Forming Expressions:
Architecture, Abstract Reality and Surrealism

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INTRODUCTION: MODERN ARCHITECTURE AND THE PROBLEM OF MEANING

The un-grounding of absolute values of beauty (introduced most emphatically by Claude Perrault's positive/arbitrary dyad) has haunted Western architecture since the eighteenth century.[1] Caprice, unleashed from the controlling reason of taste, challenges architects' abilities to render the human realm comprehensible. Style battles inherited from the latter-half of the nineteenth century often appear to provide the only avenue of creativity. But this rarely results in architectural comprehensibility or buildings capable of touching emotion. In short, the problem of a meaningful architecture resists the ability of genius alone to resolve it, especially outside of the certainties universal values of beauty or taste once provided. Nevertheless, architects dream of places that stir the passions of the individuals and groups inhabiting them.

As an alternative, Surrealism's program for rendering the ordinary *extraordinary* and Piet Mondrian's project for revealing the expressive potential of reality through abstraction, offered modern architecture a method early on (and continue to) for collapsing the alienating distance between form and content. Significantly, both facilitate a making of form as content through a direct presentation of meaning, which can become comprehensible at the moment of perception, albeit often at a preconscious level. Throughout the twentieth century, the most compelling works of architecture appear to have drawn upon the insights of Mondrian and Surrealists, which is demonstrated by a capacity to invent evocative environments in an epoch of mass culture and production.

Of the two predominant kinds of modernity, modern architecture has done a better job embodying one rather than the other: the first is associated with progress as an end in itself, characterized by a reduction of cultural life in favor of economy and efficiency driven by an extreme rationalism. Modernity of this sort arises alongside modern techno-science.[2] The other modernity is associated with developments during the latter half of the nineteenth century, especially the *discovery* of an unconscious by Freud, which facilitated developments in modern art; in this instance, Surrealist thought and practice. Awareness of an unconscious suggests that the divide between reason and dreams might be collapsible. An unconscious, Surrealism and collapse between rational waking thought and the wonder of dreams, are now as associable with the poetics of modernity as with philosophical post-modernist desires to recuperate holism (especially as elaborated on by G. Vattimo).[3] These two *modernities* struggle for dominance. The first is reductive and is motivated by cost-cutting dreams of total organization, the second is inspired by ideas of richness that turn on a synthesis capable of domesticating the modern world and its trappings by bringing these within the domain of humanism. A domesticated modernity makes possible a setting where the machine, machine production, and scientific reason could be embraced as human creations (even to the extent of revealing their wonder). Made wonderful, these things might not be feared as torments heralding from abstract and anonymous forces above.

Modern architecture's capacity for meaning is a real possibility demonstrated by works such as Le Corbusier's La Tourette, Louis I. Kahn's Salk Institute, and Aldo van Eyck's Amsterdam Orphanage. Surrealist theory and Mondrian's ideas on *abstract reality* unveils just how such works could achieve their accomplishment. All three structures were realized at a time when the most abstract qualities of modern architecture came to be institutionalized as appropriate for imaging corporate

capitalism's globalization. The present discussion gains in relevance as the incapacity of stylistic Post-Modern architecture to deliver on its promises of a more comprehensible, thus humane, environment comes into sharper focus.

The three late-modern works examined here were constructed between 1957 and 1965. The unique symbolic program character of each (a convent, a research institute, and an orphanage) offers a sharpened expression of varied approaches with a shared aim: to make the apparent banalities of modern construction technique poignant by rendering the ordinary extraordinary. Each complex houses functions lending themselves to evocative expression. Yet the real achievement of these architects is the demonstrated capacity for doing so much with relatively ordinary elements, materials, and methods of construction, which is the most obvious point of intersection with Surrealism and the ideas of Mondrian.

