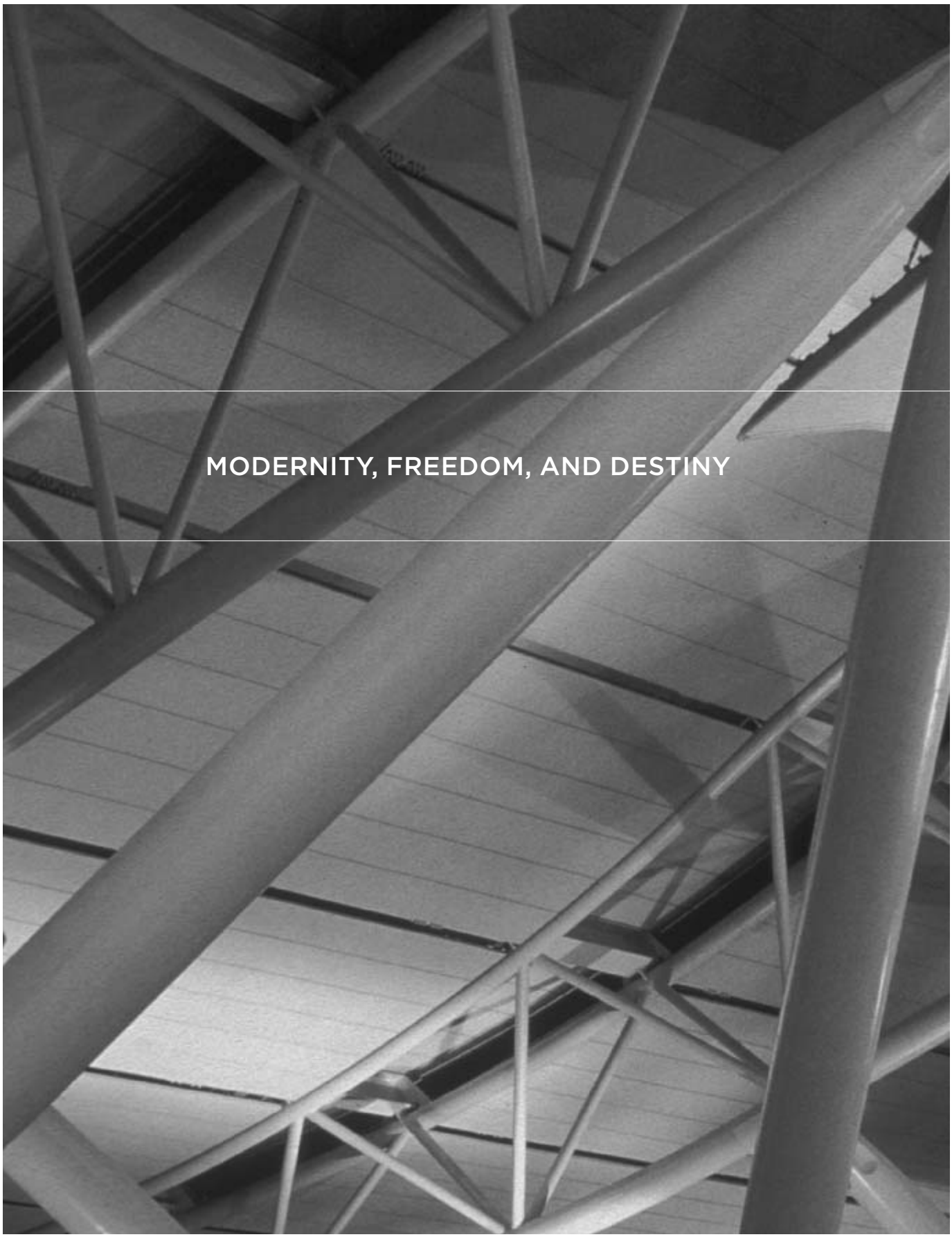


MODERNITY, FREEDOM, AND DESTINY

The state of contemporary architecture is to a large extent defined by the general fragmentation of our culture. Any serious attempt to address the key issues must therefore deal first with the nature of the relative and often derivative positions of various architects. This is not an easy task. As Max Stackhouse observes,

> when individuals and groups develop a link between their own imagination and their own reason that serves their own ends, and are not fundamentally concerned with the overall shape of the society, fragmentation inevitably ensues. . . . Everyone emotionally or intellectually, politically or economically grabs his fragment, which is partially real and creates a total reality with it. The splintered identities, the competing ideologies, the fractured parties and the glaring, cluttered advertising of competing businesses assault the person and the society from a thousand sides.[1]

Typically architects are more aware of the differences that separate them, giving their work an aura of novelty and originality. This leaves behind the common references and goals that contribute to the long-term cultural relevance of their work. The emphasis on difference and originality leads not only to results of questionable merit but also to isolation from the world that we all, in one way or another, share. There is an understandable temptation to describe that shared realm as the "given" or "real world." However, using the term "real" becomes problematic when ideologies and opinions are fiercely competing, when even "virtual reality is just another reality" and the "fact that it is computer generated with no physical existence makes it no less real."[2]

We commonly tend to save the meaning of the real by associating it with the practice of the office or with the building process. Such activities are considered radically different from the unreality or lesser reality of a project, from the deep understanding that grounds design problems, or from clearly defined visions. Though there clearly is some truth behind this impulse to differentiate, in most cases it is misleading. Architectural practice is not always practical; in fact, it is more often theoretical. We need only look at the nature of a typical brief or program, the criteria of design, and the conditions of its execution to grasp this elementary truth.

