Against-Potemkin, Thick-Envelope: Towards a Theory of the Façade in Contemporary Architecture

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Façade is the oldest, most ubiquitous element in the history of architecture, constantly the protagonist of its practice. Historically, we can define the façade as an assemblage of symbols attached to the external face of a generic wall. But to reduce the definition to this superficial comprehension of symbols and sheds is not sufficient to define its postmodern or contemporary position—thus, we shall look deeper into the definition of the façade by researching not its decor, but the relationships towards its thickness.

Decorated or transparent, the façade always kept one fundamental principle as its definition: that of a surface. If the brise-soleil was crucial on the development of the façade, this device to control the environment has created a new type of space that belongs not to the inside nor the outside, that as an architectural device lacks a proper history. A new political and representational space, in which the absence of a theoretical evaluation opens a new field of exploration with this research. When Bernard Tschumi's Lerner Hall creates an envelope composed of ramps, the façade assumes a thickness that negotiates this inside-outside relationship. A new condition appears, blurring the limits of the object and the city. Not a functional snapshot of the building nor a representational portrait of symbolic meanings, the thick-envelope exhibits a renewed attitude — function and meaning are flattened in a choreography displayed by the users.

If the contemporary discussion focuses on the political and architectural production of spaces, without a clear definition of spatial boundaries, the performative agency of its limits is questioned. I propose that contemporary architecture is that of the thick-envelope, the quasi-urban space where the definitions of inside and outside are mixed and its political boundaries collapse. In the inhabited space of the thick envelope, city and building become one, and the question of whether to submit to public or private laws and behaviors are blurred: new space invokes new performances. To understand the contemporary condition is to understand the thick-envelope as the mediator between object and city. The thick-envelope assumes the (last) role of political architecture, a space of architectural agency long ignored.

INTRODUCTION

Façade is the oldest, most omnipresent element in the history of architecture, and it is constantly subjected to be the protagonist of this practice. At least since the discovery of the orthogonal drawing in the Renaissance, through the compositional principles of the *Beaux-Arts* and the *Architettura Parlante* until its dissolution during the Modern Movement, where the façade was not (allegedly) responsible anymore for the expression, in search for its dis-appearance the façade acquired the role of representing the ideals of its builders.

Thus, the façade went from a *signifying tableaux*[1] where, from part of the support system of the building where the elements of the classical orders where applied[2], thus conferring to the construction a narrative to, during the Modern Movement, becoming the void – a canvas without its painting. According to Alejandro Zaera-Polo[3], the modern movement's façade "dismissed the classical tradition and viewed the façade as the logical result of the program - not as its representation"[4] in a way that the building in its façade becomes both "an indissociable part of the whole building and as a symbol of modernity."[5] In other words, the façade would be a literal representation of its program and/or it's constructive logic.

Advocating for the reestablishment of meaning beyond a "transparent"[6] representation of what occurs functionally in the interior of the building, the critique of the postmodern theorists, among them notably Robert Venturi, proposes that the façade becomes the ultimate architecture – once the transparency of this façade cannot be sufficiently considered as literal, then what ever be the shed, its decoration, applied and communicative, absorbed the interest of the architects – and its customers.