Its capture as an International Style decisively dissociated modern architecture from its radical origins. In many important ways, the three structures under review recuperate the promise of early modern architecture at the moment when orthodox modern architecture became questionable. Not to press the point too much, but what the poetics of these three structures share derives from a demonstrated ability to view the ordinary elements of building *imaginatively* thus avoiding the limitations of a prosaic outlook conditioned by the construction industry or the marketplace. The aim of the current discussion is to suggest that *another* modern architecture, capable of exceptional richness, is a real possibility only tentatively entered upon and it is as indebted to the past as to early twentieth-century theories of art, such as Breton and Mondrian elaborated.

END OF A NEW BEGINNING

The tragedy of World War I inspired a turn from negation of existing conditions toward affirmation of an alternative way of being modern.[4] With this, Dadaists transformed to Surrealists. But if the First World War inspired rejection of negation as well as revealing the limits of extreme reason taken to absurdity, the Second World War showed the extreme danger of techno-science unhinged from any ethical restraint. Consequently, at its zenith, positivist overconfidence — *the modern* — revealed its limitations with tragic clarity. At this very moment, orthodox Modern Architecture came into its own as the official style of business and government alike.

By the end of the Second World War, the modern project deriving from nineteenth-century positivism — early on revealed in the diaphanous haze of Paxton's modularized Crystal Palace assembly, reaching its apex in mechanized warfare (most emphatically in atomic bombs, blitzkriegs, and death camps) — was irreparably cracked. Instrumentalized reason, the logic of positivist social science, and reality disciplined by economy and efficiency could no longer pretend to contain the full spectrum of human desire. Thus, modern architecture and the logic of positivist modernism were revealed, at the moment of apotheosis, to be inadequate. In light of this, it is not surprising that the best architects of the 1950s appealed to dreams, fantasies, fairy tales, the past, other cultures, and to an alternative, maybe authentic, modernity, represented less by techno-science than by the achievements of earlier twentieth-century artists, and figures including Marx, Freud, and Einstein.

THE MISCHIEVOUS ANALOGY: ARCHITECTURE AND PAINTING

John Summerson elaborated on how architecture freed itself from the styles in his essay ''The Mischievous Analogy,''[5] and he showed in the essay ''Architecture, Painting, and Le Corbusier,''[6] how Le Corbusier transformed the logic of modernist abstract painting into the basis of an architecture strange enough to make it wonderful, yet comprehensible enough to make it usable. Yet, the limitations of Summerson's argument, in both essays, render them potentially confusing in terms of architectural invention. In ''The Mischievous Analogy,'' he argues that architecture could only become modern once it gave up attempting to analogize past styles. While correct in showing how architecture loosed the grip of the styles, his rejection of analogy seems too absolute, extending to prohibition against considering how architecture can be informed from beyond the discipline, which obscures how, though it has its own ways of thinking and doing, architecture *never* comes entirely from within itself. And although architecture can only reasonably address architectural concerns, it cannot totally free itself from being a setting for social life (at all scales). Unfortunately, Summerson's essay might leave one to think that analogy itself, and not the analogizing of historical styles, is the problem. Yet, analogy seems to be a means to rendering abstract architecture meaningful, thus comprehensible.

In ''Architecture, Painting, and Le Corbusier,'' Summerson accurately identified Le Corbusier's debt to modern abstract painting, but he got bogged down in a

formalist — conventionally compare and contrast — reading. For example, he suggests that Le Corbusier's architecture is like Picasso's Cubist work because it *looks* like it, which seems to return the problem back to one of representation. What, though, if Le Corbusier's architecture shows the influence of modern art movements (more likely Surrealism than Cubism) not in terms of appearance but in terms of thought, that is, on a *theoretical*, rather than a *representational* level? If this is the case, then it would be possible not only to expose the relation of twentieth-century architecture to modern art movements, representing an *authentic modernity* and freed from nineteenth-century positivism by way of poetic reason, but also to show how such an understanding reveals the possibility of an abstract architecture that is as free of the styles as it is full of meaning. It is in this regard that André Breton's Surrealist theory and Mondrian's theory of *abstract reality* reveal a method by which modern architects could (and have) rendered modernity and abstraction comprehensible.