If we take as a basic criterion of reality the horizon of our everyday, commonsense world, a book might usefully be written to explain how the process of design and building relates to this horizon. That book would be devoted almost entirely to the different aspects of representation and to its history. We may already apprehend that representation is not limited to the physiognomy of buildings and spaces but relates more closely to the situational structure and meaning of architecture. Indeed, it is in this relation that the nature and degree of architectural reality can be established. However, before we can investigate the nature, reality, and meaning of modern architecture, as well as what it represents in our contemporary life, we have to understand the role of representation in creating and experiencing architecture in a broader historical context.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF REPRESENTATION

The problem of representation is closely linked with the process of making (*poiēsis*) and with creative imitation (*mimēsis*). Each project, however small or unimportant, begins with a program—or at least with a vision of the anticipated result. Such a program or a vision is formed in the space of experience and knowledge available to each of us. The result can be seen as the single actualization of an infinite number of possibilities. The formation of the program can be modified or improved through words or drawings because they make the potential field of possibilities present and available. Under such conditions, the actual result becomes a representation of the latent possibilities, bringing into focus their typical characteristics and enhancing their presence. Such focus takes place each time we succeed in grasping what is essential to a performance space, a concert hall, a particular urban space, and so on in a project. Thus, as Hans-Georg Gadamer points out, in contrast to the conventional understanding, "representation does not imply that something merely stands in for something else as if it were a replacement or substitute that enjoys a less authentic, more indirect kind of existence. On the contrary what is represented is itself present in the only way available to it."[3]

On this account, representation more or less coincides with the essential nature of making, and in particular with the making of our world. In the original Greek sense, making as *poiēsis* is the bringing into being of

something that did not previously exist.[4] This bringing into being is a creative step that transforms the open field of creative possibilities into a representation articulated by gesture, word, image, or concept. The rather limited mode of representation is, owing to our finite abilities, the only way to come to terms with the inexhaustible richness of reality. Because we have no other access to reality, certainly not a direct one, the unity of representation and what is represented is for us the only possible criterion of the reality of the task and its mode of being.[5]

The nature of representation as in the whole history of European architecture was defined by the continuity between a particular mode of representation and what is represented. This continuity was articulated and preserved in a framework that was, until relatively recently, dominated by cosmological thinking. Only in the second half of the eighteenth century was the cosmological paradigm replaced by a historical one, characterized by the search for the origins of representation—the concept of the primitive hut, the formation of new typologies, and the beginning of historicism, which culminated in the cultural relativism in the early years of the twentieth century. One cannot tell what framework of reference characterizes that century. Despite the *Gesamtkunstwerk* legacy of Art Nouveau, the "cathedral of the future" vision of the Expressionists, and the Surrealist dream of reconciling all opposites, the world of the twentieth century remained fragmented and sundered by conflict. This was in no way changed or improved by efforts to establish an international framework for creative cooperation.

The international movement of Constructivism was probably the first serious modern attempt to unite most progressive artists, Surrealism, the international movement in architecture, and so on. Its aims were formulated in many different ways, but the following "proclamation" is typical: "from all over the world come voices calling for a union of progressive artists. A lively exchange of ideas between artists of different countries has now become necessary, the long dreary spiritual isolation must now end. Art needs the unification of those who create. Art must become international or it will perish."[6] Such attempts failed because of a dichotomy in the nature of the avant-garde, a contradiction between the need for participation and the desire for individual freedom and emancipation.

The possibilities for genuine participation were compromised by a naive belief that the main forces of unification, objectivity, and universality

1.1. Renzo Piano, Kansai International Airport, passenger terminal.

might spring from technology. To technology was transferred the quasi-religious status given to art in the nineteenth century (figure 1.1). After the First World War it was assumed that "from amidst the hardest struggles an architectural style will arise which bears the stamp of the new age; for above everything that has happened stands the historical meaning of the new facts, ensuing from the victories of technology over matter and the power of nature. Every style is enforced on an age like fate; it is the manifestation of the era's metaphysical significance, a mysterious imperative."[7]

The elevation of technology as a universal metaphysical foundation for a new era of culture was the final step in a process that reduced all that is worth knowing about the making of architecture to transparent productive knowledge. It did not seem to occur to those who believed in such a possibility that technology itself has no particular content: it is only a method of inventive production, and it therefore cannot be a source of order of any kind. Order is always constituted in the communicative space of a particular culture as a whole. When the culture itself is reduced to its most elementary characteristics and is represented in a manner compatible with technical thinking, then and only then it is possible to believe that "technology is far more than a method," that "it is a world in itself."[8]

Under such conditions "architecture should only stand," Mies van der Rohe as well as some members of the avant-garde believed, "in contact with the most significant elements of civilization. Only a relationship that touches on the innermost nature of the epoch is authentic."[9] Mies, whose late work offers the most interesting interpretation of a relationship between architecture and technology, was convinced that technology reveals its nature most explicitly in construction, in large-scale structures in particular; but he also believed that technology might reveal something else (figure 1.2). He describes this enigmatic something "else" as "something, that has a meaning and a powerful form, so powerful in fact that it is not easy to name it."[10]

To explain the enigma, Mies asks what happens to technology when it is applied. "Some people are convinced," he writes, "that architecture will be outmoded and replaced by technology. Such a conviction is not based on clear thinking. The opposite happens. Wherever technology reaches its real fulfillment it transcends into architecture."[11] This conclusion becomes more overt when we realize that the idea of "technological fulfillment" goes back via Gottfried Semper to Goethe and Karl Friedrich Schinkel, where it is known as the idea of material transformation, which reveals the poetic function of architecture.[12] In the process of material transformation, the inner logic of a building and its material realization manifest themselves as an ideal "material form." Such a manifestation corresponds with Mies's own conclusion: "Architecture depends on its time. It is the crystallization of its inner structure, the slow unfolding of its form. That is the reason why technology and architecture are so closely related."[13]

1.2. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, National Gallery, Berlin.

The primary conditions for a new relationship between architecture and technology were first established in the seventeenth century when a gap opened up between the traditional symbolic and the new instrumental representation. In this period, in the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth century, architectural thinking, which had always been closely associated through its long history with the mathematical representation of its principles, was overtaken by new developments in the natural sciences. Relatively soon, the older approach and the new instrumentism were merged. The eighteenth century saw the foundation of engineering schools, which began to compete with the traditional architectural education; the emergence of modern aesthetics, providing a new formal appreciation of art; and the general formalization of culture, which were the main symptoms of the new situation. Other symptoms, less obvious, were the diminished relevance of tradition, most clearly visible in the ambiguous nature of late classicism, the growing arbitrariness of architectural decision making; and the discontinuity between the means and the content of representation.

The dual nature of symbolic and instrumental representation was long preserved in the cultural memory. It is apparent in all the main architectural movements of the twentieth century—from Constructivism, the Bauhaus, and De Stijl to French Purism—which no longer distinguished the formal representation of reality from the mathematical representation of technical knowledge. Mies van der Rohe himself declared: "our real hope is that technology and architecture grow together, that some day the one be the expression of the other. Only then will we have an architecture worthy of its name. Architecture as a true symbol of our time."[14] This hope did not last long. It was soon evident that not architecture but technology had become the symbol of our time.

