

# Making Present the Act of Perception: Considering New Modalities for Urban Interpretation and Architectural Design

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The environmental projects of artist Robert Irwin address how the act of perception and the reality and history of a place are brought together in the context of a highly experiential re-presentation of "site." Irwin's proposal of four categories of work that exist outside the usual definitions of painting or sculpture refers to "site" as a phenomenal entity. An expressed goal of Irwin's is to focus on the experiential, sensual qualities of a setting that exist in a shifting dynamic dominated by change. What distinguishes Irwin's design process is that all aspects of the design process are considered a vehicle for the work and not its subject. Critical examination of Irwin's site referenced project categories and design process followed with an overlay of Irwin's design method upon a series of case study projects not created by Irwin has revealed the possibilities of a site conditioned architecture devoid of abstract references to content, history, and stylistic implication. Architecture, like art that is phenomenally and conditionally based, crosses the traditional boundaries of landscape, urban design and related artistic disciplines as it becomes a responsive design activity. When situated in the contextual crucible that contains the immediate cues the architect utilizes in forming an operative response, one encounters values discovered in the visual-haptic-olfactory experiences of "site" that stand in opposition to an age increasingly defined by cybernetics and virtual reality.

## SITE REFERENCED ART AND ARCHITECTURE: LEVELS OF PHENOMENAL RESPONSE

Irwin's four working categories for site art: 1) *Site dominant*, 2) *Site adjusted*, 3) *Site specific*, and 4) *Site determined/conditioned* reflect their level of response to and engagement with site phenomena.<sup>1</sup>

*Site dominant* design as defined by Irwin exhibits qualities of permanence, transcendent and historical content, meaning and purpose. Using a sculptural analogy, Irwin cites the work of Henry Moore as an example of site dominance since it is referenced by its content, purpose, placement, familiar form, materials and technique, etc.

An architectural example can be found in the work of Aldo Rossi. The School at Fagnano Olona near Varese, Italy, (1976) is conceived of as a small city focused upon a central piazza. The primary axis of the school's major spaces is composed of a collection of site-dominant urban artifacts that include: the entrance propylae, the cylindrical volume of the library, the rectangular great hall or gymnasium, external great stair and brick heating plant stack that also serves as a community focus. The school is a site unto itself that provides a locus to which other subsequent urban gestures can be referred. The dramatic play of light and shadow that is carefully considered with minimal, color application comprises the major experiential component of the sensual experience of school and place. Rather than responding specifically to phenomenon existing on the site, the architecture generates a whole or "site" around it.

*Site adjusted* design is predicated upon the idea that meaning-content has been reduced to a terrestrial, abstract dimension. The work, in terms of the sculptural example, is largely conceived off site and is either made or conceived in the studio and transported to or assembled on site. Sometimes still referenced by their familiarity in terms of content and placement as in the site dominant example, adjustments or site accommodations are made in terms of scale, placement and appropriateness to place. However, the oeuvre of the individual artist is still referenced and emphasized as in the sculptural work of Mark di Suvero.

The Museum of Decorative Art at Frankfurt am Main by Richard Meier, (1985) while still within the evolving syntactic language or *idée fixe*<sup>2</sup> of Meier, establishes connections to site elements such as the existing Villa Metzler and the other museum structures along the Main River in terms of proportion, scale and syntax. By means of the Villa Metzler's quadrate figure, with its 17.6 meter cubic proportions, Meier anchored the four corners of the site by means of "cubic envelope in the form of a gridded cube which not only assumed the basic dimensions of the existing villa, but also replicated in its elevational harmonies, the scale, the size of and rhythm of its windows."<sup>3</sup> The 1.10 x 1.10 square meter grid of the building's porcelain enameled metal

