

# 1 Beginnings and Motivations

1.1 The building is an attempt to understand and subsequently render the space and experience of architecture itself as political.

1.12 Perhaps this is a futile task. For maybe every act of building is inevitably political, being inextricably caught within the power system that brings a building into being. Yet surely there is a difference between an architecture that is reflexive of the author's consciousness of this fact and one that is not.

1.13 Perhaps there is no stable mechanism for the self-reflexion of the political in building. No mechanism which is historically stable can be recognized continually over time in durable form. In thinking the political in architecture, there is encountered constantly a twin problem of the embodiment of political meaning in architecture and the temporal stability of its subsequent recognition. Possibly it will not do to have framed the problem in this way: the prospect of embodied meaning and its recognition may initiate an intolerable burden, a task which can never be completed. The problem, as stated, may operate as a trap: the structuring of the problem itself being the greater problem.

1.14 And yet, I have the intuition that much of the architecture that I admire has confronted the question of its own political status. So what is at work in such buildings? Am I reading the failure of the attempt to register the political in building? Is failure ironically the only form of success to be had in such questions?

1.15 Can a political architecture, self-consciously construed, be achieved by a critical engagement of the difficulties inherent in the world that power is trying to put in place, and, at the same time, by a simultaneous reflexion of the difficulties of the way such a meaning can be represented or made manifest in building?

1.16 Or is there no difference discernible between the content of architectural meaning and the mechanism of its realization? To make a real world, one that is politically alive, must one rid oneself of the false puzzles of representation?

1.17 As Wittgenstein says, "(The question 'What do I mean by that?' is one of the most misleading of expressions. In most cases one might answer: 'Nothing at all — I say...')"<sup>1</sup> What can I do in response to such a question as "What do you mean by this?", but say or do it again? When you ask, "What does it mean?", do you want me to do something different?

1.18 Can we not enter a building without words?

1.19 Or is this line of thinking too purist, saying that sense can only be found here or there, in this medium or that? Is not the greater sense to be made in the play between senses, between different media of sense-making? Is the question of medium a dead end?

<sup>1</sup> L Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, Berkeley, 1967, p 2e.

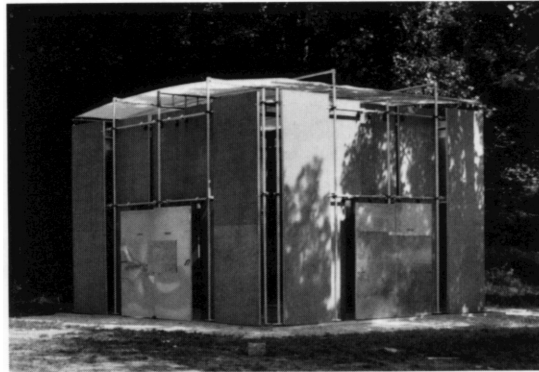
## 1.2 Architecture and Human Difference:

### The inscription of subjectivity in building

1.21 Architecture possesses a relation of ambivalence to human difference, to the differences at work in life. It makes a space for their play and perpetuation, in part even creates the fact of difference, but is itself withdrawn from the object of its influence, life. It is itself an inevitable but impossible neutrality. Architecture frames the differences of life but cannot participate in them fully.

not from view. Yet, in withdrawal architecture is somehow marked by the covert nature of its operations. The fact of withdrawal and the negative sense of marking, of being marked, give rise to the double sense of neutrality and subjective inscription. Thus is the sense of contradiction defused.

1.22 The withdrawal, the apparent disengagement of architecture from life, may give rise to an illusion that architecture itself is somehow autonomous, or neutral, operating as our surroundings yet as a realm set apart. But, architecture, so it is said, can also be read as an index of the form of life which it frames, as an inscription of the subjectivity for which it was made. Is there a contradiction here: a pretense at neutrality and disengagement set against a reading of architecture as marked with life? In what conception could both sides of such a contradiction be understood as true, and the sense of contradiction thus diffused?



1.23 The act of withdrawal is the construction of an illusory neutrality. In withdrawal something about the operation of architecture, perhaps its influence in the construction of the subject, remains unacknowledged and is hidden from recognition if

### 1.3 Can the political in architecture be awakened by an attack on the banality created through the functionalist attitude which so predominates everyday discussions about building?