That architecture was particularly open to technical interpretation has much to do with the general technization of everyday reality and its new levels of organization and formalization, particularly as related to work, bureaucracy, and domestic life. The level of formalization achieved is reflected in the history of architectural typologies; more broadly, it is seen in the reduction of the purpose of activities originally based on religious, cultural, or other meaning to technically and economically useful standards. These standards govern a period in which technical perfection and economic efficiency are considered to be "the most significant elements of civilization and the innermost nature of the epoch."[15] The technization of everyday life was in turn strongly influenced by the possibilities of representation developed in great diversity and on a large scale in the domains of architecture, urbanism, and landscape design. I am primarily thinking here not of the representational power of perspective, descriptive geometry, topology, and surveying, but of their power to transcend the unity of representation and to establish a new horizon of autonomy.

This development brings us to the very essence of a change that is manifested as a difference between the participatory and emancipatory nature of representation. It is well known that we largely experience the surrounding world, in its plenitude and in its given state, as otherness. I have already remarked that our experience of the given reality is never direct but only mediated, and that the most important role in that mediation is played by representation and its unity. Only the unity of representation can bring us closer to the depth and the plenitude of phenomenal reality, which would otherwise remain inaccessible. A line of poetry or a single painting

very often can tell us much of the hidden meaning and beauty of a landscape, just as a light in a sacred space tells us of the intelligibility of the sky and the divine.

The primary purpose of representation, we may conclude, is its mediating role, which can also be described as participatory because it enhances our ability to participate in phenomenal reality. But the process of representation can also move in the opposite direction toward the emancipation of the results and, as a consequence, toward their separation from the original communicative context. This is a tendency that we know well from the attempts of avant-garde movements to create a new language of expression and representation, a language fully emancipated from history and tradition that might support the autonomy of the particular avant-garde position. The most radical manifestation of this type of emancipatory representation can be seen in recent movements that, so many years later, still share the intentions of earlier avant-gardes.[16]

The technical homogenization of whole areas of modern life makes it much easier to share the illusion that even the most abstract architectural solutions, based on narrow technical criteria, may be adequate and appropriate. Human adaptability is an important factor in the cultivation of this illusion. Even more important, however, is the overwhelming and persuasive power of emancipated representation itself, which addresses only the level of reality expressed in technical language. It is extraordinary how many different forms and facades this language can adopt. And yet, behind all the facades we find a common set of characteristics—not only in the areas normally associated with production and technology but also in other fields of creative activity.

CREATIVITY IN THE AGE OF PRODUCTION

The difference between creativity and production largely coincides with the distinction drawn above between participatory and emancipatory representation. Creativity is always situated within a particular communicative context from which it grows and in which the creative results participate. This circular process is not only the essence of creativity but also the essential moment in the disclosure and in the constitution of the human world. Production, in contrast, though it may grow from the same context,

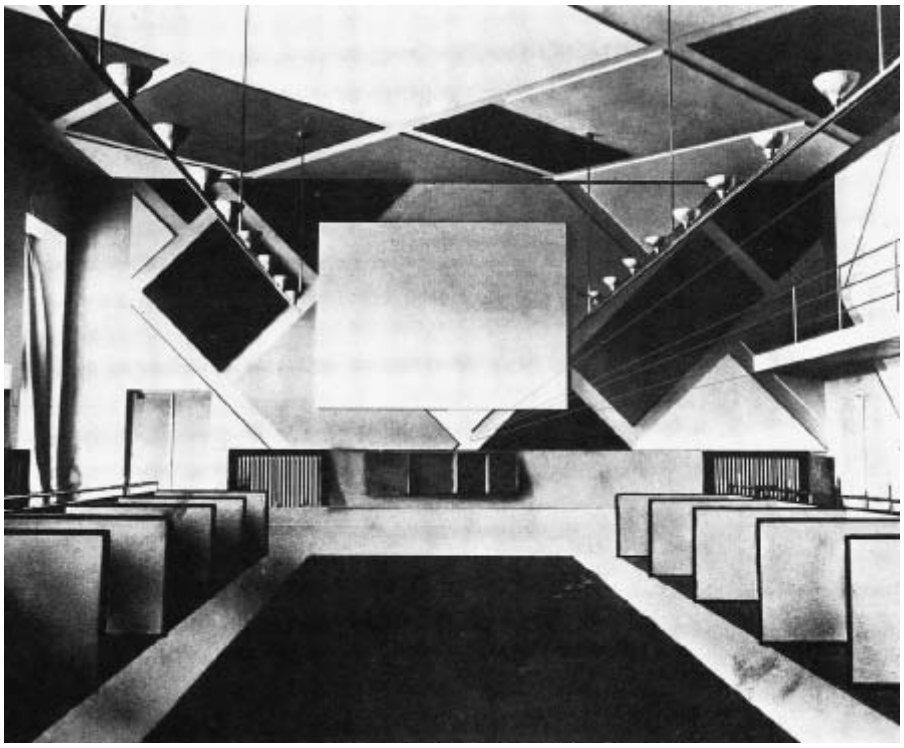
separates itself and establishes its own operation in an autonomous domain of reality.

What makes that separation possible is the know-how supplied by technical knowledge and the autonomy of the formal structures embodied in emancipated representation. In real life, the distinction between creativity and production is never absolute: each creative act always contains initial element of inventiveness, and any production—at least in its initial stage—displays a certain level of creativity. However, their goals remain strongly and clearly differentiated. What is produced, unlike what is created, has no communicative relation with its cultural setting: its purpose and meaning are established entirely in accordance with the task's internal logic. Not just many structures and buildings—industrial plants, supermarkets, schools, hospitals, and the like—but also many artworks are produced in the same way as any other industrial product.

Such a product is typically designed for a precise purpose, and at the same time for any place, people, or culture. In describing his vision of the new art, which was to be universal, Theo van Doesburg already in the 1930s used purely productive terms: "The work of art must be entirely conceived and formed by the mind before its execution. It must receive nothing from nature's given forms or from sensuality or from sentimentality. We wish to exclude lyricism, dramaticism, symbolism, etc. In painting a pictorial element has no other element than itself. The construction of the picture, as well as its elements, must be simple and visually controllable. Technique must be mechanical, that is exact, anti-impressionistic"[17] (figure 1.3).