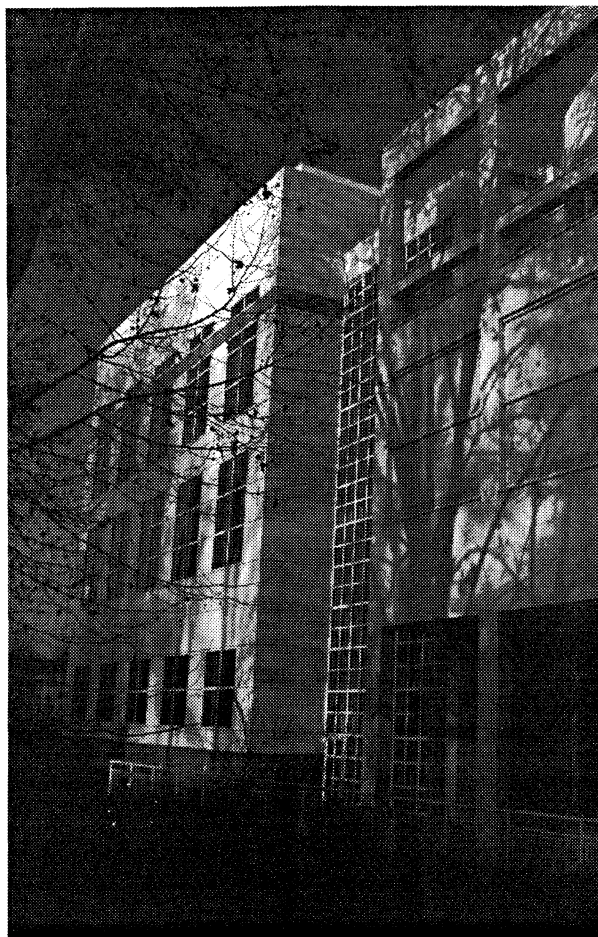


Fig. 1 The Museum of Decorative Art, Frankfurt am Main, Richard Meier, 1985. West Elevation. Photograph by the author.

panels was derived from 16 equal subdivisions of the 17.6 meter cube<sup>4</sup>. The grid shift of 3.5 degrees relates to other museums along the Main River and the pedestrian site links.<sup>5</sup> As in the work of Rossi, the museum's primary connection to the site is its reference to light. Meier describes the project as "metaphysically and literally 'radiant'."<sup>6</sup> As in the work of di Suvero, proportion, scale and geometry became the primary vehicles that adjust the oeuvre and *idée fixe* of Meier to the site.

*Site specific* design is conceived in terms of site issues that set the parameters of the design inquiry and become the *raison d'être* for the work. Initial steps are taken to integrate the project into its surroundings. The process of understanding the work of art, however, is still linked to the oeuvre of the individual artist. In order to fully comprehend design intent, familiarity with the lineage, intention, style, use of materials and techniques of artist is assumed, as in the consistency of Richard Serra's work.

The architecture of Günter Behnisch & Partner as seen at the German Postal Museum, also in Frankfurt am Main, (1990) approaches this level of site specificity in its response to the sensual phenomena and the difficult, narrow proportions of the Gründerzeit villa site along the Main River. Most

notably within the permanent exhibition space, the shell of the building minimizes the distinction between interior and exterior. A maison dom-i-no structural type of reinforced concrete extends to become an elegant porch facing the river and also slips out from behind the transparent walls to support the truncated glass structure that connects the lower level exhibition space to the upper levels, garden and sky recalling a similar relationship established by I.M. Pei at the Grande Louvre pyramid addition.

The interior spaces around the permanent exhibition volume are experienced simultaneously through the vertical layers of the building that are 'sheared open' by the truncated cone and its filigreed glass skin where the light begins to take on a material quality as it interacts with the multiple materials and layers. Plane trees at the southern end of the building sparingly cut into the building volume responding to localized incident in a specific way. Multimaterial detailing strategies of the balconies, railings and stairs contribute to a sense of weightlessness that minimizes the building's intrusiveness upon its fragile setting.