1.31 The functionalist attitude to architecture makes of building a passive servant to our desire. Functionalist architecture, in the naive sense as Rossi defines it, is fundamentally the construction of a relation of dominance over an object.<sup>2</sup>

1.32 What does it mean to have an object which panders to our desire? What kind of relation between a person and an object is achieved in forcing subservience of things to human need or desire? An object passively construed as a service to life becomes banal.

1.33 The images of the banal can be used, when corrupted, to deflect expectations of the ordinary, thus awakening a more political sense of the object.

1.34 In this building the image of the lavatory is used as an attack on functionalism.

1.35 In the lavatory the door is (and has) a simple sign, indicating ease of access and certainty of use.

1.36 In the lavatory architecture is at its most abused.

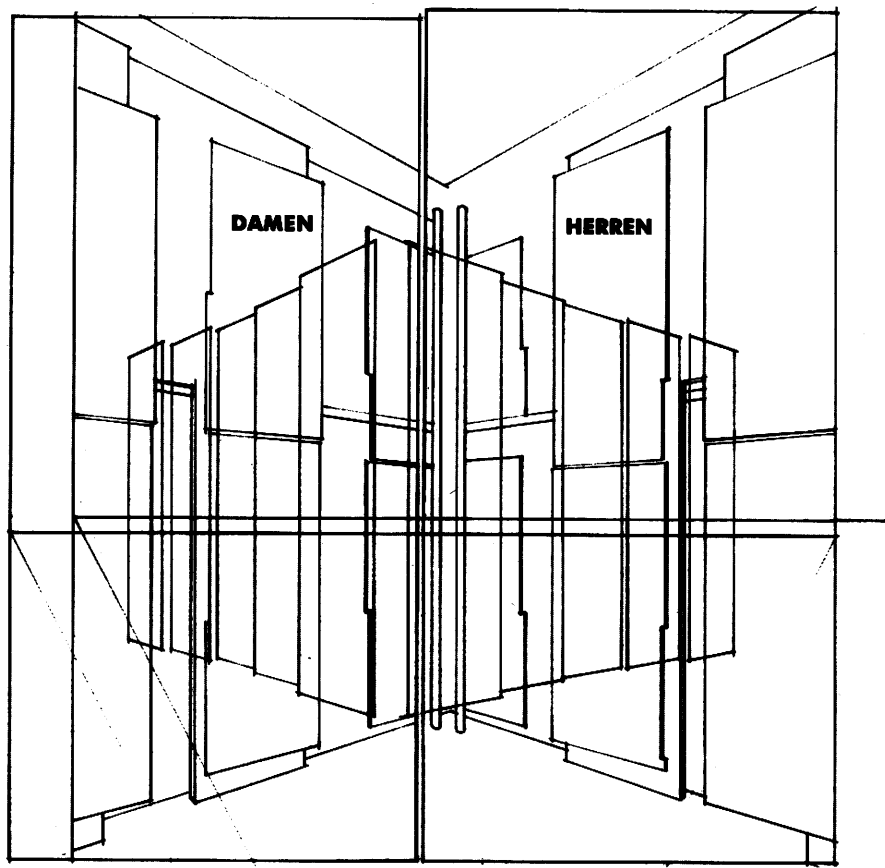
1.37 In the banality of the lavatory door is subsumed the major system of devices by which architecture is appropriated in(to) life. The sign indicates function. The door, itself a metonym of the body, indicates passage and, in conjunction with the sign, ease of access. Door and sign together indicate a security if not a certainty.

The threat of the other side of the door is nullified by the exterior sign arousing a confidence of use, and in turn creating new threats of 'the other'. The ordinary door, upon opening, places the subject at the threshold of a room which by optical projection s/he can grasp as intelligible. A visual map is made of the room in a single glance. The projection once made, the architecture thus appropriated, the room can be used in accordance with its function. Nothing in the architecture is to trouble the subject further. The architecture is exhausted, no longer needed. It can be left behind, forgotten.



<sup>2</sup> A Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1982, pp 46-48





## 1.4 The pavilion is the essay form of architecture.

This building attempts to foil the systems of architectural appropriation at work in the banality of function.