The productive attitude to art and architecture, which profoundly influenced the nature of creativity in the twentieth century, has become particularly dominant in recent decades. One of its main characteristics is a tendency to accelerate the development of "productive" possibilities. This characteristic is directly linked to the nature of emancipated representation, which translates and reduces reality into an image structured more by our inventiveness and visions than by the given conditions of reality itself. To invent or produce under such conditions is like moving at a high speed through thin air. It is perhaps not surprising that in the fragmented culture of the twentieth century it proved to be easier to produce than to create.

Much evidence is available that helps us to see more deeply into the intricate relation between creativity and production. Perhaps most imme-



1.3. Theo van Doesburg, Aubette, cinema and dance hall, Strasbourg (destroyed).

diately enlightening are Daniel Libeskind's drawings, which he himself describes as "deconstructive constructions" (figure 1.4). They consciously explore "the relation between the intuition of geometric structure as it manifests itself in a pre-objective sphere of experience and the possibility of formalization which tries to overtake it in the objective realm."[18] The drawings offer a unique insight into the constructive possibilities on the boundary of actual and imaginary space—in other words, an insight into the representative power of our imagination, challenged by the conceptual power of invention. The transition from actual to imaginary space, from the geometrical representation of actual spatial relationships to their formal equivalents, is in essence a transition from the space of real possibilities to the space of possible realities. In this process, which illustrates the emergence

1.4. Daniel Libeskind, *The Architect and His Shadow* (1981).

of the autonomy of geometrical representation, the original continuity of meaning is replaced by the transformational meaning of the process itself. The open-ended and enigmatic nature of the results is the price paid for the new productive freedom. Such freedom seems to be the demand of the current situation, but why? Libeskind again:

> Contemporary formal systems present themselves as riddles—unknown instruments for which usage is yet to be found. Today we seldom start with particular conditions which we raise to a general view; rather we descend from a general system to a particular problem. However, what is significant in this tendency, where the relation between the abstract and the concrete is reversed, is the claim which disengages the nature of drawing as though the "reduction" of drawing were an amplification of the mechanisms of knowledge.[19]

The tendency to extend and, where possible, to surpass the limits of visual representation is one of the main characteristics of the contemporary avant-garde as it attempts to transcend the confines of traditional culture and the existing human condition. It is perhaps not surprising that geometry and mathematical thinking in general play a key role in such an effort. Mathematics has always been the major instrument of transcendence, because it generates its own development, regardless of whether its results can be directly reconciled with the world of phenomena. The extension of mathematical thinking into a broader sphere of culture brings architecture itself close to mathematics, and thus into the stream of productive thinking. Because architects are not usually much concerned with the sources and the nature of the knowledge received from other fields, tending to view it either uncritically or as a pragmatic tool, they are very often victims of deep confusion.

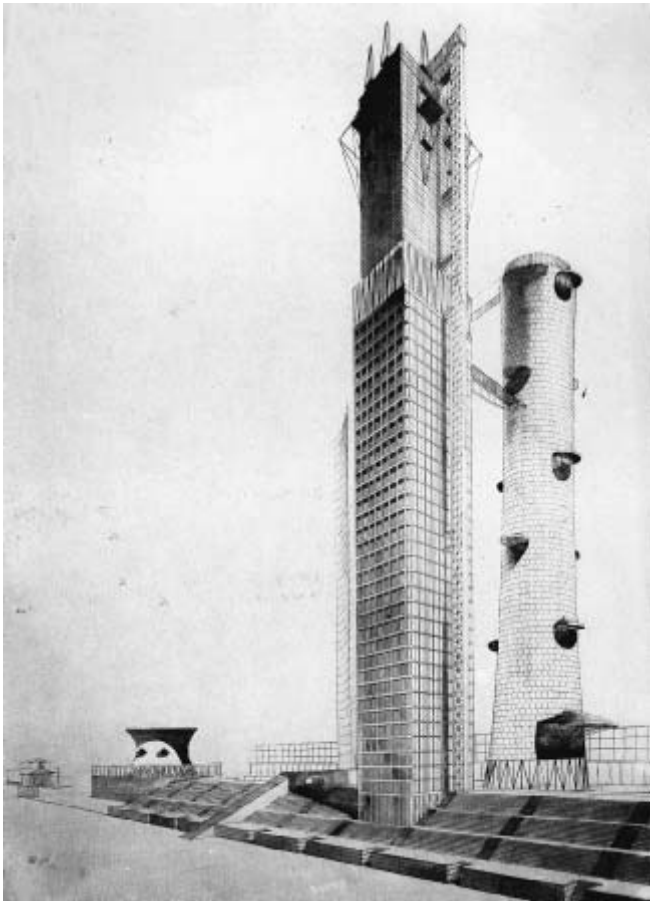
In the case of mathematics, much effort was invested already in the nineteenth century to better understand its logical foundations and applicability and to gain a more comprehensive vision of the relationship between mathematical representation and reality. In all these studies and investigations, the recurring issues are the ontological nature of the conditions and possibilities of formalization, the nature of formal systems, and the continuity of meaning in mathematical operations (figure 1.5). It is

surprising that architects, who encounter practically the same problems in their own work, pay little attention to their nature and their implications—this leads inevitably to confusion. The words of Jean Ladrière, a leading mathematician who is clearly speaking only about his own field, nonetheless apply also to architecture:

> The abstract is not the first. It is by a perpetual return to its intuitive origins and to the reality of its problems, by a close fidelity to the imperatives of this hidden life which traverses theories like fertilizing sap, that mathematical thought reconquers, through the inevitable snares of a necessary abstraction. This original concrete [reality], which is always present, at the core of its movement, and which manifests in most characteristic fashion its permanent activity in the highest moments of creation. . . . To detach itself from these roots, would in reality be to condemn itself to asphyxia, to enclose itself in a kind of mortal solitude which would result in the emptiness of a system void of all content.[20]

The danger of emptiness has haunted modern architecture from its very beginning. However, it is important to realize that emptiness sprang not only from the buildings but also from the absence of an articulated public culture. Once the continuity of shared meaning has been broken into fragments of understanding, it is unrealistic to expect ambitious abstract structures and their implied meaning to be understood as their authors intended. When Mies van der Rohe speaks about the spiritual meaning of construction, or Michel Seuphor praises an "architecture which by the technical and physical methods peculiar to the age, reflects in its particular organization the magnificent order of the universe,"[21] they are no longer convincing.