However, in our contemporary discussion, the façade departs from having the connotation of frontality/faciality common until the postmodern period and exceeds its surface "by incorporating a much broader set of attachments."[7] From the literal surface to its attachments, this redefinition of what now can be called *envelope*, give new meanings and – consequently – new *affects*[8] in the relationship between the observer of the space and its defining agent, the architect.
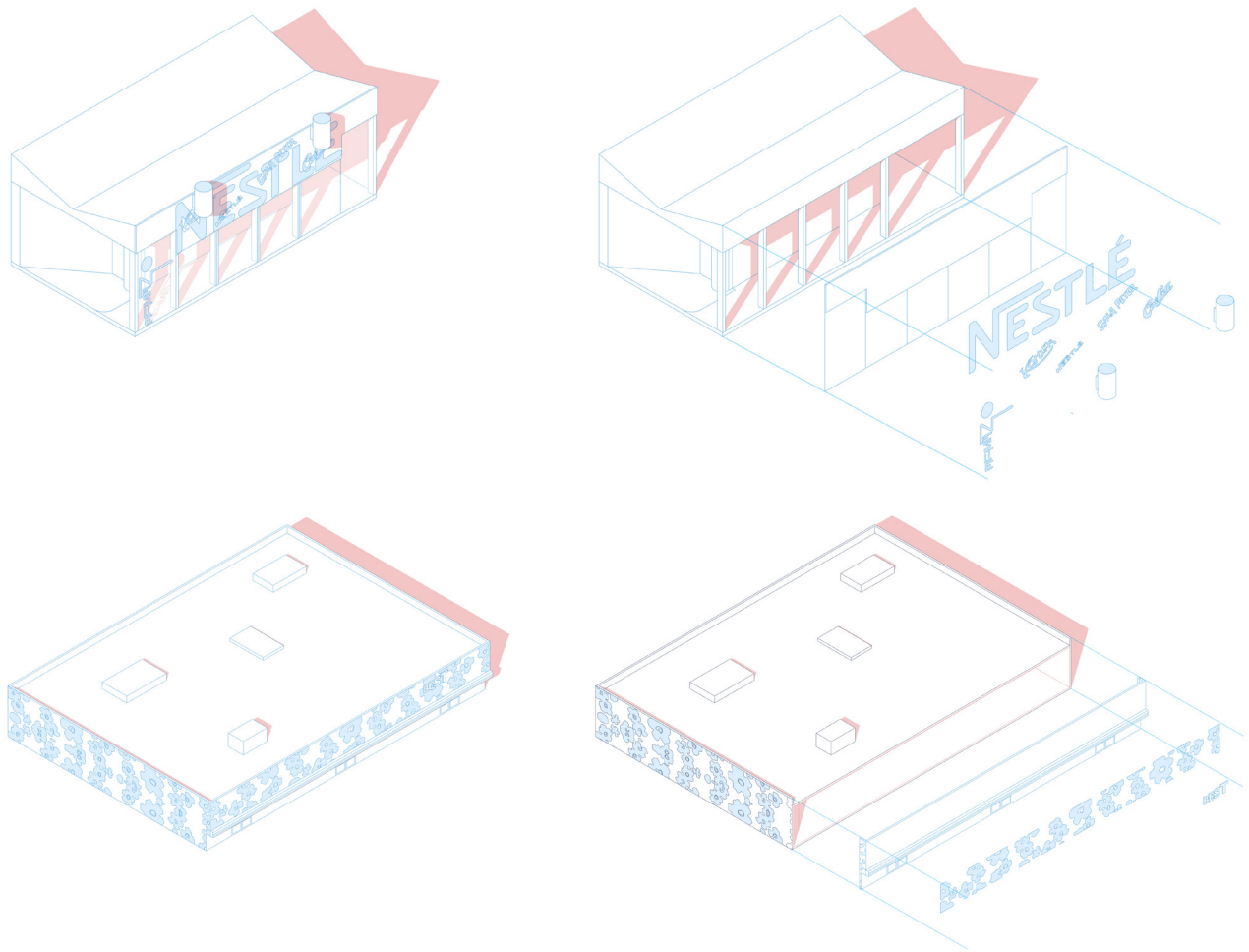
Figure 1. Nestlé Pavilion, Le Corbusier and BEST Store, V&SB. Decorated shed. Author, 2019.

FROM FAÇADE TO ENVELOPE

Historically, we could insinuate that the façade is an assemblage of symbols attached to the external face of a (generic) wall – the urban portion of the limits of a building - and comprehend this double relationship, and the subsequent *lobotomy*[9], as a signifier to the city - the postmodern contribution to architectural theory. This double relation between the interior-exterior representation is what Venturi[10] calls *difficult whole*, or the complexity and contradiction in the element of the façade that synthesizes the forces existing between the interior of the building and its exterior.[11]

With the increased complexity of the contemporary designs – notably with the introduction of the *fold* as an architectural device, especially since the 1990's, the limits between the façade, the floor and the ceiling become fluid, complicating the separation in discrete elements – starting a *continual* definition of architecture.[12] The classical definition of the façade and its elements stopped being operational and became necessary to introduce the concept of *envelope* – a new definition that absorbs the limits of the interior-exterior between the private space, of the building, and the public one, of the *polis*.