*Site conditioned/determined* design is drawn entirely from its surroundings. Derived from an intimate encounter through inhabiting the site and the surrounding environs over time, one is challenged to consider issues of organization and

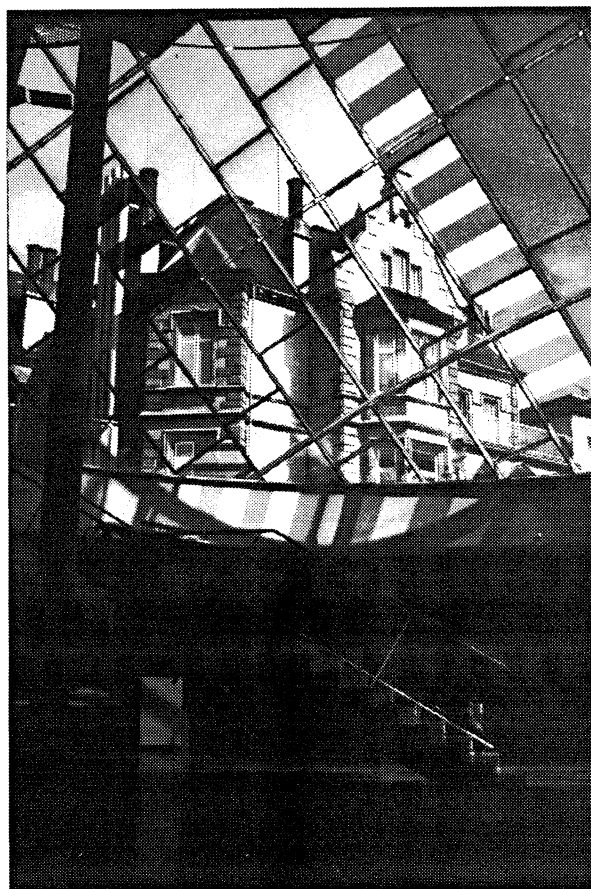


Fig. 2. The German Postal Museum, Frankfurt am Main, Behnisch & Partner, 1990. Permanent Exhibition Space with Existing Villa Beyond. Photograph by the author.

systems of order, relation, architecture, use, distance and sense of scale. Site phenomena such as snow, wind, sun angles, dimensional variables such as light, sound, movement and the presence of water, are considered as well as the physical and human densities of the site. A concern for the human beings as seen in an awareness of detail, finish and craft, the history of past, present and desired future use in addition to the direct experience of the site circumscribes this multifaceted approach to site issues.

A transparency of complexity, as seen in the work of Jean Nouvel at the Cartier Foundation, Paris (1994) is specific to site exigencies in terms of site approach and principal views, building volumetrics, proportion and sequencing while responding to the shifting, ephemeral aspects of site. The 'immaterial' or 'dematerialized' building envelope at the Cartier Foundation, like the diminishing art-object, becomes so ephemeral, at times, it seems to disappear altogether. As per the site design issues at the German Postal Museum, site constraints on the Cartier Foundation's building footprint were significant. The new construction was limited to the footprint of the pre-existing early nineteenth century villa. Eight levels above and below grade were required to meet the demands of the office space, exhibition and service program. A six-story semi-glazed palisade initiates the building's

experience at the front parcel line and recalls the boundary of the former garden wall that surrounded the earlier villa. The palisade and the twenty-six foot high sliding glass doors allow for views through the structure to the garden. Multiple reflections evoke shifting visual responses. Glass is experienced in its layered solidity as well as transparency.<sup>7</sup> Nouvel explains:

"By laying out three parallel glass surfaces, I created an ambiguity which will have the visitors wondering if the park has been built on, if it has been enclosed, or if—because of the series of reflections—the trees are inside or outside, if what they see through this depth is a reflection or something real."<sup>8</sup>

As pointed out by Irwin, the issue is not that of the object versus non-object but, rather of seeing or not seeing the richness of everyday phenomenal perception not subject to "abstract limitations as to form, place, materials, and so forth."<sup>9</sup> Nouvel, like Irwin has sought to discover and value the experience of beauty in all things though an intimate encounter with the phenomena of a specific site over time. In the work of both Nouvel and Irwin, the experience of change is foregrounded rather than fabricating a stylistically induced "permanence."