Abstraction may be the great achievement of modern art, but abstraction does not free art from content or meaning, rather it frees art from representation. In architecture, this plays out as the potential for architects to finally be free, at least potentially, of the style obsession that obtained (in one form or another) since the end of the Baroque. An abstract architecture presents a number of problems. If its autonomy from everyday life is too complete, it will be incomprehensible. If it is weakly abstract, it will constantly encourage comparison to previous styles, or a search for represented content. For an abstract modern architecture to be both free of style obsession and to have content it must operate through reference or analogy. Its elements will need to carry a charge comprehensible at the moment of perception, even if only vaguely so, capabilities modeled for architecture by Surrealism and Mondrian.

ABSTRACT REALITY AND SURREALISM

Breton's conception of Surrealism and Mondrian's idea of Abstract Reality share an early twentieth century preoccupation with reconciliation.[7] For Breton it would be a reconciliation of waking reality with dreams; for Modrian it would be a reconciliation of the mind-matter dualism. The bringing together of apparent opposites that both shared was expressed differently but revealed a shared desire for an augmented reality (and consciousness) that could redeem individuals from the leveling excesses of nineteenth-century materialism. If Breton sought the roots of creative invention in the access dreams give to unconsciousness, Mondrian sought to unveil primordial relationships, which he argued form the basis of all meaning that naturalism, according to him, conceals. Both conceptions of reconciliation harbor great consequences for architecture, already provisionally explored in the strongest modern work. In a way, Mondrian's project for abstraction as a form of revelation helps to release the Surrealist project from interpretations stuck on its most provocative imagery. For abstract reality to be comprehensible, access to unconscious perception at the moment of experience must be at least entertained as a real possibility.

According to Mondrian, abstraction is an un-veiling of relationships that carry a charge, which naturalism (representation) either veils or confuses. Repose, for example, is the outcome of such relationships; it can be expressed by a flat land, a broad horizon in the distance, with the disc of the moon high above — all abstracted by the fall of night. Expression of repose purged of all its representational (naturalistic) appearances can still convey the outcome of repose, which is a condition of peacefulness and tranquility. If this is correct, the beauty — sense of balanced calm — of a beach with the ocean beyond and a bright big moon above is as much the outcome of charms specific to a particular beach under unique circumstances as it is a direct apprehension of meaning at the moment when the relationship between the flat swath, broad horizon, and illuminated disk above — which emphasizes the counterpoint of the first two — is experienced. In abstraction, the trick is to purge the assemblage of its representational naturalism without losing its referential content. Ultimately, it is not what it *looks* like but rather what it *feels* like. If such a statement sounds woolly, it is because rationality overvalues what is seen, thus documentable, and ultimately countable. The felt of emotional states resists quantification thus evading concretization through verbalization or recording. But that does not make emotion any less real than its quantifiable counterpart. The *realness* of felt experience suggests that the barely conscious intangible, which resists explicit expression, is more fully the architect's occupation than simply the measurable, or re-presentable — especially if touching emotion is a sensible aim.

Mondrian's consideration of repose offers a convenient way to nudge abstract reality towards architecture: for example, the architectural correlate of repose is horizontality. The very word repose carries with it the idea of horizontality: *to lie or lay something at rest*. Consequently, a setting of (or for) rest, that is, a place that analogizes rest, would emphasize horizontality over other arrangements, especially verticality. But horizon-

tality in relationship with verticality, depending on the proportion of each to the other, actually increases the experience of repose through counterpoint. Horizontal also carries with it horizon, the implication of which is a limit where earth and sky meet, but also the sky-dome itself, defined at its lower limit by an apparent plane — the ground or earth. Building also participates in this drama by constantly attempting to reconcile the horizontal and vertical in terms of an upward thrust carrying a potentially crushing load, or through the preparation of a horizontal building platform ready to receive and support vertical elements of construction. Kenneth Frampton suggests that this is the drama of the tectonic, which is ultimately a poem of construction revolving around the downward pull of earth and the upward thrust of sky.[8]