We may feel, quite rightly, that there is a deep gap in communication, not only between people or between people and buildings, but between different areas of culture itself. The presence of this divide, it seems to me, is illustrated by the sheer amount of verbal explanation and commentary that accompanies the visual arts. Its purpose, no doubt, is to convey the personal meaning of the work to the public. The need for such explication illustrates a much larger problem—the gap between the achievements of modern science and technology, including their deep influence on contemporary so-



1.5. Ivan Leonidov, headquarters of heavy industry, Moscow (1934).

ciety, and the communicative nature of the phenomenal world. This is, reflected most clearly in the difficulty of reconciling the abstract, conceptual representations of our world and the particular conditions and aspirations of our lives.

There is a tendency to believe that the emancipation of technological possibilities and powers affects reality as a whole and uniformly, and therefore leads to human emancipation. That would be true only if life and nature could be reduced to transparent knowledge; but as we know, such reduction

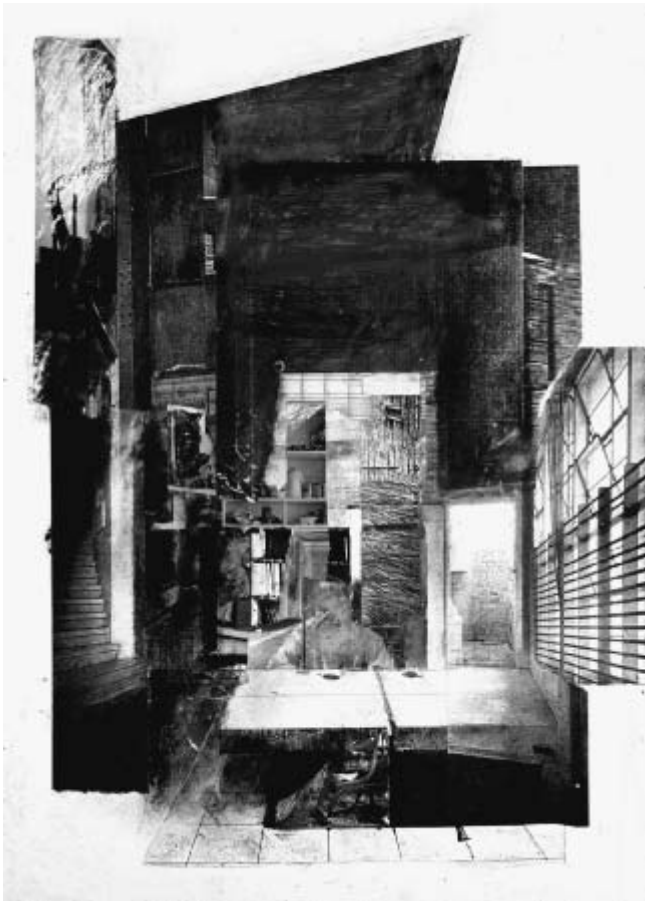
is impossible. Whole areas of nature and life are beyond our capacity to comprehend—and yet those very areas exert the greatest influence on the nature of our world. Their importance is increasingly underscored by the growing knowledge now being accumulated by anthropology, human ecology, environmental medicine, and so on, as the following statement by the microbiologist René Dubos illustrates very well:

> The evolutionary development of all living organisms, including man, took place under the influence of cosmic forces that have not changed appreciably for very long periods of time. As a result, most physiological processes are still geared to these forces; they exhibit cycles that have daily, seasonal and other periodicities clearly linked to the periodicities of cosmos. As far as can be judged at the present time, the major biological periodicities derive from the daily rotation of the earth, its annual rotation around the sun and the monthly rotation of the moon around the earth.[22]

Dubos briefly describes the conditions under which the regularity of certain vital processes of our lives were constituted and under which they eventually became the source of other regularities and movements that structured the higher, more articulated layers of our life and culture. That the articulation of cultural life is directly linked with conditions that remain relatively unchanged, while at the same time the path of culture that is open to technological transformation has changed radically, creates a tension and eventually a deep void in the very heart of the culture itself.

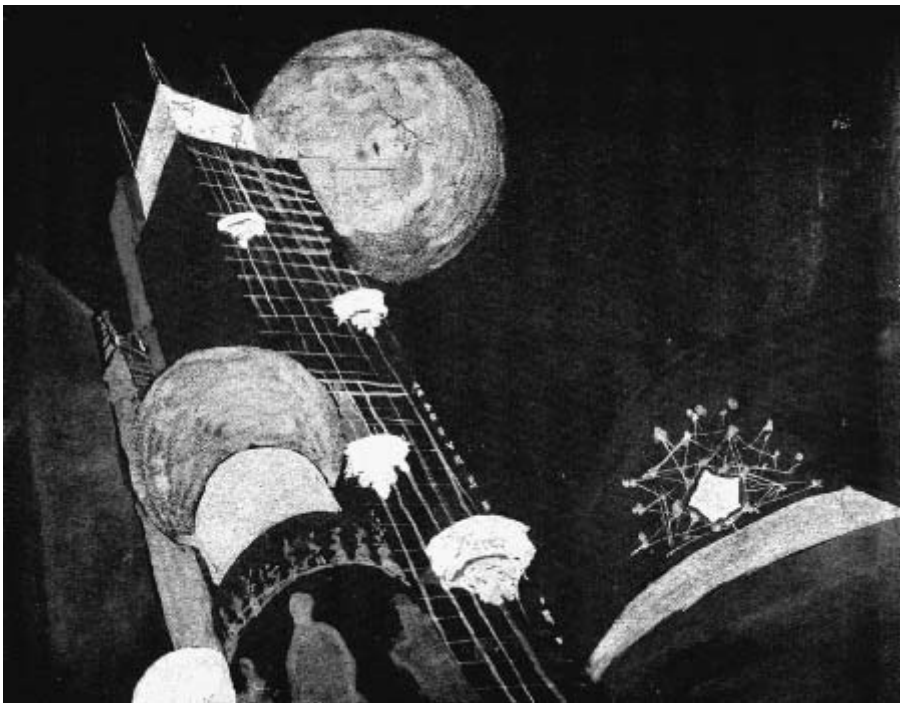
The vision of modern society undergoing a steady technological transformation en bloc is misleading. There is a great difference between those levels of reality that can be directly manipulated and those that resist such manipulation. In the case of dwelling, for instance, new constructions, materials, and services, are being developed on a different level and at a different rate than the nature and purpose of the dwelling, which are rooted in tradition, customs, habits, and in the relative stability of primary human situations (figure 1.6).