#### DESIGN PROCESS OF SITE DETERMINED/ CONDITIONED ARCHITECTURE

Irwin's experientially based environmental design process, as suggested in a 1990 interview, notes that site-conditioned artistic production becomes activated in terms of a process that involves: 1) extended site visits through which multiple site impressions without ambition, focus or conclusion are gathered, 2) an exploration of site approaches and interfaces along the lines of principal access, 2) An assessment of the surrounding streets in terms of their volumetric, proportional configuration and "attitude," 3) An evaluation of the scale levels associated with the site, 4) Understanding the qualities of surrounding buildings in terms of their material, detail and craft, 5) Grasping the qualities of the larger neighborhood in terms of plantings and prevalent color choices, 6) Separating oneself from the site and crystallizing the idea, 7) Testing the initial response in terms of site presence and feeling, 8) Incubation of the idea in a "hypnagogic" condition where the design objectives are questioned, haptically as well as mentally, 9) A consideration of the "mechanics" and material choices of the work with its construction, and 10) Establishing the validity of the work through presentation based upon the composition of the sponsoring group. From the design process activities described by Irwin, one is aware of their connection to the physical configuration and phenomena of the site in addition to the conditions, qualities and consequences associated with the *circumstances* of our *being* in the world. *Being* as embodied in our genetic, cultural and personal histories provides the subsidiary cues that shape our experience of site phenomena.<sup>10</sup>

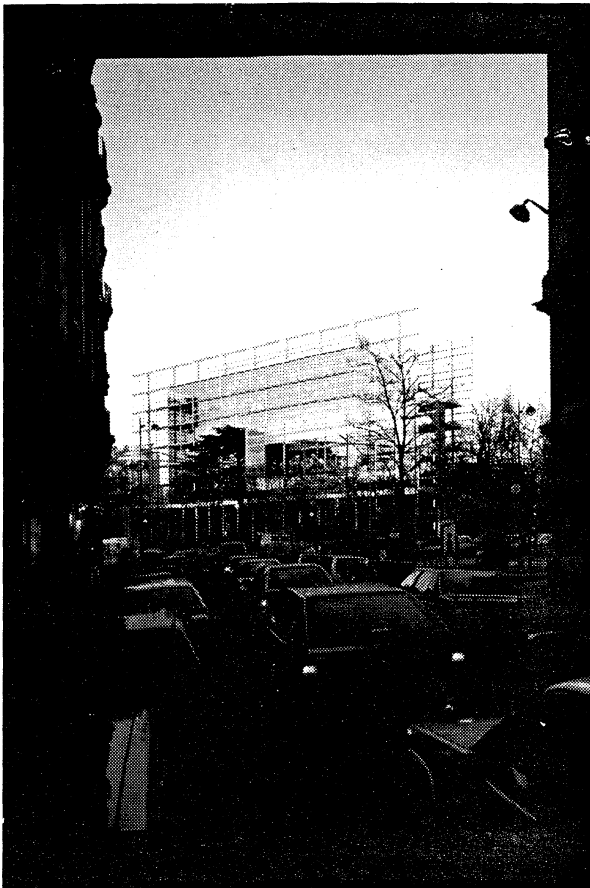


Fig. 3. The Cartier Foundation, Paris, Jean Nouvel, 1994. Photograph by Philip Ruault for Terence Riley, *Light Construction* (New York, 1995), p.55.

## SITE DETERMINED/CONDITIONED CASE STUDIES

Referring to his *Filigree/Line/Plane* (1980) project at Wellesley College, Massachusetts, where a low 1 cm. thick knife-edge like stainless steel wall cut through with a pattern of interlaced shapes that refer to the leaves found in a gathering of oak trees on the lake shore, Irwin notes: "I'm still trying to draw your attention, my attention, to the sheer wonder of the rich perceptual drama that is taking place all of the time just beyond the periphery of our everyday awareness."<sup>11</sup> Although the project does establish a visual connection between two campus buildings, its quiet, phenomenal presence that recognizes the qualities of light under the oak trees, the undulating topography and the horizon over the lake at sunset provides for rich, shifting, multiple experiences that accentuate the changing conditions of the site. Subtle and fragile, the project does not announce the oeuvre of Irwin, but the intrinsic beauty of the site.

