

# The Status of the Non-Place Object

CHARLES RUDOLPH  
Georgia Institute of Technology

*Science manipulates things and gives up living in them. It makes its own limited models of things; operating upon these indices or variables to effect whatever transformations are permitted by their definition, it comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals. Science is and always has been that admirably active, ingenious, and bold way of thinking whose fundamental bias is to treat everything as though it were an object-in-general – as though it meant nothing to us and yet was predestined for our own use.*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*,  
(Northwestern Univ. Press, 1964, p.159.)

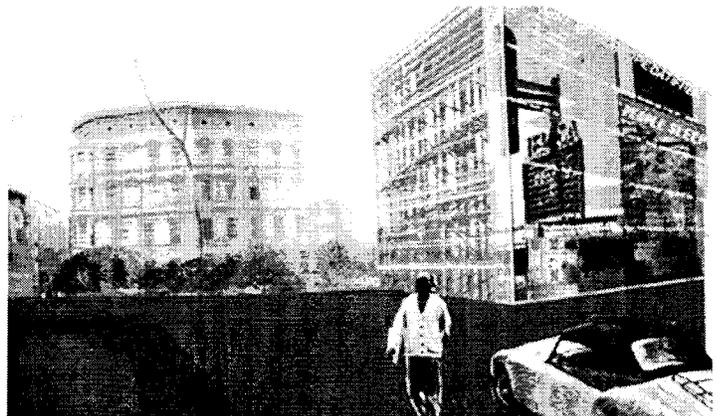
How to define “non-place object”, in relation to architecture? Is it something “not lived in”: something that resists the Heideggerian “to dwell”? Is it a utilitarian “object-in-general”, without specific or memorable qualities (but everything has specific qualities!)? Is the non-place object made more – or less, real by virtue of its “lack of place”? Is the non-place made more real by virtue of the object’s existence?

The word “object” carries with it associations that are ideal and material, conceptual and practical, mysterious and mundane. The object – including the architectural object, is by definition separate and distinguishable: capable of arousing emotion. It is something of which we are aware. Non-place is a function of the material and temporal: it literally IS speed-plus-space, yet it can be something of which we are definitely not aware. We move through non-space daily. Non-place objects are sometimes a result of design and sometimes they are created by erasures or additions that allow the object to “slip into space” (Robert Morris the artist said this). The ubiquity of non-place objects makes them appealing, but it does not explain them.

The question of the *status* of the non-place object suggests that its *conditions* are important relative to other objects/conditions. In the context of contemporary architectural practice, where the *non-place object* is “alone” as both cause and effect, a “strong” reading of place or object cannot be re-constructed. The conditions of contingency and weakness must, as if by default, be the provisional strategy of architecture until the larger territories which spawn the non-place can be made legible as



Atelier MvdRohe. Bank and Department Store.  
Hindenburgplatz, Stuttgart: photomontage 1928



Atelier Jean Nouvel. Berlin Intervention. Photomontage, 1990.

either figures or textures. This issue is as existential as it is spatial and environmental.

The legibility of non-place objects and their potential for relations with other objects, resides in our being able to *live in them*. City-making as a form of “filling up” the temporal abstractions of non-place must involve a new appraisal of the *objects-in-general*.

## MAN / OBJECTS / STATUS

The title for the paper was suggested by the title of Kenneth Frampton’s 1982 essay, “The Status of Man and the Status of his Objects: A Reading of the Human Condition” (Modern Architecture and the Critical Present, AD special issue no. 7/8). This essay, while not including a discussion of architecture *per se*, is a reminder to architectural culture about the perils of relinquishing the “worldliness” of man-made artifice in the face of a repressive and ever-expanding “wordlessness” rooted in man’s production-for-consumption rationalizations. The essay sketches a position fundamentally critical of the globalizing tendencies of modernity, including the culture industry, by highlighting opposing values: durability and impermanence, place and transience, art and kitsch.

Using Hannah Arendt’s “The Human Condition” (1958) to frame his view, Frampton sees that instrumental productivity has lost its “natural” balance in privacy, the realm that it created for leisure and consumption. Only the world-building of the private realm makes possible, in Frampton’s (following Arendt’s) view, the construction of a public realm “where men live so close together that the potentialities of action are always present” and, “can power remain with them”. This “power” stands to preserve, and create, cities as *related things*. This manifestation of both worldly production and public “being” is of course Arendt’s famous “space of appearance”.