How to reconcile the differences in the nature and rate of development is a question often addressed. The typical answer refers to technology and to the need to adapt to its imperatives. How one-sided and problematic



1.6. Melanie Young, metaphorical study of the design studio.

such an answer is can be demonstrated by the complex history of adaptation going back at least to the end of the eighteenth century, when the total dominance of disengaged emancipated rationality was first seriously challenged by Romanticism and by its influence on later generations.[23] We have to remember and acknowledge that Romanticism was not just a reaction to the Enlightenment, an artistic movement, or an impossible dream but also a science, philosophy, and general attitude toward culture as a whole.[24] In the dialectical development of modern culture during the past two centuries,



1.7. Ivan Leonidov, United Nations Headquarters (1957–1958).

Romanticism—in different forms and under different names—has been the main source of the continuity of humanistic culture, creativity, and the sense of wholeness. It is mostly through its more recent manifestations in Expressionism and Surrealism, but also (though less explicitly) in certain aspects of Constructivism and even in High Tech, that the Romantic tradition has exerted its influence on modern architecture (figure 1.7). It is difficult to find a better example than the work of Hans Scharoun. His whole life was devoted to a thoughtful and highly personal interpretation of culture that, under the relatively narrow label "Expressionism," manifested a rich, long-term contribution from philosophy, literature, theater, and visual arts. In the Expressionist epoch, most German culture was dominated by a desire to transcend fragmentary experience and to attain a vision of the whole, to achieve a union with the inward reality of the world.

THE INWARDNESS OF MODERN CULTURE

Inwardness is the main feature not only of Expressionism but of the twentieth century as a whole. It has resulted from a long-term transformation of European culture, tied to a belief that our life can be entirely represented in terms of scientific, technical rationality, leaving behind all that cannot be subordinated to this vision—mainly the domain of personal experience, praxis, and the natural world. The emancipation of scientific rationality led to a culture with its own criteria of intelligibility and to a new sense of wholeness based on the continuity of the humanistic tradition accessible through personal, introverted experience. In the field of architecture, this mode of culture is typically embodied in the Romantic notion of genius, which reduces the traditional complexity of culture to a single, creative gesture and to direct communication with the assumed creative powers of nature. In his 1925 lecture at the Breslau Academy, Scharoun declared: "The creator creates intuitively in accordance with an impulse that corresponds not only to his temperament but also to the time to which he belongs and with which he is, to a great extent, one. And if we want to explain this impulse, then we must understand the real tasks of our time. The law that drives and leads an architect can perhaps be grasped only metaphysically."[25]

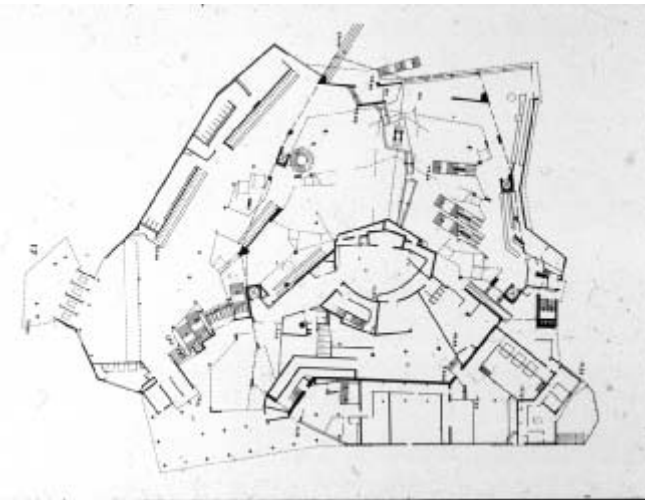
The law that drives and leads an architect is very closely linked with the mystery of architectural form (*Gestalt*) to which Scharoun explicitly refers: "The great mystery in the creative work is undoubtedly *Gestalt, Gestalt* in the sense of organic and multiple form."[26] The mystery of form has much to do with the question of authenticity, which for Scharoun was synonymous with the organicity of design, as measured by the correspondence between *Leistungsform* (functional form) and *Wesenhafte Gestalt* (essential form). The functional form is a result of a *Gestaltfindung* (investigation), in which the appropriate solution is determined by the given purpose, material, and construction. Together with Hugo Häring, with whom he shared many ideas, Scharoun believed that the functional or organic form, as he sometimes calls it, is a result of an anonymous process in which the intrinsic laws of nature or human life determine the design. Despite the importance of functional investigation, the goal of each project was the essential form that was supposed to reconcile the formal solution with the spiritual principles of the epoch. However, the presumed anonymity and ob-

jectivity of the process were illusory. The determination of design by the laws of nature or human life is conceivable only as an interpretation in which the role of the architect and his or her experience, imagination, and intentions are decisive. Their importance is even more obvious in the search for the essential form, which in the absence or even negation of all precedents requires a great deal of experience and knowledge as well as a high level of inventiveness.

Under such conditions, the task is not only to invent a particular building from one's own cultural reserves but also to invent a culture that would make the building meaningful. The result is a cycle that seals the introverted nature of the creative process and potentially opens the way to arbitrariness and relativism. It is very difficult to imagine how a culture articulated in an inner dialogue can replace the richness and wisdom of a culture that was publicly cultivated and shared for many centuries. This problem is clearly apparent in the discrepancy between Scharoun's buildings and his stated intentions. In the Berlin Philharmonie, for instance, the main hall was no doubt deeply influenced by the history of music auditoria; and yet Scharoun describes the process of its making as a direct dialogue between the nature of music and the nature of space, seen as a landscape (figures 1.8 and 1.9). "The construction," he writes, "follows the pattern of a landscape with the auditorium seen as a valley and there at its bottom is the orchestra surrounded by a sprawling vineyard climbing the sides of its neighboring hills. The ceiling, resembling a tent, encounters the landscape like a skyscape."[27]

The indeterminate, changing perceptual structure of the whole is held together by the constructive imagination of the architect and the musical experience of the audience. It is interesting to see how early Scharoun anticipated the close link between his own imagination and public experience. In one of his drawings for the Glass Chain, he illustrates the place and the role of the artist among the people—the artist's ability to embody and represent their will and elevate it to the higher level of "spiritual" existence[28] (figure 1.10).