Irwin integrated color and a new material, colored chain link fencing, into his environmental *9 Spaces, 9 Trees* (1979-83) project at the Public Safety Building Project in Seattle that began to significantly expand his visual vocabulary. Constrained in his use of color during the early minimalist projects, Irwin saw his phenomenally engaged color interventions as not distracting and self identified decoration, but as an integral part of the whole. Considered from multiple viewpoints amongst a relentless field of gray stone buildings in Seattle, *9 Spaces 9 Trees* responded to Irwin's desire for a strong graphic reading. The resulting solution was a diaphanous nine square grid of blue chain link fencing material that engaged pink and purple plum trees with their violet leaves coupled with a magenta ground cover to produce a "layered, visually tactile maze."<sup>12</sup>

Concurrently from 1981-83 at the University of California San Diego, La Jolla, Irwin was continuing his exploration with color in his environmental interventions as seen in the *Two Running Violet V Forms* project. This time however, the grid was a venerable existing grove of eucalyptus trees that are part of the Stuart Foundation Sculpture Collection site.



Fig. 4. *Filigree/Line/Plane*, Wellesley College, Wellesley Massachusetts, Robert Irwin, installed May 1980. Photograph by Robert Irwin for Jan Butterfield, *The art of light and space* (New York, 1993), p. 49.

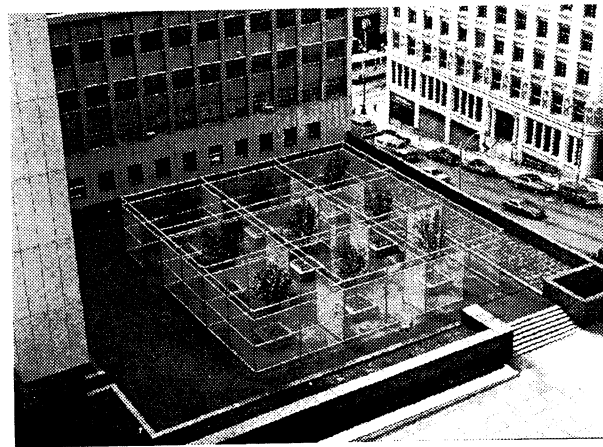


Fig. 5. *9 Spaces 9 Trees*, Public Safety Building Plaza, Seattle, Robert Irwin, installed 1983. Photograph by Robert Irwin for Jan Butterfield, *The art of light and space* (New York, 1993), p. 55.

Silver leaves and variegated bark within the grove provide a dramatic display of light and shadow. Used informally by students and faculty on their way about campus, the eucalyptus grove Irwin was interested in avoided the pretentious art event in the out-of-the-way place that becomes cluttered with mystique and ritual. Here one could focus on a "world rich in subtleties, changes in mood, and real events."<sup>13</sup> Irwin saw the result as a "sometimes bright, sometimes transient thin veil of violet color carried on stainless steel poles"<sup>14</sup> that were integrated in size and color with the straight smooth tree trunks of the eucalyptus grove. Irwin has noted that as the project's newness has worn off, the piece has "fused gently into the whole"<sup>15</sup> recalling Steven Holl's notion of 'site completion' as a 'poetics of revealing' the nature of the place.

More Recently in 1991, Irwin was asked to design the *Sentinel Plaza* in front of the New Police Building in Pasadena, California designed by Robert Stern. In collaboration with landscape architects, Irwin has gone beyond minimal material re-introduction to "full scale exterior

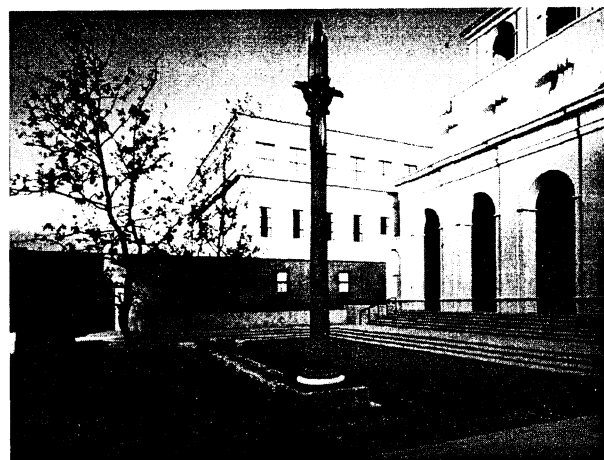


Fig. 6. *Sentinel Plaza*, New Police Building, Pasadena, California, Robert Irwin, 1991. Photograph by Robert Irwin for Jan Butterfield, *The art of light and space* (New York, 1993), p. 65.