In all its forms, the drama of gravity and resistance of it analogizes bodily experience of rest, play, work, and even death. With this in mind, it is possible to argue that emotional states are traceable to bodily states. For example, a body at rest on a bed (or on some correlate to a bed, such as a rug or a beach) appears to best communicate the condition of repose, which expresses peacefulness or tranquility that horizontality conveys. Repose is comprehensible at the moment of its perception precisely because rest (or sleep) is so crucial for emotional and physical well-being. Rest is always in mind, sleep is when the day is shaken off and dreams intrude upon consciousness. To summarize: abstraction reveals the relationships naturalism conceals. It also reveals the outcome of those relationships. More accurately, it analogizes them. In doing this, abstraction can overcome representation without a loss of content. A content that communicates through reference rather than representation is *experienced* rather than *read*. If Mondrian's theory of *abstract reality* overcomes representation, Surrealist theory offers a pathway to reclaiming awareness of the content abstraction can harbor, especially by validating the reason of dreams, which is associative.

MEANING AND BUILDING. OR, HOW TO ENRICH MODERN ARCHITECTURE

By the latter half of the 1950s, the attempt by architects to align themselves with positivist social scientists and the methods of the hard sciences resulted in a reduced environment increasingly incomprehensible to the actual inhabitants of buildings. Reflection on the failure of a scientism applied to architecture is in no way a call for architects to beat a path back to the *styles*; rather, it is a challenge to conventional ideas about the built environment. Orthodox Modern Architecture concerned itself

primarily with problems of quantity, planning, economy, computerization, and especially prefabrication, as well as with the design of functional cities and minimum dwellings.[9] Clearly, the excesses of modernist thought shows that the emotional potential of architecture is easily overwhelmed by attempts to render design a fully rationalized and quantified process.

Because decisions are never made on rational grounds alone, concern with emotional criteria, the qualitative and the intangible (such as Mondrian's and Surrealist theory give access to) is the *real*/preoccupation of architects. Broadly rendered, individuals seek two things: something which locates them in their own time, and something that binds them to a distant, even primitive, past. Things that harbor both — the modern and the ancient — are most capable of carrying a charge to which emotion and desire is responsive, even as more rationalist function is met. Coexistence of apparent opposites, such as the primitive and the modern, is the logic of dreams. Architecture responsive to the actual richness of the multi-varied needs of individuals is possible only when rational functionalism is intermingled with extended emotional functionalism. Such architecture is not so much representational, in the sense of resemblance to something familiar, such as a past architecture, as it is capable of analogizing states of being both archetypal and contemporary. Joseph Rykwert pinpointed the link between Mondrian and an enriched architecture, in so doing; he implied a role for Surrealism:

> In [the strongest] pictures [by Mondrian] abstraction has been left behind — they are images constructed out of autonomous and artificial elements. In these pictures figuration is not resemblance but analogy. Mondrian is the key. Here all the threads I have toyed with: psychology and anthropology, perception study and ergonomics, come together at last to be given a form. What that form shall be can only be worked out in time. But I believe we have come to the end of a non-figurative architecture and that we must now look to the scattered material which psychologists and anthropologists have been gathering. Not only myth and poetry, but the fantasies of psychopaths await our investigation. All the elements of our work: pavement, threshold, door, window, wall, roof, house, factory, school-all these have their poetry; and it is a poetry we must learn to draw from the programmes our clients hand us, not to impose it by a cheap melodramatisation, but to spell it from the commonplace elements which we fit together.[10]

A figurative architecture — informed by Surrealism and abstraction-is an articulation of figures arranged into a particular form; it is non-literal and does not embody or convey meaning by way of melodramatization; it uses neither stereotyped characters, nor exaggerated emotions; it is not simplistic, and the conflicts it purports to resolve are not reductive. A figurative architecture operates with metaphor and analogy — the building *is* a body, and the building *is like* a body. The figures out of which figurative architecture is configured are all the elements of architecture, including the parts, or materials, of a building fitted together through construction, the spatial themes of a building experienced through sentient occupation, and the institutions that make up and house society. The difference between an architecture of technical functionalism and one of emotional functionalism is that the first simply attempts to get the job done with a minimum of effort as it appeals to reason alone; the second is technically functional in *addition* to establishing a place for dreams, desires, and the intangible.