It is a sign of the avant-garde mentality that the architect sees him- or herself as a sole agent, fully responsible for everything related to creativity. This illusion culminates in the belief that world is essentially each architect's own world. Everything created under such conditions is bound



1.8. Hans Scharoun, Berlin Philharmonie, plan.

1.9. Hans Scharoun, Berlin Philharmonie, interior.

1.10. Hans Scharoun, *Ich Du, Volkshausgedanke* (1920).

to be unique, and yet claims are often made for a universal validity. This paradox can be sustained only by a self-centered culture, prepared to share the paradox as a norm. However, this does not resolve the real problem of the relation between the universality and the particularity of design. We can see that problem not only in the architecture of Scharoun but also in the work of his opposite, Mies van der Rohe. The universality of Mies's structure, it is conventionally believed, represents both the universal and the specific aspects of the program and of the broader context of culture (figure 1.11). In fact, the deeper content is present only enigmatically and is accessible only through very cryptic personal interpretations. No amount of wishful interpretation, however, can bridge the gap between the promise of meaning and its fulfillment. In the end, Mies's buildings remain what they are—cultivated material structures, which can at best be appreciated aesthetically. The talk about Mies's classicism and his own arguments about the expression of the essence of the modern epoch through technology are no more than empty intellectual constructions. On the basis of these constructions, the emanci-

1.11. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, National Gallery, Berlin.

pated and isolated reality of Miesian structures is sometimes situated in a broader sphere of meaning. Such meaning may be available to the architect himself and to those who are persuaded by the thrust of his argument; but to those who are not initiated or have their own critical understanding, the argument must appear hermetic and illusory. It is quite astonishing to see the extent to which the twentieth-century avant-gardes succeeded in fabricating their position—their promises of new meaning, coherence, and wholeness—through publicity, exhibitions, manifestos, and utopian projects rather than through the convincing quality of buildings, to say nothing of cities.[29] In a sense, the career of Mies shows similar characteristics.[30]

The critical role played by the media, the secondary and derivative mode of representation, in the making of modern architecture illustrates how tenuous the link between architecture and its cultural context has become. In Miesian terms, the universality of the solutions is, contrary to the intentions of their author, only a form of universality. In the work of Scharoun, as we have seen, most important is the process of creation starting

from and cultivating the particular. "We know," he wrote in the last years of his life, "that all our attempts are only a modest beginning in detail."[31] In the development from the particular and from the detail, there is always a certain anticipation of the result in the form of an idea or conceptual image. However, the aversion toward the a priori presence of all universality leaves Scharoun's work isolated from the broader meaning of the common culture. In that sense, it is complementary to the work of Mies.

THE GRAY ZONE OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

By curious historical coincidence, Scharoun's Philharmonie and Mies's National Gallery, the two most typical representations of the polarity in modern architectural thinking, share the same space on the Kulturforum in Berlin (figure 1.12). The gray zone that separates them can be understood both literally and metaphorically.

The space of the forum in its contemporary state is a sad memento of twentieth-century inability to create a genuine public space. That failure is reflected in the broader and deeper metaphorical meaning of the gray zone, which shows the true scale of the gap between the universality of modern culture, represented by modern science and technology, and the domain of introverted culture, represented mostly by the arts, the humanities, and personal experience. Its width was already apparent in the contrast between Mies's conviction that "the individual is losing significance" and "his destiny is no longer what interests us" and Scharoun's doubts about the role of rational knowledge and structured creative process. "Do we reach pure creativity through reflection, through knowledge?" Scharoun writes; "—No—man is the center."[32]

In one sense the gray zone is a metaphor for a deep discontinuity in modern culture; in another sense it is a metaphor for the problematic attempts to resolve the discontinuity from a single, relatively narrow position. The typical example is a loose and arbitrary connection established between a highly personal experience and ideas of universal validity. In the history of modern architecture, the attempts to resolve the problem of cultural discontinuity have resulted in the formation and consolidation of several distinct positions. The most obvious, already discussed, took shape around the belief in the universal role of technology and around personal

1.12. Berlin Kulturforum, aerial view.

expressive epiphanies. Among other formative beliefs might be cited a faith in the restorative power of the vernacular tradition, in classicism, and more recently in the historicizing improvizations of postmodernism and in conceptual deconstructions.

The arbitrary nature of the relation between the sphere of experience and the sphere of concepts or ideas is the main characteristic of the gray zone. It is a source of an unprecedented freedom to produce new works but also of an overwhelming relativism, loss of meaning, and narrowing range of common references—and, as a result, of a general cultural malaise.[33] The nature of this malaise can be easily illustrated by the dilemma facing most contemporary architects. On the one hand, it is assumed that true creative architecture should be free of historical and other unnecessary cultural references in order to be as original and unique as possible. And yet, on the other hand, it is expected that the result should be universally understood, appreciated, and accepted.

In an atmosphere of arbitrariness and relativity, originality of design is manifest primarily in the visibility of the result. Visibility always presumes, even in its most abstract form, some form of continuity with the natural world. That is its main virtue. On the same grounds, visibility can be pushed to its limits and serve as a transition to the derivative quasi-visibility in the conceptual domain. Such a transition is particularly relevant for understanding the fragile nature of visibility in works structured under the strong influence of technical thinking—considered today to be the main source of originality. In many of these works, matters of visibility usually do not precede but instead follow the diagrammatic stage of the project, very often remaining residual.

The residual nature of the primary visibility in modern buildings was anticipated by Mies when he wrote: "The visible is only the final step of a historical form, its fulfillment. Its true fulfillment. Then it breaks off and a new world arises. . . . Not everything that happens takes place in full view. The decisive battles of the spirit are waged on invisible battlefields."[34] These invisible battlefields are the domains of conceptual thinking, calculations, and diagrammatic imagination. The extent to which contemporary architectural projects are conceived on that level can be illustrated by many examples, some of them involving an architecture inspired by no more than structural possibilities.

