

## What Would Donald Judd Do?

JUDITH BIRDSONG

University of Texas at Austin

**Keywords:** Donald Judd, minimalism, non-referential, self sufficient, Peter Zumthor

**Architects as diverse as Frank Gehry and Peter Zumthor have responded powerfully to the elemental lessons they perceive in the artwork and architectural projects of the artist Donald Judd. Not surprisingly, John Pawson, the “minimalist” architect perhaps most strongly aligned with the style that takes its name (if not its ideology) from the arts movement that Judd unwittingly helped father, has acknowledged many debts to Judd’s work. From Eduardo Souto de Moura to a new generation of architects that includes David Adjaye, Claesson Koivisto Rune, Brad Cloepfil, and Johnston Marklee—all attest to Judd’s influence on their architecture, and often for reasons that don’t share any immediately apparent common ground.**

**Query: What form would the minimalist artist’s own architecture have taken had he not died just as he was beginning to receive commissions?**

**Early in his career as an art critic, Judd worked ruthlessly to expose the hollow core of the post-Expressionist art world while simultaneously producing works that would eventually demonstrate the merits of his counter position—and thus radically alter the course of contemporary art. Judd would later direct his critical attention toward the then-pervasive superficiality of post-modern architecture, laboring in his writings to articulate an antidote to the status quo by stating the negative case: before we can assert what architecture should be, it must first be stated what it should not be. Unfortunately, Judd died before he was able to realize a single major autonomously designed work. Unlike his art, we are left with only a few sketches and drawings of unbuilt projects against which to assess his alternative position.**

**In 1992, Judd began design work on an administrative building to be built adjacent to Zumthor’s Kunsthau Museum in Bregenz, Switzerland. This paper proposes that it represents the most succinctly articulated exposition of Judd’s architectural thinking and terminates a line of investigation that began eight years earlier with three projects intended to house artwork at his properties in Marfa, Texas. It illustrates in praxis the case Judd elaborated in his writing and substantiates a surprisingly prescient architectural perspective that remains valid for the profession to this day.**

In 1989, five years before Donald Judd’s death in 1994, the monograph *Donald Judd Architektur* appeared in print. Written to coincide with an exhibit in Germany of the artist’s then little-known architectural projects, it was the first of several books that followed to explore the output, written and built, of the artist’s parallel pursuit. Architecture had emerged as an interest early in Judd’s career, and between 1968 and the time of his death (from non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma at the age of 65), Judd was actively involved in the design of a number of significant architectural projects, both alone and in collaboration with others. Although he was able to toggle between the disciplines with astonishing agility, Judd harbored no illusions that art and architecture were flip sides of the same coin, despite a somewhat common formal predilection and, as we will see, organizing DNA in the work he produced. Architecture, he wrote, is “concerned with its purposes,” and function “one thing that separates architecture from art.”<sup>1</sup>

Judd the artist famously eschewed being cast as a “minimalist,” a label that has come to define an art movement characterized by a reductive materiality and stripped formal aspect. This would seem to align the art with the architectural style (and the word here is important and intentional) of the same name, at least superficially and, in fact, Judd’s work is often referenced as influential by architects collected under the minimalist umbrella. John Pawson described his publication, *Minimum*, as an “attempt to examine the idea of the ‘minimum,’ which can be seen as the pursuit of simplicity, as a way of thinking: exploring the possibilities that it offers for working creatively,” and included images of Judd’s work as illustrations of the themes outlined.<sup>2</sup> Peter Zumthor, who is associated with an altogether different strain of minimalism, has written “The works of Donald Judd and other artists of the time, reductions to basic volumetric shapes...impressed me.”<sup>3</sup> More recently, Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee have cited time spent in Marfa, Texas, in the company of Judd’s installations as formative. Their early work, while not typically minimalist, likewise foregrounds the legibility of volume over surficial embellishment. Judd’s own architectural projects exhibit the restraint and geometric purity necessary to ensure the “visible reasonableness” requisite in his work and certainly meet some of minimalism’s stylistic criteria. It might be helpful, therefore, to clarify the difference between the post-painterly art movement Judd helped beget and its architectural counterpart.