From his perspective 20 years ago, Frampton views the rejection of artifice (a product of measured work) in favor of the fabrication process itself (labor without measure or criteria) as the root cause of architecture’s marginalization. His description of these circumstances includes a potent, and all-too-familiar, description of non-place:

*The consequence . . . for contemporary architecture is as distressing as it is universal. Elevated on freeways or pedestrian decks or alternatively sequestered behind security fences, we are caused to traverse large areas of abstract, inaccessible urban space that can be neither appropriated nor adequately maintained. In a similar way we are confronted by piazzas whose hypothetical public status is vitiated by the vacuousness of context, or alternatively we are conducted down streets evacuated of all public life by the circulatory demands of traffic. We pass across thresh-*

*olds whose public-representative nature has been suppressed or we enter foyers which have been arranged or lit in such a manner as to defeat the act of public promenade. Alternatively, we are caused to depart from airports whose processal function defies the ritual of leave-taking. In each instance our value-free commodity culture engenders an equivalency wherein museums are rendered as oil refineries and laboratories acquire a monumental form. By a similar token public restaurants come to be rudely incarcerated in basements, while schools find themselves arbitrarily encased within the perimeters of windowless warehouses. In each case a ruthless cultural reduction masks itself by the rhetoric of kitsch or by the celebration of technique as an end in itself. (Collected Essays: Labour, Work, Architecture. P. 36)*

It is entirely possible to consider the objects of today as being the same that served Frampton’s critique, having only been recycled or re-constituted by advanced societal processes. The term non-place object, therefore, implies acceleration beyond this earlier status. Perhaps you ask “what, then, is the status of non-place man”? Has there been a parallel acceleration of our “homeless” man? Has there occurred some transformation of his *vita activa* that might provide him new powers to reify his works? Could Hannah Arendt’s *homo faber*, our metaphorical architect, reappear in the present to construct a new home in the non-place realm?

“For architecture at least”, writes Frampton, to end the essay, “the relevance of *The Human Condition* resides in this – in its formation of that political reciprocity that must of necessity obtain, for good or ill, between the status of man and the status of his objects.”

## NON-PLACE: “NEVER LOOK EMPTY, NEVER FEEL FULL”

At the mention of the term *non-place*, images of buildings, projects, and landscapes immediately spring to mind, but these are very disparate images: urban fragment or ruin, suburban big-box, airport cocktail lounge, one-off architectural sculpture, industrial park, highway bridge, maybe a piece of lonesome “public art”. Some of these images suggest self-containment or autonomy, some interiority, some object-hood, others the relationships among things. As these images begin to cycle through, nothing much accumulates; certainly nothing at the level of architectural “meaning”. As we think of non-place our blurred memories might be accompanied by sensations of the transit-zone and possibly of the time of day or some destination. We were probably behind the wheel. The space of the “non-place”, to use a 1960’s saying by the British architect Cedric Price, “never looks empty, never feels full”. What does this jingle mean for the status of “non-place architecture”?

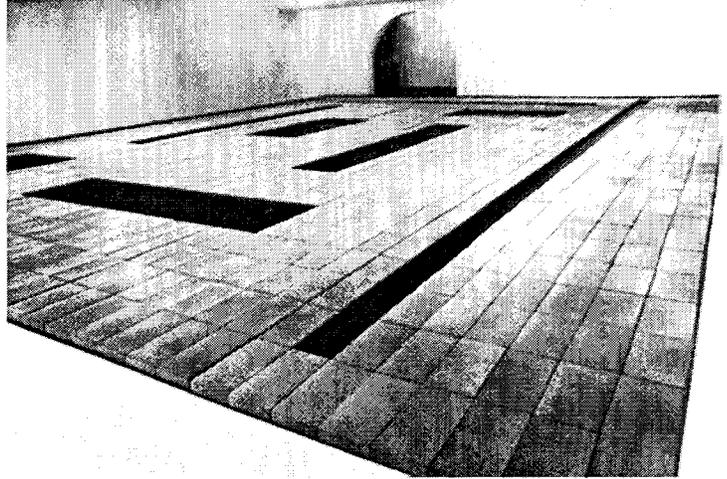


South London public housing under construction  
(Source: M. Pawley, Terminal Architecture, 1998)