Surrealism assists architects by suggesting how it is possible to look at building assembly not simply as a combinative process guided by economy and efficiency, but *also* as a method to de-familiarize construction, occupation, and institutions so that the wonder hidden by such commonplaces is revealed as an ever present immanence, which overconfident rationality conceals. Surrealism and "abstract reality" gets at the apparently hidden marvelous dimension of the commonplace by appealing to faculties beyond waking reason alone; dreams, unconscious thought, and even madness can reveal the wonder that seemingly firmly established banality conceals, which is how both inform an architecture of extended modernism. And just as Breton argued that Dante and Shakespeare are notable for the *surreality* they elaborated in their literary efforts, the architecture of Michelangelo and Borromini participate in a similar expression of the richness reconciliation between waking reason and dreams (the conscious and the unconscious) facilitates.

Surrealism and "abstract reality" could suggest to architects how they might reveal the hidden, to make conscious the unconscious, to bridge the rationalist divide between dream and reality — to reveal some truth about existence. The cultivation of a knowledge surpassing the limitations of logic would permit architects access to what, for most people, only ever vaguely intrudes upon consciousness.

Fig. 1. Campidoglio (image by author)

ABSTRACT REALITY AND SURREALISM REALIZED: LA TOURETTE, SALK INSTITUTE, AMSTERDAM ORPHANAGE

La Tourette is notable for its roughness, partial enclosure, and play of Corbusian forms. At first glance, Le Corbusier appears to have defeated monastic enclosure (especially in the cloister) with a series of cruel jokes that renders it meaningless. But this is not the case. La Tourette is often called a monastery, which it is not; it is a convent. Different kinds of community are housed by different kinds of religious structures. Monasteries house fully enclosed communities, convents — in this instance a Dominican house — do not. By de-familiarizing monastic forms, through displacement resulting in surprise, Le Corbusier made La Tourette an appropriate setting for an order of preachers who traditionally lived in university towns and took no vows of silence or enclosure. In its play with monastic analogy, opened up by cosmopolitanism, La Tourette becomes a setting uniquely suited to the Dominicans struggle of finding a balance between the certainty of enclosure and monastic order and the temptations of the world for preachers ministering to society at large.

If partial enclosure is comprehensible as an opening up of monasticism toward cosmopolitanism, the roughness of La Tourette is immediately understandable as an architectural correlate to vows of poverty. The Corbusian forms that clutter the cloister, and the overall arrangement of the complex, quickly inform us that things are not exactly as they appear: convents are not monasteries. And religious orders, with their commitment to faith and charity might still have something to share with *rootless* cosmopolitans, even if La Tourette is on a hill in the countryside beyond the city.