In this paper, I propose that the understanding of applied symbols/signs (independently of a flat or folded *envelope*) is a very superficial vision of the façade's role in contemporary terms. Superficiality that even Zaera-Polo identifies in his text, but one where himself does not act upon when the author says that the envelope "has been relegated to a mere 'representational' or 'symbolic' function. The reasons for such a restricted political agency may lie in the understanding of the envelope as a *surface*, rather than as a complex assemblage of the materiality of the surface technology and its geometrical determination."[13]

To reduce the definition to this superficial understanding (although more complex due to attachments) of the façade/envelope as symbols and sheds do not realize the complexity created by the historical development of the envelope. Furthermore, to understand the duality of elements as surface-decoration as the core of the division modernism/postmodernism[14] does not verify itself, once the very idea of a decorated shed is not so far from the modernist thinking.

The reading of "the modernist object-subject split" leaves that "the full cognitive potential of our experience of architecture has remained unrecognized, and it has been perceived narrowly as pure, visual and abstract, devoid of any subjective dimension."[15] – and adds:

> "Furthermore, the separation of experience from its moral and ethical content and the separation of architecture from its social, political, and cultural context have created an autonomous space for architecture. Postmodernists contend that a visionary and autonomous image of modern architecture has been achieved by a complex maneuver. The object is first decontextualized from the specificity of its social, political, cultural, and physical context, and then recontextualized as a "visual representation" to be judged on specifically aesthetic and formalist terms."[16]

This recontextualization gets closer to the postmodern collage, justifying a definition of this style as a shed – a "conventional shelter that applies symbols"[17]. I argue here that the temporal demarcation between modern/post-modern from the standpoint of differentiating façades is unreal and simplistic, acting more to unify than to separate these movements. As a precedent study, we could observe a proto-pop banality on the act of applying symbols on a conventional shelter – that has been utilized, at least, at the height of the modernist heroic period.

Le Corbusier, already in 1925 in his *Pavilion Esprit Nouveau* with its "supergraphics" in the letters EM painted on the side façade and later, more explicitly in his Nestlé Pavilion in 1928 [Figure 01] applied a superficial treatment in the external face as a decoration of a shed to transmit meaning and specificity to this building. Although one of the first projects to use his butterfly-wing roof, subtly distancing himself from a generic shed, Le Corbusier utilizes the pavilion as support to "enlarged graphics and chocolate advertisements"[18]. Naegele goes further and defines Le Corbusier's pavilions as *publicité*, "literally a sign, a billboard, a display intended to call attention to itself"[19] where letters aligned with the architectural openings suggest the interaction between form and its decoration.

In other words, what is the real difference between the graphic project of Le Corbusier in the 1928's pavilion and some of the following projects – already iconic from the post-modern period, such as the Best Stores by Venturi Scott-Brown [Figure 01], or the *supergraphics* from Charles Moore and Barbara Stauffacher-Solomon, once the performance of the architecture arises from the relationship between the surface treatment of the external wall and what it represents as a discourse? Back to Naegele, "it might be said that with Le Corbusier, the pavilion was never simply a frame for display but was also the display itself, never simply a decorated shed, but was rather a duck of a decorated shed."[20]

Accordingly, I propose in this paper that we must look deeply into the definition of the façade/envelope by researching its relationship between this element and its thickness. We see that the division between the Modern and Post-Modern Movements must not be (only) based on the application of decoration to the façade, once this is a common *trope* to both historical moments. There is the necessity of redefining what is the meaning of the façade/envelope to its discussion in contemporary architecture. Both, modernism and its successor, deny "a legitimate role to the experience of architecture" when they "reproduce asymmetries of power. More importantly, postmodern theorists ask: How are we to decide whose experience of architecture should be taken seriously, given that one's experience reflects a construction specific to one's subjectivity"[21]