Reacting in part to the critic Clement Greenberg’s reduction of painting to a grocery list of formal attributes, in part to

a growing dissatisfaction with Expressionism's subjectivity, and driven in part by an imperative to release American art from conventions inherited from centuries of European influence, Judd and a handful of other artists working in the 1960s produced, in a few very short years, an explosive body of three-dimensional objects that would not only eradicate the subjective gesture and expose the unnecessarily restrictive nature of Greenberg's catalog, but destroy it altogether. The minimalist artwork, often an object or objects positioned decisively in space, "begins and ends in itself."<sup>4</sup> It is resolutely non-referential and non-figural; its subject matter is its own materiality and the fact of its existence. In restructuring the relationship of the viewing subject with the object, it privileges an immediate and unmediated experience with the work over one whose meaning was dependent on an external or historical referent. For Judd, the viewer's encounter with one of his works was, in fact, considered crucial to its proper apprehension. The height at which a piece was mounted relative to eye level, the depth it projected from the wall and, often, the distance and position from which a work was viewed, were fixed so that the work was seen to specific effect. More importantly, the dimensions of height, depth, and spatial interval were not simply set standards for installation, but were considered essential components of the art itself and participated in how the work's was perceived: "We see simple proportions," Judd wrote, "Much of the quality of a structure lies in these."<sup>5</sup>

Between 1961 and 1973, Judd worked as an art critic-for-hire for publications such as *Arts Magazine* and *Art in America* and used his reviews as a platform to critique the art world at large, working to articulate his ideological position by stating the negative case: before we can appreciate what art should be, we must first specify what it should not be. Judd continues to build this case slowly, over a number of years, inching toward a concisely held system of beliefs, as though he could articulate a cogent alternative to the status quo only by continually and critically abrading the current condition until its mirror image was revealed. At the same time, he began to produce works of art that served to close the argument, thus "proving" the validity of his case.

This radical and purposeful "correction" in the fine arts had no corollary impulse in architecture (although, as we will see, Judd attempted to articulate one and for many of the same reasons) despite the fact that the profession was enjoying its own moment of existential self-reckoning. The modernist project, with its socially progressive agenda, had been declared a failed experiment and meaning in architecture had become unmoored; architecture no longer mattered in any way that acknowledged a universally shared ideology. Rather than use the opportunity to advance a radical reappraisal of signification, however, the discipline instead retreated to a safe and comfortable (albeit critically repositioned) reprise of the familiar and the known, and postmodernism was born.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 1. Donald Judd. Isometric sketch for the east building of the Mansana Block, 1984, pencil on paper. Originally published in Donald Judd Architektur, ©1991, MAK, Erschienen im Verlag Gerd hatje, Stuttgart, 1991.

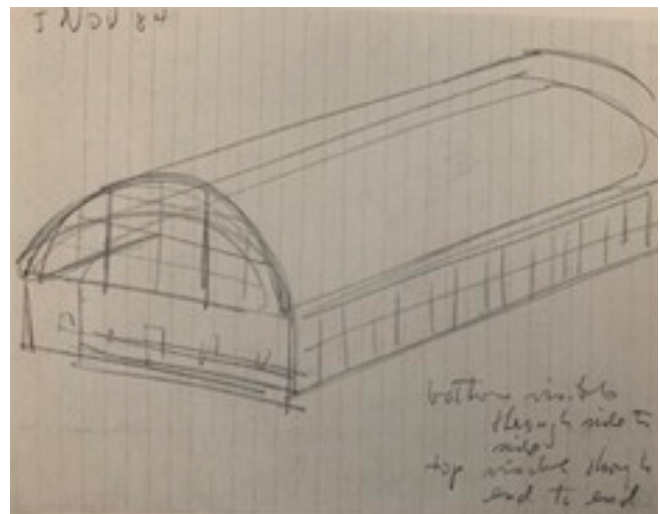


Figure 2. Donald Judd. Isometric sketch for the artillery sheds at the Chinati Foundation, 1984, pencil on paper. Originally published in Donald Judd Architektur, ©1991, MAK, Erschienen im Verlag Gerd hatje, Stuttgart, 1991.