The term *non-place* is commonly associated with those architectural or environmental conditions which, regardless of scale, locale, or the particulars of function, seem indifferent to their own reality and circumstance and to the reality and circumstance of those who experience them. The conditions of non-place can be seen, on the one hand, as representing the relativism of modern planning and its disengagement from the physical or experiential realms. On the other hand, non-place might be explained simply as inevitable global-capitalist by-product or detritus; the wake from the boat, as it were. A surrealist (such as De Chirico) might offer that non-place is that space which has coagulated from the shards and memories of other places and subjectivities. A philosopher/artist (such as the late Robert Smithson) might characterize a non-place as an experience of entropic time; an episode of the metaphysical "re-wind" (as described by "weak" philosopher Gianni Vattimo). Are any of these descriptions, having now veered into the aesthetic margins, approaching a REALISM of the non-place? Maybe in some sort of combination. In any case, non-place is our "place" and its materials are as real and tangible as anything else.

What media or method might best describe the *real* material of the non-place? Could it be film or architecture or some-other-kind-of-art? We know that, even though they may never look empty or feel full, non-places are a repository of desires, fears, longings and other traces of the subject. Whether they exist as spaces created of political neglect, covert political power, or private paranoia, the non-place offers the experience of duration as its material substrate. This is its base reality and the reality which is negotiated with the object-as-subject.

The French anthropologist Marc Auge has popularized non-place as a condition acutely experienced by the traveler-in-waiting. In this kind of non-place, there is a hyper-awareness of time that can stimulate increased mental activity centered on projecting one beyond the non-place. Psychologically, non-



Carl Andre, *Eight Cuts*, Dwan Gallery, LA 1967

place can be more complex than traditionally "public" space. The spatial forms of non-place do not engender spontaneous or intuitive forms of interaction. Subjectivities may split and splinter rather than concentrate interactively where speed is desirable, desires are suppressed, and duration excruciating. There can be an exhilarating alternative, can't there?

Non-Place presents itself first as *surface*. The heterogeneous mixture of material, form, signage, light, and movement creates flatness without stasis or exact orientation. Within non-place, the materials: landscape and building, are horizontal and vertical vectors of duration – not enclosure. Non-place represents the condition of speed relations. All the space-fragments of development, architecture, non-planning and abandonment have their own speeds or "ratios of duration".

#### ARCHITECTURE AND THE NON-PLACE OBJECT: ART TRACK

*Today's landscape hardly constitutes a background into which the architectural object might be thought of inserting, or integrating, or infusing itself. Powerful processes of what Gilles Deleuze has called deterritorialization situate today's architectural objects in non-places, in non-landscapes. Contemporary architectures make their appearance ex abrupto, taking us by surprise. Their presence is not connected to a place. Our reception of them is almost always mediated or mediatized by photographic, video, or computerized images, by possible views, and the disconnection between the built and what goes on around it. It might almost be said that we are now at the opposite pole from the picturesque integration of the fifties, were it not for the fact that integration and estrangement must be considered as two faces of the same problematic coin. The fifties' pantheistic fusion with landscape and today's isolated stupor of the object both serve to demonstrate that the*

*architectural object no longer establishes a stable and hierarchical relationship between itself and its surroundings. Quite the opposite: the mediated-in both senses of the term-condition of architecture leads it into a relationship with its surroundings, which is to say with the world, that is always adventitious, improper, extrinsic. An organicist pantheism has given way to a rootless atheism. In both these situations, architecture cannot conceal the depth of its wound: the absence of a felicitous relationship with the territory, with nature, and with life.*