Flat or folded, decorated or transparent, historically the façade always maintained a fundamental principle in its definition: it had to be a surface. Even with its theoretical reinvention by Zaera-Polo in the last decade, when it becomes the *envelope*, acquires political agency and a new taxonomy, the façade still keeps its superficiality as its construction. By considering here the relationship between the thicknesses of the façade, we could finally realize that "the hierarchies of interface become more complex: the envelope has become a field where identity, security and environmental performances intersect."[22]

POLITICS: THE URBAN BUILDING VS. THE ARCHITECTURAL BUILDING
By questioning the thickness of the envelope, we could argue that architecture confuses itself with the city. To Pier Vittorio Aureli:

> "If one were to summarize life in a city and life in a building in one gesture, it would have to be that of passing through borders. Every moment of our existence is a continuous movement through space defined by walls. Architects cannot define urbanization: how program evolves, how movement performs, how flows unfold, how change occurs. The only program that can reliably be attributed to architecture is its specific inertia in the face of urbanization's mutability, its status as the manifestation of a clearly singular place."[23]

This doubling of the edifice as city and as an object, from the urban building vs. the architectural building, as identified by Gandelsonas[24] in the search to be "within its own boundaries and to have an effect outside", an urban-architectural fantasy that "implies the reduction of the physical-spatial reality of the city to the status of the architectural building: the city as an object of architectural desire is the city as building"[25], which follows the reading of Aldo Rossi when "seen in terms of production, 'one is the product of the public, the other one is for the public' and therefore the only place available in the city for the architect is the place of the viewer"[26].
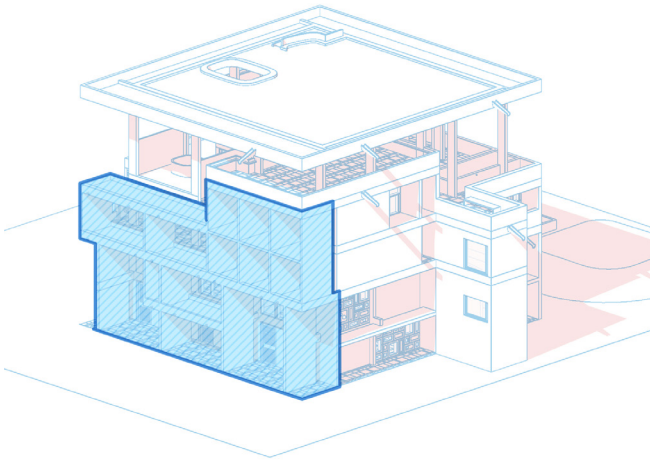
Figure 2. Villa Shodhan. *Brise* as inhabitable space. Author, 2019.

By analyzing the building in this double and ambiguous role, we note that the limits get blurred when this imaginary line of separation possesses more than a few inches thick of material but acquires a spatial order of magnitude. In other words, "by instituting an inhabitable space in the thickness of the window wall, making an experiential threshold between street and room"[27] this border is not only hermeneutically re-signified as is its political agency – from the "capacity to rearticulate the affinity between the fragments of reality already existing we could detect and mobilize."[28]

This thickness of an "inhabitable space" has its moment of invention[29] with the *brise-soleil* and the *mur-neutralisant* by Le Corbusier and as described by Leatherbarrow[30], were crucial points in the development of the *thick-wall* as envelope: a device for climate control also creates a new type of space, a space *in-between* that does not belong to the interior nor exterior. This doubling of the façade, by assuming the ambiguous place of interior/exterior without limiting to any, creates a novel experiential threshold, an architectonic experience that allows, returning to Aureli's discussion – a new relationship between what is possible to perform while space defined by walls [Figure 02], consequently with logics and norms also ambiguous, which necessitate a theory.

In spite of being much studied from a technical standpoint, where this double façade has its knowledge derived from engineering as its importance in climate control, energy efficiency or the constructive aspects of the building and matter, but as an architectural device it misses a proper history. A new political, representational space was created – and the lack of a theoretical analysis opens up a field of exploration with this research.