Judd was to take the discipline to task for exactly this reason in a series of increasingly scathing texts and lectures delivered in the 1980s and early 1990s, but architecture first came under his close scrutiny in 1963 in an article he wrote for *Arts Magazine* entitled "Kansas City Report." In it, many of the themes he was to later return to time and again appear for the first time: a disdain for the corrupting forces of capitalism on good design and a disregard for tall, curtain wall buildings (what Judd was later to call "toy forms") that concealed any sense of interior organization; an appreciation for legible order and for purposeful structures whose form was not "imposed

from the outside;" the use of local (and, therefore, specific) materials; and for buildings that explore the "possibilities of construction."<sup>7</sup> Above all, there is a contempt for historicist sleights-of-hand that preclude uncorrupted signification and impede any attempt to communicate "live attitudes." The following year, in an essay written for the catalog published to coincide with the exhibit *Twentieth Century Engineering at The Museum of Modern Art*, Judd applauded many of the large-scale works on display for countering this tendency toward referential allusion – although their functional mandate did not ipso facto guarantee a "specifically" determined resolution: a modern bridge with rustic stonework could just as easily be damned for diluting its self-sufficient signification with unnecessary – and unnecessarily "general" and "indirect" (to use Judd's terms) – historical overtones.<sup>8</sup>

Judd didn't hesitate to call out those he saw as complicit in furthering a position antithetical to his. Robert Venturi, Helmut Jahn, Michael Graves, Mario Botta, Hans Hollein and Philip Johnson – as well as Frank Gehry and Peter Eisenman – were repeatedly invoked for abandoning their professional and moral responsibility by contributing to the proliferation of bankrupt and inauthentic Reagan-era constructions. His sincere passion for a field where he viewed many of its key practitioners as self-indulgent or glib and irresponsible pencils-for-hire can't be denied; his writings read as nothing less than a plea for a professional overhaul and purge.<sup>9</sup>

Judd the Critic was always also Judd the Practitioner, and his turn toward architecture as a subject of investigation (and consternation) is coincident with an upsurge in his architectural production. As with his art criticism and artwork, Judd's architectural criticism and design work seems locked in a reciprocal loop of exposition and experimentation where theory is tested in practice and the product embodies the theory. Judd left a remarkable portfolio of remodeled buildings, a handful of unbuilt proposals, and several competition entries produced in collaboration with other architects, but due to his early death, a Judd-built "manifesto-in-stone" never had the opportunity to fully step outside the shadow of his critical writing to see the light of day.

What form, then, would this statement have taken?

Reading between the lines, we can begin to discern its outline and, not surprisingly, it often aligns with and echoes Judd's views on art. Given his concern with the authenticity of signification in every aspect of the built world, we could hardly expect it to be otherwise.

As early as 1968, in an interview with Margot Willett, Judd flatly stated that architecture was "fairly backward," and still beholden to "compositional fiddling around," reiterating the same concerns he sought to redress with his art. Provoked for

perhaps the first time into articulating how his architecture would differ from the status quo, he replied:

"When they put up, say, a plain ordinary steel frame building before it's covered by whatever junk they cover it with, that building isn't composed; it's a big cage, and it's not bad before they cover it all up."

"...Then you have to put a series of cage-like structures."

"Well, I don't know; I haven't thought about how I would build such a big building, but there are certainly alternatives. There's one right away: leave it as a cage somehow."<sup>10</sup>

Structure, an ordering framework decided on the basis of something other than an imposed arrangement of parts, offered one means of eliminating the arbitrary – and arbitrarily-composed – from architecture. It opened an avenue of thought that had the potential of liberating a building from a subjective bias: reveal what the form required to exist; remove what conspired to conceal it.<sup>11</sup>

"What characterizes a good building?"

"Again, a certain wholeness, consistency, coherence, attention to the function, attention to what the building is supposed to be for, consideration for the people who work in the building or use it."