Ignasi de Sola Morales, *Differences*, MIT Press, 1996, p. 22

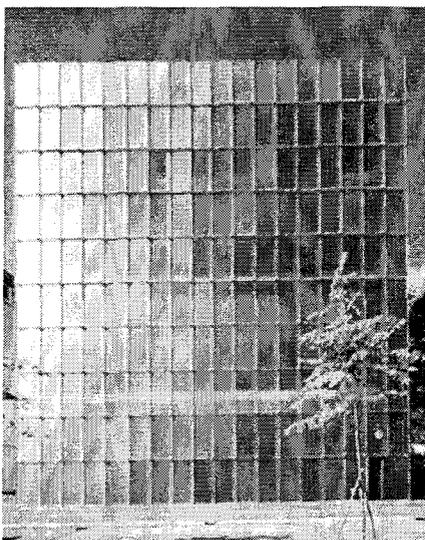
One could hardly be more pessimistic about the difficulties of perpetuating traditional or secular-humanistic architectural values in the context of non-place. In order to strive for a new political reciprocity between man and his objects, e.g. a new set of conditions which could give rise to Arendt's "space of appearance", one has to first take into account Sola Morales' anguished lament before considering alternatives. Given the caveat that "men's proximity to other men" to allow for "power to remain with them" can be resolved digitally and electronically, without recourse to political advocacy, we may proceed with our strategizing. What are immediately apparent from the passage above are the terms used and their alignment with art practice, particularly sculpture. "Inserting", "integrating", "infusing" are given with regards to the "background" (field). The object's "presence" is not tied to place. It cannot be "received" by the subject due to the distractions of "mediation". "Integration" and "estrangement" are, for Morales, the double-sided coin of the non-place object. No "stable and hierarchical" relationship exists between architectural object and landscape: only "today's isolated stupor of the object".

It may be that Sola Morales is railing against a landscape of commercial speculation and poorly designed buildings which

are blighting not just his beloved Catalonia but the globe. It might likewise be that he is attacking an approach to the non-place architectural dilemma which involves the appropriation of art practices – namely minimal art. The "stupor of the object" is a fascinating image: a drunken, sullen, alienated building, made "stupid" by its surroundings (?).

Consider, however, the object's setting (amidst fellow objects) as if the non-place landscape were an art gallery and the object a minimalist piece. Is the "stupor", then, a quality of integration or estrangement? Can the non-place object create relationships at the urban scale that create the same phenomenological dynamics as "literalist" sculptural objects in a gallery? The minimal piece, we must remember, having emptied itself – and the gallery, of all illusionist or pictorial space, begins a process of "filling up" the gallery with the viewer's bodily space. This mode of temporality, which became critic Michael Fried's disqualifying "theatricality" in the essay "Art and Objecthood" (1967) was a critical hinge for art practice. Although architectural "minimalism" is not in any sense a new phenomenon, its increasing adaptation and evolution as a conscious non-place strategy – at least since 1990, warrants attention.

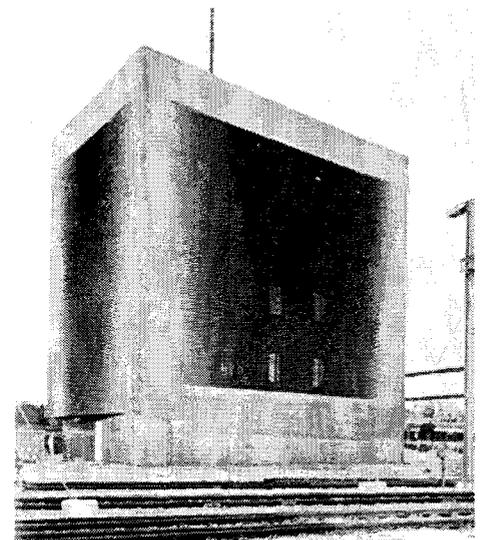
The strategy of architecture-as-art, with respect to the non-place object problem, has many notable examples: the work of Herzog and De Meuron, perhaps being the most obvious, and the most overt in its dedication to surface as a guarantor of object-hood. The firm's highly publicized Central Signal Box 4, Auf dem Wolf, Basel, 1994-7, comes as close to rendering architectural the effects of minimal sculpture as any project – with the possible exception of Austrian architect Peter Zumthor's Kunsthalle, Bregenz, Austria, 1991-6. Both projects are mute, uninflected, exquisitely tailored objects, which stand "in the round", with no outward revealing of an interior realm.



Peter Zumthor, Kunsthalle 1991-6



Dominique Perrault, Hotel Industrielle 1985-90



Herzog + DeMeuron, Signal Box 1994-7

The level of abstraction of the architectural object, which depends ultimately upon either the technological sophistication of its cladding, or the craftsmanship of lesser materials, determines to a large degree the “negative force” of the non-place (minimal) object. Scale and proportion, detailing of ground and sky conditions, the resolution of penetrations into, or deviations within, the membrane for openings are no less critical, and these issues – joyously, distinguish the architectural object from the distribution warehouse and the Wal-Mart.