By rethinking the point of view of how to read a façade, specifically how to read and interpret a thick wall through the theoretical framework of architecture and urbanism, we question the logic of the envelope based on its thinness. From Leatherbarrow, the:

"The depth of the frame, in both modern and traditional windows, is as much a space of adjustment as it is of view; that is, while it is something seen and seen through, it is also an instrument that simultaneously connects and changes opposite situations. This makes it both passive and active: a receptacle, like the human eye, but also a tool, like a person's hand. The instrumental or handy nature of the window is often suppressed for the sake of general appearances."[31]

In a critical analysis of envelopes in terms of their relative thickness and by observing contemporary buildings towards an expansion of the definition of *envelope*, we could position a new meaning to the façade and its political role in the contemporary city, with its implications both for the interior space, of the building, as for the public space of the city.

PRECEDENTS

When Bernard Tschumi's Lerner Hall (1994-99) [Figure 03] creates a thick envelope composed by ramps inset between the modern glass and a historicist composition, the building's character is not expressed by an applied apparatus, or dissolved in a factual expression of the building's function (in other words, neither post-modern nor modernist). Here, I argue that for the first time the contemporary façade assumes – *consciously* by the architect – a thickness that negotiates a relationship between interior and exterior, an in-between space that questions the fundamental position of the envelope: that of the limit, of a permeable skin that wrap and encloses the interior – designed and controlled by the architect – from the exterior, the domain of the city.

Figure 3. Lerner Hall, interior. Wikimedia: Beyond My Ken, 2014.

By making the façade thick, a new condition emerges on the campus where the urban-building is part, one that blurs its limits and assumes a new political position – until then ignored. Its reading is less from the meanings generated by the shape described from its function or its materiality (contextual, as per the masterplan of the intervention), and more from the possibility of events to be generated – as in its frequent use as a dance-performance stage[32]. From this, Tschumi establishes that the representation of his building happens on the borders of its composition, while with the stretch of the glass ramps the architect redefines the limits of architecture and the possibilities of the envelope.

From this observation, the meaning of the building ceases to become the *result* of its program (once dance performances weren't in the initial scope of the architect) or a mere *representation* of its concepts (once the final image ceases to

be relevant)[33]. Thus, I propose the theoretical point that the envelope, by acquiring thickness, becomes the building, an interior-exterior space where the building *looks as what in it is made*.

This way, overcoming the post-modern theory of façades, the idea of being a duck or decorated shed is remixed, as the *thick-envelope* is a representation *applied* on the form, but a representation that arises not as decoration or ornament, but from the events and the agency of its program. In other words, the performance of its users becomes its decoration element.

What happens then when you are not inside nor outside? Does the space of the thick-wall belong to the architectural-building or the urban-building?

The newly-opened Miami Garage [Figure 04], by the New York office WORKac (2014-18)[34] expresses the potency of the

Figure 4. Miami Garage, exterior. Imagen Subliminal, 2018. Courtesy of the authors.

thick-envelope concept: decorating the shed of an ultra-generic building, a parking garage, by increasing the thickness of its façades to surround spaces that in turn present urban events. In a 4ft thickness, the office creates an "unexpected opportunity for social interaction" that stacks vertically "a series of public spaces, including a graffiti gallery, kid's playing area, gardens, and a DJ booth" among others, that are "expressed on the façade as a series of tunnels in perforated screen, as in an ant farm of activities presented down the street". The architects define as the strategy to "start stuffing the envelope so it is not the space between the two skins that is inhabitable, but the skin itself."[35]

Not a functional snapshot of the building in a Modernist fashion, nor a symbolic representation of meanings in a post-modern façade, the thick-envelope in Miami shows a renewed attitude *both-and*[36] towards envelopes. At the same time modern as the expression of its programmatic logic and post-modern in its aesthetics of a semiotic and referential representation, compositive even, the architecture/urban building sublimates the stylistic time and generates new affects and, consequently, a new micropolitics of action.