—Donald Judd, Interviews, 1993.<sup>12</sup>

With the purchase of Ft D.A. Russell in 1979 (later renamed the Chinati Foundation), a decommissioned army base in Marfa, Texas intended to permanently house large-scale installations of Judd's work together with that of John Chamberlain and Dan Flavin, Judd finally had the opportunity to begin "research" a built thesis. He was also in the enviable position of being his own client, able to author program briefs open-ended and spatially innocuous enough (storage, display) to allow him to foreground concerns other than a determining function. Over the course of an eleven-year period between 1983 and 1994, Judd returns again and again to one particular typology, an orthogonal (either square or rectangular) volume capped by a barrel vault roof, repeatedly testing, revisiting, and refining the *raison d'être* whose outward expression results in each project's form.<sup>13</sup> It can be thought of as a genealogical thread, a perfecting of the breed, and it begins with Judd's declaration that the design of two freestanding buildings to be constructed at the Mansana Block, his residential compound in Marfa, are "architecture:" "...they will be steel beams [steel framed] and prefab concrete slabs and a curved Quonset hut-type roof, and the axes will be crossed. The two floors and the roof will divide the buildings all in thirds, going up. ...[They] will be real architecture." (Figure 1).<sup>14</sup>

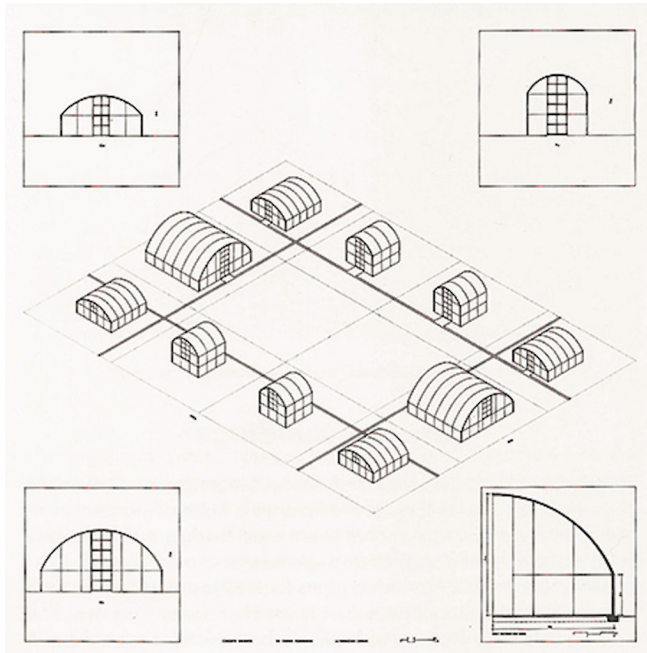


Figure 3. Donald Judd, drawing by Claude Armstrong and Donna Cohen. Axonometric drawing for concrete buildings at the Chinati Foundation, 1987, ink on tracing paper, 42 x 42 inches (106.7 x 106.7 cm). Image ©Judd Foundation. Donald Judd Papers, Judd Foundation Archives, Marfa, Texas.

The designs for the two buildings at the Block (one intended for works by John Chamberlain, the other for Judd's collection of drawings and paintings) privilege an expressed structure, coherent form, an organizing spatial axiality, and legible proportioning – all devices Judd employed in his artworks to rid them of any kind of external referents. They are self-sufficient; they claim the ground for their own, and they are the spring board for the renovation of two former artillery sheds at Chinati that followed quickly thereafter: "So those two buildings [the artillery sheds] are derived from these buildings [at the Block], even though they're going to exist first."<sup>15</sup>

Judd's work on the sheds (which would eventually host his 100 untitled works in mill aluminum) consisted primarily of trading the existing garage doors for the quarter-paned windows that Judd favored and replacing the flat roof (which leaked) with a vaulted, semi-circular one that clearly harkened back to the Block buildings. The height of the roof and its profile were determined by inscribing the existing brick-and-concrete building base within a circle drawn in space resulting in an uninterrupted second story volume that repeated the height of the original structure (Figure 2).<sup>16</sup> Not long after, in 1985, Judd began work on the design of the concrete buildings, a compound of ten freestanding structures to be sited near the perimeter of the Foundation property intended to provide still more permanent space for the display of Judd's work. Located on the footprint of a long-since dismantled structure originally built to house German prisoners of war, the buildings vary in size, but once again share the same characteristic rectilinear

footprint and vaulted profile Judd favored in the Block and sheds projects (Figure 3); however, Judd shifted here from the steel and concrete panel assembly first explored at the Block to a poured-in-place concrete shell with site cast concrete panels and symmetrically-placed window openings capping the ends. The design process lasted over three years, with Judd consulting with a number of architects and engineers as he tried to reconcile his vision for a pure volume with a continuous skin with the realities of structural stress and forces. Construction began on the complex early in 1988 but was halted in October of that year for reasons not altogether clear and the project was never completed<sup>17</sup>

"I think as far as art and architecture are concerned, they have to be relatively simple for us to understand, because primarily you understand them at once, or at least the initial interest is there at once. You understand it in a different way over a period of time, but I don't think in the same way as in the beginning. ...You should have a reason for this kind of solution in architecture, one that is a part of its function."