The French architects Dominique Perrault and Jean Nouvel are often included in round-ups of global architectural minimalists. Perrault’s Hotel Industriel Berlier, Paris, 1985-90, which houses his offices, was one of the earliest and most appropriate examples of a directed response to non-place utilizing a minimalist techné: “pioneering” as it did on a vacated industrial and railroad site within the redeveloping 13th arrondissement.

Judging from works which are very diverse in terms of scales, programs and sites, the Atelier Jean Nouvel does not pursue any consistent program of architectural “literalism” and departs significantly from the Swiss/German minimalists in terms of an attitude toward surface. Nouvel is passionate about the ambiguous building skin, the concrete-yet-dissolving phenomena of architectural surface. Nouvel’s buildings melt and meld into the city, the events of the program, nature, etc. The consistent integration of visual media technologies into his projects, whether as advertising, signage, or pure optics, bears this out with force.

His latest works aggressively approach the cinematic, relying more upon architectural “scaffolding” (as ephemeral in the project images as film sets) which are covered over and hidden by programmes. The projects of Nouvel may not confront the

non-place directly as objects, but there is evidence of an aesthetic influence, according to Olivier Boissier:

*His vision is dynamic. Speed and movement, naturally, are the intrinsic components. It is in this respect that Nouvel has discovered the equivalent to his own way of seeing things in that of film-makers: panoramic views, zooms, framing shots, reverse shots, wide-and-short-angle shots, are all included in his buildings as architectural features, in an explicit complicity with a lucid, tender and modern vision of urban jungles, derelict wastelands, the anonymous desolation of the undersides of motorways and the ashen flavour of parking lots captured in the films of his friend, Berliner Wim Wenders.*

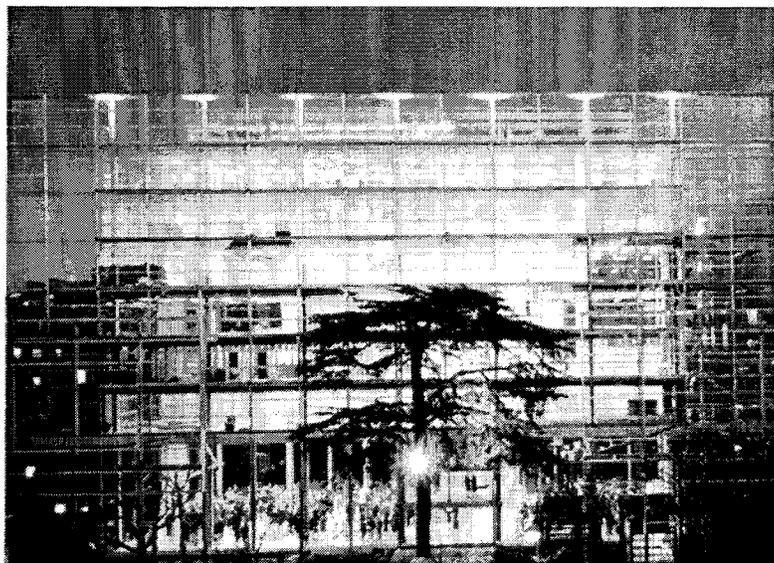
O. Boissier, *Jean Nouvel*, Editions Terrail, Paris, 1996, p.14.

Is non-place more a cinematic “site” than an architectural one? As opposed to architecture-as-sculpture, the architecture-as-cinema approach must rely upon the mechanics (illusion) of visual/architectural ephemera to achieve the necessary effects of integration or estrangement. This distinction, between the “stupor of the object”: inert, mute, thick with nothing, and the object-as-TV-screen, is vital; it marks a splitting into either architecture/art (sculpture) or architecture/technique (engineering). The manipulation / exploitation of technique must operate at a high level in both, as recent works attest. In any event, despite the sophistication of the objects themselves, we must ask: does architecture which is inserted or embedded in the non-place teach us about non-place conditions? Are these objects exemplary enough to breed others that might cultivate a new kind of place? Or, are we simply enjoying a Beckett-like turn of nihilist theatre?