Function and meaning become one, flattened in a choreography exhibited by the users. Its performance becomes the performance of the people that inhabit its façade. Architecture creates the subtle limits of the infrastructure of the possible: the composition ceases being formal and becomes programmatic.

DISCUSSION

If the contemporary discussion is focused on the political and the citizenship of the production of architectural spaces[37], relating to the question of what a possible urbanism can be, becomes an active agency of the comprehension and construction of social spaces. By expanding urbanism to interior urbanism[38] we have the "emergence of non-traditional types of public spaces"[39], and the construction of cities would go through the architect-urbanist relation and its limits of intervention. Thus, we move from the reinterpretation of the envelope towards a new dimension of the construction of the spaces in the city, to the creation of an open city, as defined by Sennett. The author proposes the necessity of a concept of *porosity* in this interface between the interior-exterior spaces, differentiating boundaries and borders: the former, edges where things end, and the latter, edges where different groups interact.[40]

Meanwhile, until now the current discussion focused on the production of these borders as walls, thresholds, and edges that separate in the horizontal plane different conditions of public spaces. In an interview, Winy Maas says that the redrawing (in plan) of the interior/exterior, as in the Nolli Map, "is not completely updated to the current possibilities, because it is bidimensional. It is not concerned with heights nor talks about the role of the façade."[41] What is proposed here is that this same threshold separation, when in the vertical plane, becomes in itself a public space, an interior urbanism.

Without a clear definition of this spatial barriers, now in the depth of the *thick-envelope*, the agency of the performance of this barriers are put to question – and the role of the architect is expanded and gets confused with that of the urbanist – the subject of the architecture becomes the city as much as the user of the building, not any longer in two distinct buildings, as proclaimed by Gandelsonas, but in the intersection space in them – the *thick-envelope*. Manuel de Solá-Morales, describing the impossibility of the project for a public space, proposes
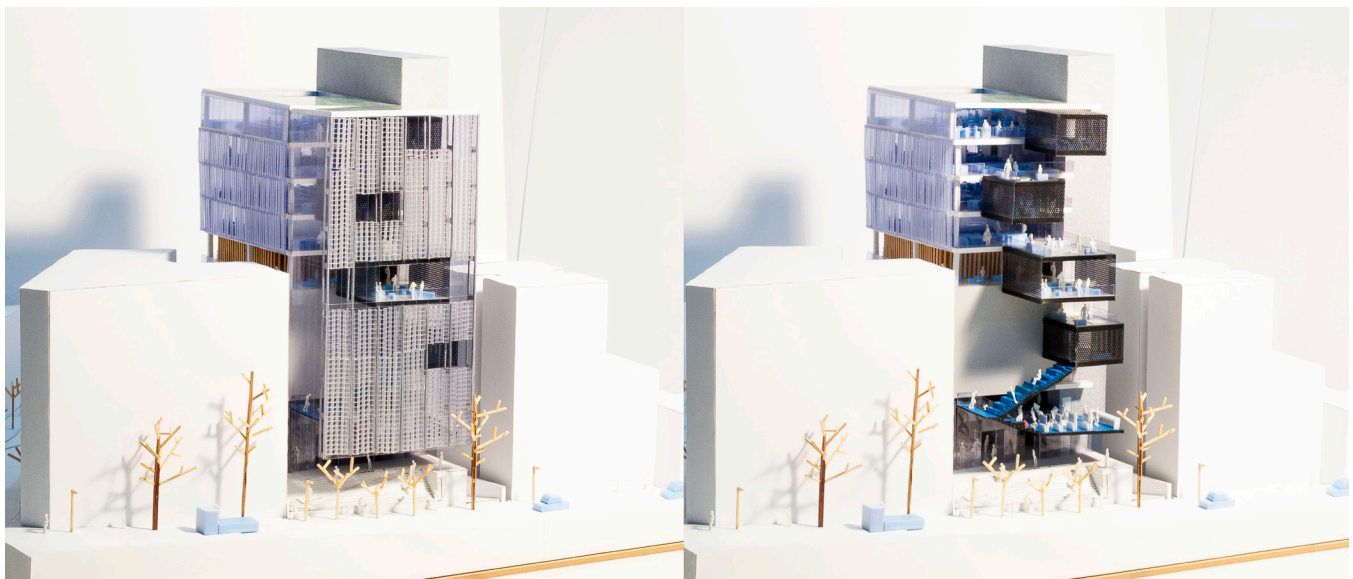