embellishment.”<sup>16</sup> The color intervention is still present, with a violet color appliqué along the back wall of the courtyard serving as a backdrop for a thirty-six-foot high sculptural column and two sycamore trees that recall the primordial situation of the site. Water moves between the two sycamore trees and the column in a channel for a length that approximates the height of the column. Plantings on either side of the water mirror the color of the back wall. The surface of the plaza is of multicolored stones and stones with earth tone hues. A link between the old and new buildings, this new body of work explores the idea of circumstantial art within a wider range of materiality to produce a coherent synthesis of building and site.

Irwin has developed urban spaces at a scale significantly larger than *Sentinel Plaza* based upon his principals of a conditional, circumstantial art. Proposals for Battery Park City (1982), The University of Minnesota (1980-1983), Ohio State University (1978) and The City of New Orleans (1980) all act in concert with existing site phenomena. Attempting to activate a level of subliminal cognition within the participant of what is already present, Irwin’s proposals seek to enhance the every-day-life-world human activities and site phenomena that characterize the settings of our daily lives by coming to know the nature of our presence in those particular places.<sup>17</sup>

Challenging the programmatic assumptions of R/udat consultants and the traditional architectural charrette mode in his New Orleans (1980) *Aviary* project, Irwin found a client for his proposal in the Audubon Zoo. This “dead” urban space along Basin Street would have an active client to maintain it as well as generate an authentic, viable public program that challenged the R/udat team’s innocuous proposal for “spontaneous sculpture exhibitions”<sup>18</sup> that Irwin discovered to be untenable after meeting with local artist groups. Answering the mayor’s office call for a public focus capable of changing New Orleans’ image and providing a locus to an area of rather bland 1950’s-era hotels, the project would provide important urban exposure to the burgeoning, but situationally fringed, ornithological and botanical institution. Its audience would include area residents, visitors to the complex of hotels and “brown-bagging” office workers from nearby businesses.

Irwin had discovered the zoo in his frequent walks about the city. He carefully observed the sensual components of the urban setting, the grass levees, beautiful trees and rich flora that suggested a semi-tropical environment. The interior of the aviary was to shelter tiered habitats protected from the street by a twenty-foot high berm recalling the grass levees about the city. Waterfalls would provide the necessary water elements for the habitats as well as sound isolation from the city traffic. The exterior responded to the idea of an urban park in New Orleans. Oak trees along the street were preserved and the present walk was widened into a promenade with places “to sit, collect and watch”<sup>19</sup> as well as for various vendors and food service activities. A restaurant facility was cut into the grass levee with interior and exterior

dining areas. On the side of the aviary opposite the existing oak trees, Irwin created a corridor of deciduous golden rain trees. At one end of the “green corridor,” a proposed square shelters office workers and at the other, a set of steps cuts into the grass levee in front of the library. Seeking to generate the critical mass necessary to generate a “people place,” Irwin understood, that in addition to the project’s response to site phenomena, the project must be self supporting, self maintaining and self programmed before it could become the tourist attraction, teaching tool and ecological asset desired by the administration of the City of New Orleans.<sup>20</sup>

## TOWARDS AN AWARENESS OF SITE IN THE DESIGN STUDIO

Serving as a critical catalyst, the work of Robert Irwin has provided a mirror to reflect upon ongoing efforts to engender an awareness of site in the architectonic expression of the work produced in my design studios. Irwin’s design process of a site conditioned architecture, as discussed earlier, parallels in many respects the design process method I have been exploring in the studio with my students for some time. A form of “emotive” drawing has become one of the primary vehicles that allow students to record their perceptions of the site. Emotive drawing investigations focus on site dimensional criteria that so vividly impact our perception such as color, light and shadow, profile, silhouette and contour, materiality and texture.