1.41 It is also partly inspired by a parallel observation in *Écrits* by Jacques Lacan.<sup>3</sup> Lacan depicts a figure of two doors: one marked for men, the other for women. The figure occurs in a passage where Lacan is discussing the failures of nominalism in relation to the "agency of the letter in the unconscious." He intends by the example "to show how in fact the signifier enters the signified," thus destroying by contamination the distinction on which a nominalist argument is based. The nominalist denies the existence of entities labelled by general categories and prefers to speak only of individuals. His argument for the existence of individuals turns on the arbitrariness of names, their independence from things and their resemblances to each other. Lacan's observation that name and thing, signifier and signified, enter into one another is intended to deny the nominalist's argument by denying the independence of name from thing.

1.42 This building announces its entrance with two signs: DAMEN and HERREN. But, the announcement is at once significant and a herald of its own futility and difficulty.

1.43 It is significant in the sense that the building is a deceit which displays itself at every turn.

1.44 The sign on the door is a common device of indication in architecture. It is used when architecture fails or cannot itself be sufficient as an index.

In the lavatory the sign is commonly used to separate the sexes more for moral rather than hygienic purposes. In this building the separation indicated by the signs on the door is not fulfilled on the interior.

1.45 The sign is the failure of architecture. Architecture always fails?

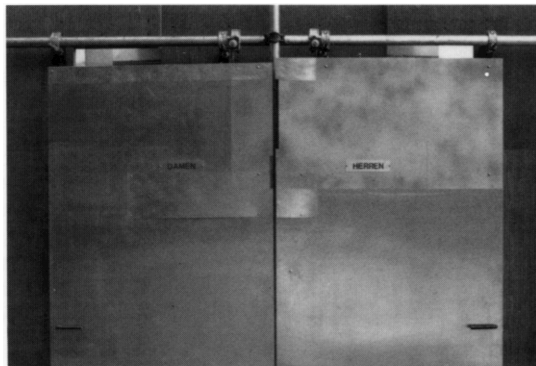
1.46 Ironically, this building comes to depend on signs, such as words, for its understanding. In this instance the dependency of building on word is ironic because it was intended originally to achieve their independence.

1.47 Intention in architecture forces a dependency of building on word by seeking a building form that is accountable to its design intentions verbally stated. Insofar as the difference in medium between building and word marks a gulf between sign forms that cannot be negotiated

directly, an intention, stated verbally, cannot be carried out on its own terms. In a sense, intentions to build always fail. However, this failure of intention does not imply a corresponding failure of the building. The building may succeed on other terms, in other ways.

1.48 In this line of thought I am led to three other questions. First, what is the possibility of tracing a line between intention and building: where is the thread lost? Second, does this first question assume intention to be exclusively verbal? Third, if intentions are not merely verbal, what relations and contaminations are at work between word and building?

3 J Lacan, *Écrits*, New York, 1977, p 151



## 1.5 The building is a mechanism for the adjustment of architectural space.

This isn't the wind in the maples, my boy  
No song to the lonely moon  
This is the wild roar of our daily toll  
We curse it and count it a boon  
For it is the voice of our cities  
It is our favorite song  
It is the language we all understand  
It will soon be the world's mother tongue

Bertolt Brecht,  
*Song of the Machines*, 1925-28

1.51 It is constructed in such a way that the internal space of the building can be altered or disfigured by re-calibrating the structure manually with a set of wrenches. The columns can be raised or lowered by two feet. The panels will simultaneously be raised or lowered as the frame is moved. The panels can also move horizontally, parallel and perpendicular to the frame. The doors on the panels can be opened to make incursions into the room as calibrated. The way the space has been set or adjusted is disturbed on entry. The surface of the metal can also be distorted to bend the top and bottom of the interior surface of the wall into the room.

1.52 Once constructed, the building was indeed calibrated. The interior panels were set using deflections from the orthogonal which were sensible but not immediately noticeable. If a deflection drew attention to itself so that it was noticed right away, then it was diminished, re-calibrated to be a deflection that the eye could barely discern. The purpose of this criterion of 'the barely noticeable' was to pressurize a specific form with subliminal senses which are exterior to it.