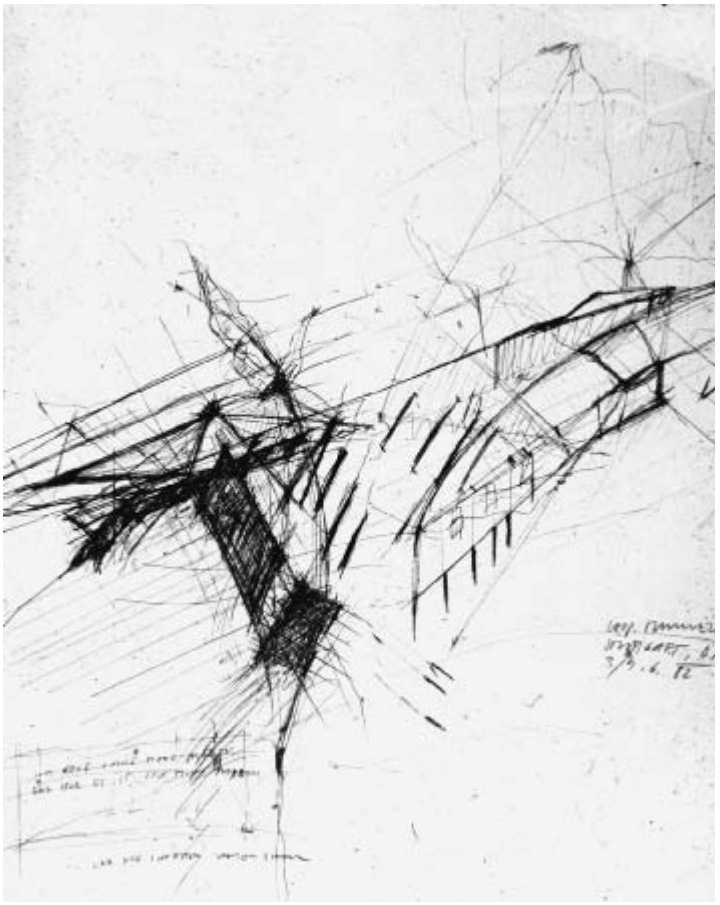
The fragility of the visible can be extended to other areas of our experience. What we experience in front of an incomprehensible building or structure escapes explicit understanding but is reflected in our tacit response. This dynamic was recognized years ago by apologists of Constructivism, particularly in reference to beauty. "The beauty of the machine," writes the Czech art critic Karel Teige, "is the rational value of an irrational product. . . . Irrationality is the essence of the inexplicable beauty of the machine. It is for that reason that machines can be an example not only of a modern, logically functioning mind, but also of a nervous modern sensibility. There is nothing more nervous than a vibrating dynamo."[35] This understanding of the nature of beauty exemplifies the transformation of modern sensibility in which the richness of a fully articulated world revealed in works of art and buildings has been reduced to a personal aesthetic experience, based on elementary sensations. In the closed world of aesthetic ex-

perience, it is virtually impossible to differentiate between the nature of reception and the nature of production or creation.

The concentration on private experience, imagination, and fantasy appears to contradict the very nature of architecture, which is always open to a shared public culture. And yet some architects recently have tended to create architecture in a way similar to the automatism of Surrealism or of action painting. The architects of the Coop partnership are very much aware of this affinity, as they declare: "We conceive of architecture which would engage complicated human procedures and psyches and which would represent a personal statement, with all the attendant strengths and weaknesses implied—not unlike the way art is made" (figure 1.13). The main precondition for taking such an approach is a full emancipation from historical precedents and the continuity of tradition. In their own words, "it is a kind of release from fixed ideas . . . and for that reason we never talk about architecture for fear that inhibitions about what is possible functionally or what others have done before us in similar circumstances will creep in. . . . We have to be self-monitoring, or else we could get side-tracked. We avoid analysis, but remain aware of our bodies and our hearts."[36]

In the spontaneity of the automatic process of design, the content of the project depends, almost entirely, on an internal dialogue with oneself—on the personal and not on the inherited culture (figure 1.14). Is it possible to envisage the genuine content of a work outside inherited culture? This is a question that had already been raised in the early days of Surrealism. Louis Aragon observed, "If you write deplorable twaddle using Surrealist techniques, it will still be deplorable twaddle. No excuses. If you belong to the species of individuals who do not know the meaning of words, it is more than probable that the practice of Surrealism will simply serve to highlight this gross ignorance."[37]

And as Jürgen Habermas notes, "The neo-Avant-Garde moves today within a more or less non-binding pluralism of artistic means and stylistic schools while no longer able to enlist the force of an enlightening originality released in the violation of established norms, in the shock of the forbidden and frivolous, in irrepressible subjectivity."[38] The difficulty of enlisting the force of originality pushes the contemporary avant-garde deeper into a more radical form of self-centeredness and self-referentiality. The result is a higher level of autonomy and separation from everyday



1.13. Coop Himmelblau, preliminary sketch (1982).

reality, accompanied by a desperate search for new sources of originality in current technology and in the domain of private fantasies. Here the difference between the product of imagination and imaginary reality is no longer clear. As artists produce imaginary solutions, they replace the dialogue with phenomenal reality by a monologue of conceptual imagination that relies on the quasi-visibility of geometry as its scaffold. Under such conditions, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "the illusion of seeing is therefore much less the presentation of an illusory object than the spread and so to speak

1.14. Coop Himmelblau, conversion of the attic space, Flakestrasse, Vienna (1989).

running wild of a visual power which has lost any sensory counterpart." This characteristic loss leads to hallucinations, "because through the phenomenal body we are in constant relationship with an environment into which that body is projected and because when divorced from its actual environment, the body remains able to summon up, by means of its own settings, the pseudo-presence of that environment."[39]

This sounds like a description of some recent projects oriented toward a creation of virtual reality, which, as is generally acknowledged, is a

consciously structured and controlled hallucinatory world. But hallucinations occur only in certain spaces and media, and cannot be identified with the reality of the whole. Indeed, there are structures in our culture that resist hallucinations. More specifically, Merleau-Ponty writes, "what protects us against delirium or hallucinations are not our critical powers but the structure of our space."[40] The structure of space has its source in the depth of culture and coincides with the overall coherence of our cultural world. Because our existence is always spatial, the nature of lived phenomenal space determines the topography, orientation, meaning, and the sanity of our existence. However, when we speak about the coherence of the cultural world we refer not only to its latent background but also to its visible manifestations, which exhibit a high degree of fragmentation and discontinuity—revealed most dramatically in the gray zone of modern culture.

The distance that separates us from the deeper levels of reality marks the success of the development of the new means of representation. The problematic consequences of this development are the emancipation of representation and the tendency toward self-reference. The emancipated, relatively closed world of representation puts at issue, more radically than ever before, the relevance of communication. How are we to grasp the relation of abstract or simulated space to the space of the everyday life? In the past, such a question would be answered by pointing to a sequence of levels of reality that constitutes a link between universal concepts and the particularity of individual phenomena, thereby creating a continuum of the articulated, communicative space of culture.[41] That this space is accessible to us nowadays only with intense effort remains a challenge for the future.