Following the emotive drawings that are conducted on

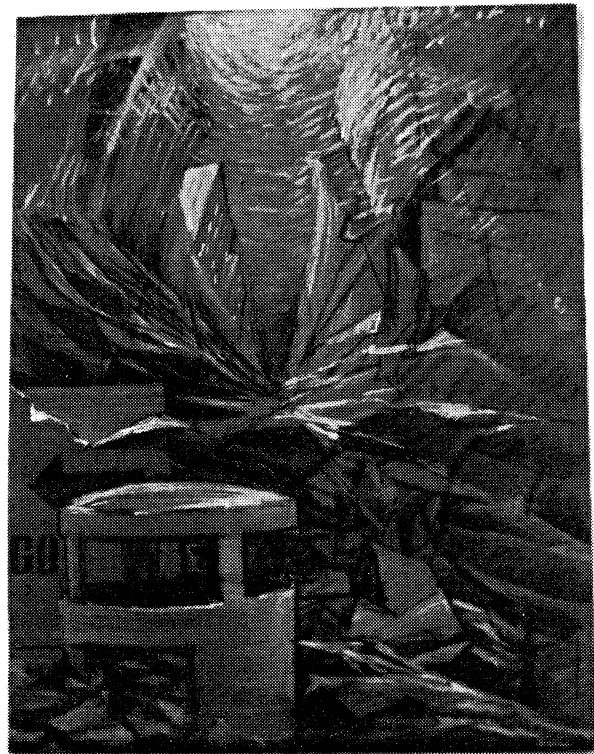


Fig. 7. Work in Progress Proposal for An Interpretive Gallery of Contemporary, Art, Cincinnati, Hui Wang, Miami University, 1996. Emotive Drawing. Photograph by the Author.

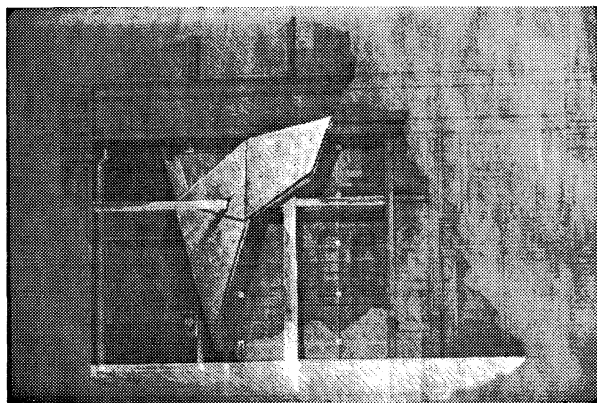


Fig. 8. Work in Progress Proposal for An Interpretive Gallery of Contemporary Art, Cincinnati, Hui Wang, Miami University, 1996. Facade Proposal. Photograph by the author.

multiple occasions without a predetermined focus or conclusion, the students are asked to create a folie or material construction that is intended to “capture” or “re-present” the site’s perceptual issues present in their area of investigation as seen in their emotive drawings. At this point in their investigation, the students encounter issues of materiality and construction that are at a scale that is accessible to them; where issues of detail and their connection to site phenomenon and the user can begin to emerge. The formal qualities of the folie or construction emerge primarily as an expression of the site phenomenon they engage as seen through the student’s unique genetic, cultural and personal histories. At this point in the design process, the program is introduced to discuss potential connections between it and the immediate site characteristics in the larger setting. Potential dualisms between program elements and site features are discussed, e.g., street and gallery circulation. Design intentions are tentatively fixed and reviewed on site with studio members, faculty, clients, guests and the community. With critical feedback in place, the students begin to refine their conceptual and tectonic assumptions with their understanding of site as a source of critical information. Tectonic refinements are subjected again to site phenomena as measured in presentation drawings that express the project’s connection to site characteristics and phenomena until a “fusion” between project and site occurs.