Sony Jumbotron at Seville Expo '92

Source: M.Pawley



Atelier Jean Nouvel, Fondation Cartier, Paris 1991-95

To return to the issue raised by Kenneth Frampton's "The Status of Man and the Status of His Objects", which subjects our architectural culture to the lens of Hannah Arendt's critique of production. Are our objects, in the end "wordly"? Are they suitable for reification, and are we capable of "living in them" (Merleau-Ponty, page one)? If our objects are in the end "world-less", then it matters little what disciplinary track we switch onto. It needs to be mentioned here that Frampton took the Swiss/German minimalists to task in an essay titled "Minimal Moralia" which was first published in *Seroope*, Cambridge Architectural Journal, no.9, 1997. He saw in the work that was gathering world-wide attention an abandonment of the architect's *métier* in favor of the "hallucinatory surface effects of the mediatic world", and "the indifference of the value-free sign or its aestheticized equivalent". Only Peter Zumthor (the eldest of them all) was credited, within his artistic practice, of "pursuing single-mindedly the presence of things in an ontological sense." In Frampton's eyes, the sin committed by the young architect/artists was basically one of existential neglect: a forfeiting of the struggles and joys involved in world-building. Perhaps what troubled Frampton even more than this was that he could see a failure to simply *resist*?

Included in the "Minimal Moralia" article is the following passage which speaks clearly to Frampton's concerns for architecture's lack of disciplinary commitment:

*... As far as the relation between art and architecture is concerned, even though quite different considerations would be necessary here, we seem to be living in a colossal paradox. While many contemporary architects look to the world of art for material and inspiration to solve problems within their own discipline, there are just as many artists who look, conversely, to the sphere of architecture—a realist art if ever there was one—for the realism which they can't find any more in their own craft. Everything would be fine, were it not for the fact that the artists have turned to architecture at a time when realism is no longer appropriate to it, and architects have turned to art at a time when the latter refuses to converse with terms like aesthetics or creativity. The paradox is that both the artists and the architects seek solutions to the problems in disciplines that have by now changed and which can only offer a parody of themselves . . .*

Niccola di Battista, *The Artist's Knowledge, Domus*, no. 773, July/August 1995, p.77

## CONCLUSION

The issue of designing buildings for the non-place realm is one that questions the basic assumption that architecture is; or remains, central to any concept of "place-making". The reality of non-place (its ever-presence) has forced the architectural project into a position which seemingly demands a strategy of extremes. Extreme abstraction and neutrality of form, extreme fragmentation and sculptural effect, extreme ephemeralization via media technologies, to name three current approaches to imposing or "infusing" objects into non-place space. It has become difficult for architecture; for its normative objects specifically (not necessarily its *monuments*), to present themselves as distinct material and temporal "events" within the non-place *flux and flow*.

The buildings alluded to in this essay are representative of the special case: they are the celebrated exceptions which point to the extremes of practice (architecture-as-art, or architecture-as-engineering (as-media)). What might be an exploration still open to us is the possibility of a strategy which intensifies the inertia of the architectural object—its radical slowness and real-time effects. This is no doubt the conservative view, but it is possible for small projects of landscape and/or buildings to simply make of themselves clear territorial markings and boundaries. Contemporary construction, as semantically impoverished as it is with respect to ordinary building and landscape, can still be directed towards the clear marking of territories and limits. Even the non-place object can aspire to some kind of poetry within the limits of its "page."

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baird, George. *The Space of Appearance*. MIT Press, Cambridge/London, 1995.
- Boissier, Olivier. *Jean Nouvel*. Editions Terrail, Paris, 1996
- Foster, Hal. *The Crux of Minimalism*. The Return of the Real. MIT Press, Cambridge, 1996.
- Frampton, Kenneth. *The Status of Man and the Status of His Objects*. Labour, Work and Architecture: Collected Essays on Architecture and Design. Phaidon Press, London, 2002
- Frampton, Kenneth. *Minimal Moralia*. Labour, Work and Architecture: Collected Essays. Phaidon, London, 2002.
- Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood*. Artforum (June 1967)
- Ibelings, Hans. *Supermodernism: Architecture in the Age of Globalization*. NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, 1998.
- Krause, Rosalind. *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1977.
- Pawley, Martin. *Terminal Architecture*. Reaktion Books Ltd., London, 1998.
- Sola-Morales, Ignasi de. *Weak Architecture*. Differences: Topographies of Contemporary Architecture. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997
- Vattimo, Gianni. *The End of Modernity*. Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, Baltimore, 1988