1.53 The building can be set in many configurations, ranging from the subliminal to the overtly grotesque. Each setting could constitute not just an individual performance of the building, but perhaps a different architectural work altogether. It was

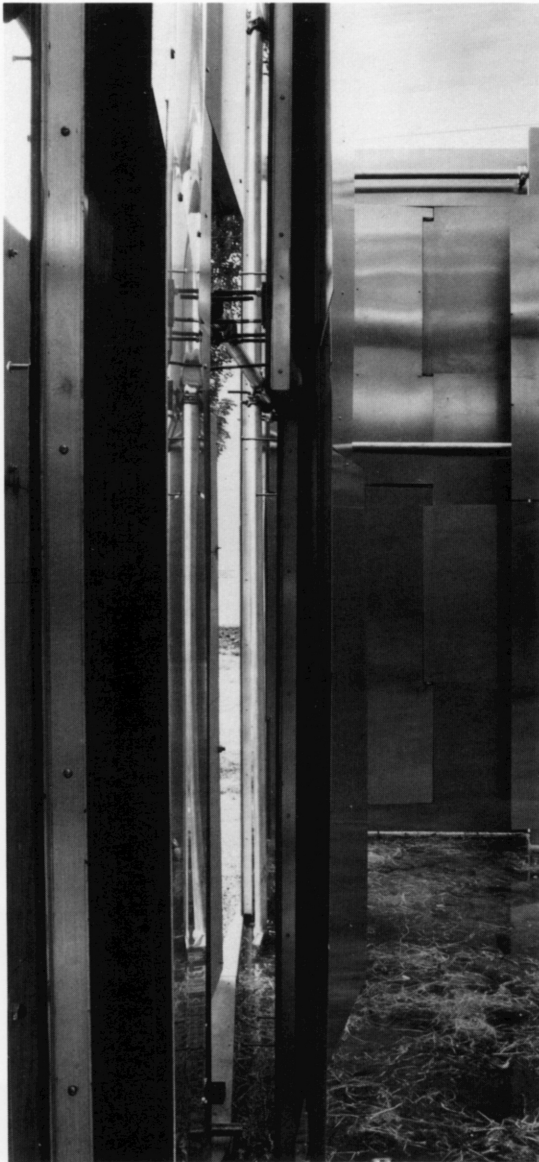
decided to set the building using only marginal deflections calibrated to be registered only subliminally.

1.54 As set, the deflections in the building produced the illusion of a redressed orthogonality to persons entering the building off-center through both doors. The interior was arranged so that the wall opposing entry was divided into two sets of surfaces, one set orthogonal to each of the divided entrants. The scale of these deflections was calibrated so that the wall could also be read as a single, albeit interrupted, plane.

1.55 The building is an experiment in architecture. It is as much a full scale model as it is a building. The fact of the building as an experiment has been registered in the architecture itself. The mechanism of the building has been rendered overt. That is to say, every rhetorical effect of the building has been underlined, as it were, by the exposure of the mechanism which produces that effect.

1.56 The concept of the building as an architectural machine was intended as part of the architecture (of the machine).

1.6 To make an object which is politically situated requires two transformations.



- 1.61 On the one hand, the experiencing subject must be moved, moved without force or deceit from the status of user to that of performer. On the other hand, the building itself must be made such that the power hidden in the banal is released. This disruption of the ordinary will trigger the transformation of the subject from user to performer. S/he must encounter the difficulties created by a disturbance of the ordinary.
- 1.62 And must this be counted as a deceit? To disturb the ordinary?
- 1.63 The interesting question to ask of the ordinary is, How did it get to be that way? Why do we regard something as ordinary and something else as not? Should we speak of ordinations rather than 'the ordinary'?
- 1.64 The ordinary is not something that is simply given. It is a constructed affair; hence, the conjoined root and the double senses of 'ordination' and 'ordinary'. Invoking the constructional aspect of reality, the association of 'the ordinary' with the term 'ordination' implies that the ordinary is not merely something to be passively accepted but that it is something about which we can have some choice and over which we can exercise some intelligence and determination. Worlds are made as much as found.