—Donald Judd, Interviews, 1992<sup>18</sup>

Arguably, the most intriguing of the four sibling projects was the one Judd designed in 1991 in Bregenz, Austria as the administrative complement to Peter Zumthor's Kunsthaus Museum. Zumthor had won the competition for the design of both the museum and the administrative building, but the museum director, Edelbert Köb, a champion of Judd's work, commissioned him to independently prepare a proposal for the smaller structure. Zumthor's reaction to this mid-stream change is ambiguous— at once encouraging and guarded. He shares the program (a reception area, four work rooms, a library for 14 people, a project room, offices, reception area, a small kitchen, and an archive – to which Judd added a bookshop) with Judd and invites him to visit and offer a "critique" of his design, yet asserts his right as winner of the competition to decide whether or not to collaborate: "I'm interested to see how you would shape and insert a new volume into the given site. I do have an idea for this myself. Yet I am open for surprises. The final responsibility for the architecture of the whole museum-complex and treatment of the site I claim for myself as you might well understand. In accordance to the result and/or character of your study could it of course become necessary to talk about the proper integration of your work in my work. Yet, given the case, I think this should not cause problems."<sup>19</sup>

The Bregenz project is the most refined in the lineage of the quartet and is a clear summation of the earlier three. Once again Judd proposes a hybrid volume merging circle and rectangle (Figure 4, left). The use of alternating concrete panels and glass again allows for the immediate apprehension of solid and void space and, again, the voids are not subordinate interruptions in what would otherwise be a hierarchically dominant

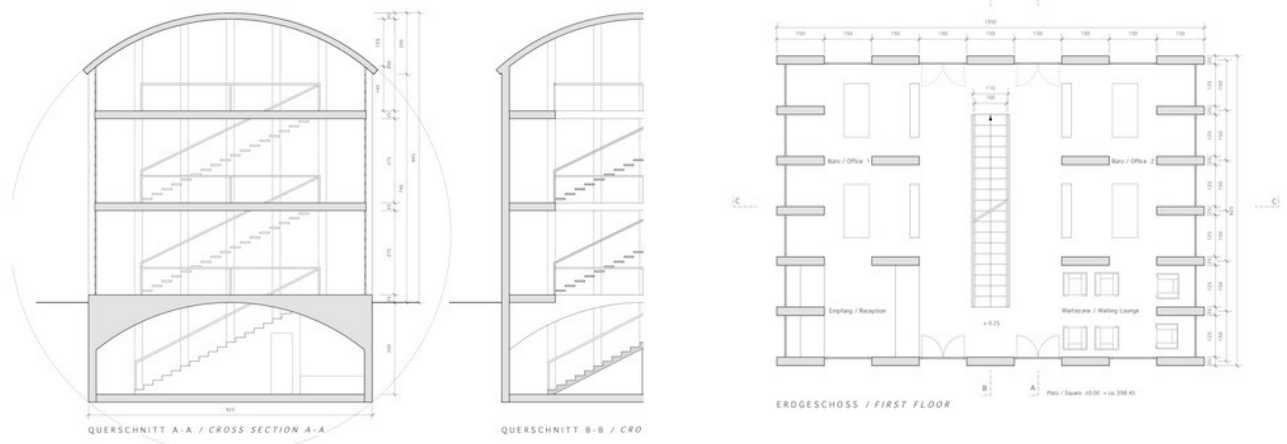


Figure 4. Donald Judd, Drawing by Adrian Jolles. Left, drawing of cross-section A-A of Kunsthau Bregenz (detail), March 22, 1992, drafting vellum 24.7 x 34.6 inches (62.5 x 88cm). Right, drawing of first floor of Kunsthau Bregenz (detail), March 22, 1992, drafting vellum, 24.7 x 34.6 inches (62.5 x 88 cm). Images ©Adrian Jolles, courtesy Adrian Jolles Papers, Judd Foundation Archives, Marfa, Texas.