## CONCLUSION

Investigation into the various levels of site conditional art and a greater awareness of “phenomenal perception” in architectural and urban design has opened and expanded the design studio’s capacity to interpret the visual complexity that is a part of our everyday surroundings. Potentially, this point of view allows sites to be considered from a multidimensional point of view that can enhance our ability to discover new tectonic possibilities in the most difficult of contextual circumstances. In an age increasingly defined by the cybernetic and virtual, perceiving, recording and designing with an understanding of the visual, haptic, olfactory and

kinesthetic cues present on site serves as a preamble to the development of an architecture and urbanism whose tectonic qualities are in specific and direct response to the experience of the site. A phenomenally based architecture that explores the tension surrounding the perception of things in their contexts may heighten our ability to perceive beauty in all things and mediate the tendencies that alienate us from our built environment.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art* (Larkspur Landing: Lapis Press, 1985), 26-27. All of four levels of site referenced art as noted in the text refer to this selection. The subsequent site response levels for architecture are based upon Irwin’s response levels for ‘site’ art.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Frampton, “Richard Meier’s Museum für Kunsthandwerk” in Roland Burgard, Jörg Husman and Gunter Standke, eds. *Museum für Kunsthandwerk Frankfurt am Main* (Frankfurt am Main: City of Frankfurt Department of Architecture and Engineering, 1988.), 48.

I refer here to Frampton’s description of the *idée fixe* as noted in the above citation as: “a well known fact that architects tend to work in series and that irrespective of variations of specific program, something of the same imagery and even, on occasion, a similar parti emerges in one building after another, although in this metamorphosis, the initial idea is gradually transformed until it becomes exhausted and played out—an architectonic hypothesis to which the architect has nothing more to add.”

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Meier, “Architect’s Statement: Richard Meier” in Roland Burgard, Jörg Husman and Gunter Standke, eds. *Museum für Kunsthandwerk Frankfurt am Main* (Frankfurt am Main: City of Frankfurt Department of Architecture and Engineering, 1988.), 64. (Refer to diagrams on page 71)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 64. (Refer to diagrams 3,4 and 5 on pages 55 + 56)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>7</sup> See Terence Riley, *Light Construction* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1995.), 54-59. My observations reflect Riley’s comments and the photographic documentation of pages 56-59 that reveal a startling, complex form of transparency.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 54-56.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art* (Larkspur Landing: Lapis Press, 1985), 29.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 28-29. Irwin notes the familiarity of this idea as he claims that no one “invents a perceptual consciousness.” However, he claims: “The process of being and circumstance is our most basic perceptual (experiencing) action, something we already do at every moment in simply coming to know our presence, and we almost always do so without giving the wonder of it a second thought. Once again this ‘oversight’ does not speak to its insignificance; on the contrary, it speaks of its extraordinary sophistication. What I am advocating is simply elevating this process, this reasoning, to a role of importance that matches its innate sophistication.”

<sup>11</sup> Jan Butterfield, *The art of light and space* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993.), 50.

An earlier version of this quote appeared in “The Talk of the Town: Seeing,” *New Yorker*, September 30, 1985, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 54. Irwin elaborates that the entire nine square grid appears to dance as the fencing creates a moving moiré pattern.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art* (Larkspur Landing: Lapis Press, 1985), 77. In

addition to being a location frequented by faculty and students, Irwin notes that the grove is also a habitat to migrating monarch butterflies that fill the eucalyptus trees with their color and movement.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 78. The “fusion” occurs in the dualism of blue-violet screen to tree canopy, steel poles to eucalyptus trunks and existing tree canopy color to the blue-violet color of the ground cover.

<sup>16</sup> Jan Butterfield, *The art of light and space* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993.), 64.

<sup>17</sup> See Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art* (Larkspur Landing: Lapis Press, 1985), 28-29.

for an account of *Being and circumstance* as an operative frame of reference for phenomenal art activity.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 121. Irwin likened the spontaneous sculptural exhibition proposal that was based upon ‘hoped for’ users to “the risk of throwing your own birthday party and having no one show up.”

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 122. Irwin noted problems that stemmed from a lack of “ownership” in well-known New Orleans public spaces such as Charles Moore’s *Piazza d’Italia* and the Louis Armstrong Park projects both only several blocks from the Basin Street *Aviary* site. Lack of a specific “client” for these public spaces resulted in continual funding, programming and maintenance problems that undermined their long-term viability.