Figure 5. GOSP HQ, *thick-envelope promenade*. N8Studio, 2018.

that its success could be from projects "that expand the public sphere and that, even by following known typological paths, offer to project new areas, distinct in scale and location, be it by topographical difficulties or thematic complexities" and goes further affirming that "this is a basic activity of the urban planner."[42]

Synthesizing in this space both fields of political construction, from the private to the collective, from the architectonic to urbanistic, the interior space of the *thick-envelope* manifests its potential as a new element in the production of citizenship, thus, its theorization is imperative to the construction of new formal possibilities of the ambiguous spaces and its uses. Not only in the mentioned examples as precedents, especially at the Miami Garage, but today we see this discussion in new projects being developed – being them by the office WORKac as well as their fellow New Yorkers nArchitects with Chicago's Navy Pier and its wave-wall (2012-16), Lacaton & Vassal's renovations or still in projects as far as Brazil, with the N8Studio + AP Arquitetos GOSP HQ in São Paulo (2017-20) [Figure 5], that look from the continuity of the urban *promenade* to occupy the space of the thick-envelope of the building.

With this research, I propose that contemporary architecture is the architecture of the thick-envelope, of the quasi-urban space where the definitions of interior and exterior get mixed and, consequently, its political barriers collapse. In the inhabited space of a *thick-envelope*, the city and the building become one, and the question of submitting to either public or private regulations gets blurred: a new space invokes new performances. Understanding the contemporary condition is understanding the thick-envelope as a mediator between the object and the city.

As proclaimed a decade ago by Zaera-Polo, "by analyzing the building envelope, architects may be able to re-empower the practice of architecture as a truly transformative force in the reorganization of power ecologies."[43] From the melancholic position that everything that was left is the "architecture of the skin"[44], the *thick-envelope* assumes the (last) position of a political architecture, a space of architectural agency for long ignored.

ENDNOTES

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6. Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, *Transparency*, (Berlin: Birkhauser, 1997).

7. Zaera-Polo, "The politics", p.195.

8. On the concept of affects, we refer to Farshid Moussavi, *The function of style*, (Barcelona: Actar, 2015).

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14. See Robert Venturi et al. *Aprendendo com Las Vegas*, (Sao Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2003) and Charles Jencks, *The language of postmodern architecture*, 6th ed., (New York: Rizzoli, 1991).

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19. Daniel Naegele, "Building books: Le Corbusier's word-image", in *Architectural publications* n.49, 2003.

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21. Ritu Bhatt, "The significance", p.230.

22. Zaera-Polo, "The politics", p.199.

23. Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The possibility of an absolute architecture*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), p.46.

24. Mario Gandelsonas, "The city as the object of architecture" in: *Assemblage*, n.37, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 128-144.

25. Ibid., p.130.

26. Ibid., p.134.

27. David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mostafavi, *Surface Architecture*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), p.57.

28. Andres Jaque, *Mies y la gata niebla*, (Madrid: Puente Editores, 2019).

29. Invention here used loosely, in the sense of proposition and mass adoption.

30. Leatherbarrow and Mostafavi, *Surface*

31. Ibid., p.71.

32. For discussions on the project, see Bernard Tschumi, *Glass ramps/glass walls*, (London: AA Publications, 2004); Bernard Tschumi, *Event-Cities 2*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001) and José Araguez, *The building*, (New York: Lars Muller, 2016).

33. On the relevance of the image, see Bernard Tschumi "Approach", in http://www.tschumi.com/approach/

34. More on the building at Amale Andraos and Dan Wood, *We get there when we cross that bridge*, (New York: Monacelli Press, 2017).

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