Figure 5. Donald Judd, Kunsthau Bregenz Administrative and Office Building, 1992-94, Drawing by Oliva Alfonso, Laura Rodriguez, Zachary Wignall (School of Architecture, The University of Florida), exterior perspective view, digital rendering. Image ©2016 Armstrong Cohen Architecture.

wall, but intervals that participate fully in, and complete, a holistic apprehension of the facades. The gridded structural framework and horizontal window mullions encode the process of spatial division and subdivision that decides the end. Judd's logic is written quite literally on the wall.

Despite the clarity with which these relationships are expressed, however, celebrating structural honesty was obviously not Judd's intention. The concrete panels pivot in plan, exposing their full width on the east and west elevations while reversing their orientation to project that width into the interior space on the north and south sides. Any kind of consistent identity is thereby betrayed: they read from the exterior either as a column or load-bearing plane depending on the elevation (Figure 4, right). The effect, on the one hand, is the introduction of a threshold space with considerable depth and direction, while the other persists as a flat surface. We are left to conclude that Judd's overriding concern must be the affect – a strong cross-axial spatial network – that results from this simple move. And, in fact, Judd continues to hyphenate the plan with a procession of panels in line with those of the north and south walls, subdividing the space without actually creating proper rooms to achieve exactly this effect.<sup>20</sup> The implied spaces that result from his apportioning strategy are relieved of their functionalist responsibility and divorced from any programmatic impetus. Zumthor's program brief is reasonably accommodated, but doesn't decide the interior layout. Despite Judd's avowal that function distinguishes art from architecture, he demotes program to the role of house sitter, occupying the space provided without affecting it or preceding it; and he does this so that we may perceive space afresh, devoid of all content or preconception, and appreciate it engaged and newly interested.

The Bregenz project elucidates what Judd may have intended as a radical architectural revision. It is what he would have done had he not died before construction documents could be completed. Consistent with his artworks, the project denies any referential inflection or recourse to external concerns for justification or explication. Signification begins and ends with the building's physical facts, and Judd finds the elemental constituents of architecture – space, form, and material – sufficient to convey the reason undergirding the resultant form and script our perception of the space within.

Zumthor, of course, ultimately designed the building that stands on the same site today. We are in the temporally untenable position, therefore, of trying to assess the importance of a work that was never constructed or widely published and was thus unable to spawn a legacy proving its influence. The same cannot be said of Judd's art, which, almost 60 years later, has had such a profound impact on what followed that today its repercussive effects are received as given. Whether or not his buildings would have elicited the same intensely visceral reaction that his best artworks do must remain in

the realm of speculation. It is interesting to note, however, that in his insistence on an architecture of self-sufficiency, he anticipated the work of many of the architects writing and practicing in the past two decades who, wittingly or not, have furthered his mandate.

## ENDNOTES

1. Donald Judd, "In Addition," in Donald Judd Architektur, ed. Marianne Stockebrand (Munster: Westfälischen Kunstverein, 1989), 207.
2. John Pawson, *Minimum* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), 7. Judd's work illustrates chapters on "Mass," "Landscape," "Containment," and "Volume."
3. Peter Zumthor, *Peter Zumthor 1985-2013* (Zurich: Verlag Scheidegger & Spies AG, 2014), Vol. 1: 23
4. Ignasi de Sola-Morales, "Mies van der Rohe and Minimalism," in *Differences: Topographies of Contemporary Architecture*, ed. Sarah Whiting, trans. Graham Thompson (Boston: MIT Press, 1997), 36.
5. Donald Judd, "Art and Architecture, 1987," *Architektur*, 198.
6. "The elaboration of the term 'postmodern' is not due to real change but is due to naked fashion and the need to cover it with words." Donald Judd, "A Long Discussion Not About Master-Pieces but Why There Are So Few of Them," in *Donald Judd Writings*, eds. Flavin Judd and Caitlin Murray (New York: Judd Foundation and David Zwirner Books, 2016), 375. First published in *Art in America*, September 1984, 9-19
7. Donald Judd, "Kansas City Report," *Writings*, 104-112. First published as "Nationwide Reports," *Arts Magazine*, December 1963, 24-28.
8. For more on the "specific" and "general" in Judd's work, see Richard Shiff, "To Stop the Heart," in *Chinati – The Vision of Donald Judd*, ed. Marianne Stockebrand (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 267-72. Reprinted in *Sensuous Thoughts: Essays on the Work of Donald Judd*, eds. Tim Johnson and Caitlin Murray (Berlin: Marfa Book Co and Hatjtje Cantz Verlag, 2020), 106-115.
9. Interestingly, despite Judd's deep knowledge of philosophy, he never engages in the postmodern debate from the theoretical perspective taken by many of architecture's harshest critics at that time -- although it is clear from the books held in his library that he must have been aware of the content framing the conversation
10. Donald Judd, interview with Margaret Willett, May, 1968, in *Donald Judd Interviews*, eds. Flavin Judd and Caitlin Murray (New York: Judd Foundation and David Zwirner Books, 2019), 333-4. Given the nature of the architectural projects Judd was to later produce, it seems as though this conversation may have triggered a chain of possibilities
11. Parallels with Mies's work come immediately to mind. Judd admired the work of Mies, saying, "There are very few buildings built by the real architects of this century, such as Wright and Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Kahn, the architects who constitute the history of architecture." (Donald Judd, "On Architecture, 1984, *Writings*, 403). Judd refers to the dog house / chicken house he designed and built at the Block with its rhythmic exposed structural skeleton as "the Miesian chicken coop. It's even more Miesian now, and it's pretty nice." (Judd, *Interviews*, 546). Judd repeatedly condemns Philip Johnson for debasing Mies's work
12. Donald Judd, interview with Lars Morrell for Skala, August 30, 1993, *Interviews*, 846.
13. The generative and reciprocal relationship between the three Marfa projects is fully explored in Richard Gachot, "Donald Judd: The Concrete Buildings," in *Chinati Foundation Newsletter*, vol. 21 (October, 2016), 24-92.
14. Judd, *Interviews*, 545.
15. Judd, *Interviews*, 549.
16. It has been speculated that Judd's repeated use of this barrel vault roof (which he will again return to in the design for the office building in Bregenz) might be a stylistic reference to the archetypal architecture of Aldo Rossi whose work may have been made known to him by Loretta Vinciarelli, an Italian architect and Judd's partner for many years, who was familiar with Rossi's work. Appropriating a referent to anything external to the immediate and specific conditions at hand – an archetype -- would be antithetical to Judd's insistence on a work's self-sufficiency, however, and would miss his repeated recourse to a geometric imperative that binds the roof and base into an indivisible whole. He was approving of the Quonset hut profile and appreciated Louis Kahn's barrel-vaulted Kimbell Art Museum in Ft Worth, but probably for their reasonable expression of form and structure, which the sheds share – and perhaps because the form was free of the typological associations other, more conventional, roof forms (such as a gable) would carry.
17. The lack of available local skilled labor, the need to shift resources to the mounting of an exhibit of Judd's work at the Dallas Museum of Art later that year, and ongoing structural concerns have all been proposed as contributing factors. See again Gachot, "Donald Judd: The Concrete Buildings," *Newsletter*, 38

18. Judd, Interview with Klaus Stefan Leuschel, April 22, 1992, Interviews, 797.
19. Letter from Peter Zumthor to Donald Judd, September 9, 1991, Adrian Jolles Papers, Judd Foundation Archives, Marfa, Texas. Earlier Zumthor had written, "Reading your book Donald Judd Architektur and being inspired by your work for some time already, I dare ask(ing) you: Would you mind giving me an opinion (a criticism) on the project whenever you will come to Europe?" (Letter from Peter Zumthor to Donald Judd, February 24, 1990, Adrian Jolles Papers, Judd Foundation Archives, Marfa, Texas).
20. Judd had used a similar means of dividing space in the conversion of a former hotel to his private residence in Eichholteren, Switzerland in 1989-92. Adrian Jolles, a Zurich architect Judd hired to act as his local liaison on that project also worked with him on the production of drawings for the Bregenz project.