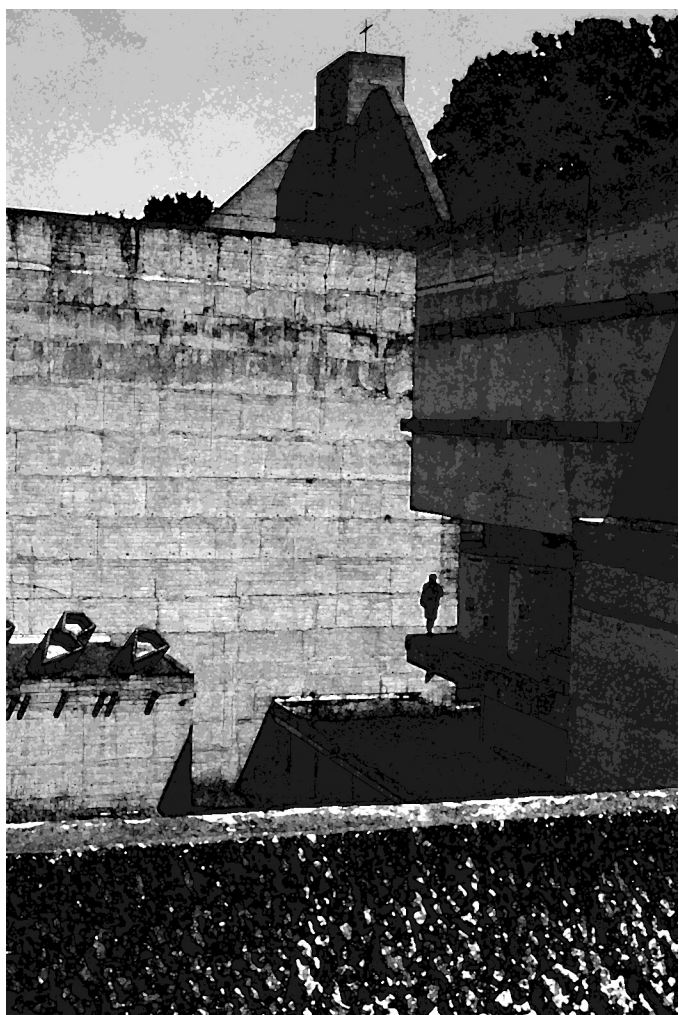The refinement of concrete at the Salk Institute is notable, particularly in contrast to the roughness of La

Fig. 2. La Tourette (image by author)

Tourette, but smoothness is not so much an expression of affluence or technique as it is an attempt to offer the West Coast of the United States a building it has no business having-a ruin suspended in time and occupied by wonder. Like Kahn, Salk's objective was one of transcendence, which is why they were able to invent such a surprising structure. A spirit of inquiry, the objective of which was to collapse the divide between scientific and poetic reason, motivated both. Architects and scientists are preoccupied with invention, and the invention of one analogizes the inventions of the other, and the creations of both analogize birth.

As a center for biological research, the Salk is preoccupied as much with discovery as with birth. The Institute looks backward, as does La Tourette, toward monastic enclosure. In this instance, for clues to how a place of inquiry—on the edge of a continent—can be open in one direction and closed in the other: open to researchers and the spirit of scientific discovery contained by

ethical restraint, closed to too much worldly distraction and the piercing sun. An honorific quiet descends upon the Salk. But if the water channel is followed westward, toward the setting sun and the ocean (the womb of all life), to the point where it falls to the lower plaza, one is struck by the noise of the water and the researchers who cheerfully occupy a deck facing outward: toward the sea, toward wonder, toward the horizon-where Western techno science falls, nearly undiscernibly, into a meeting with the infiniteness of dreams.

Fig. 3 Salk Institute (image by author)

La Tourette and the Salk embody a backward glance to achieve a forward-looking recuperative effort. Both are realizations of dreamlike de-familiarizations of ordinary program types abstracted to the point where representation is replaced by reference, and the elements that form both are comprehensible at the moment of perception as a bodily experience. The same is true for van Eyck's Amsterdam Orphanage, though here de-familiarization and displacement are more overtly employed to break open an institutional form so as to redeem it. Van Eyck achieved this by establishing an exceptionally strong initial element depicting the drama of load and support. This figure refers as much to the body as to a primordial past of original construction, which binds it to Stonehenge, Laugier's Primitive Hut, and Le Corbusier's constructive system drawn from both. The persistence of this figure derives, no doubt, from its reference to the body's defiance of gravity and to the thresholds humans pass through — physically and psychologically — throughout their lives.

La Tourette, the Salk Institute, and the Amsterdam Orphanage each extend modern architecture by making it more fully modern. They do this by bridging the illusory divide between *waking reality* and the *reality of dreams*, resulting in what van Eyck called an *authentic modernity*. It is a modernity infused with the unconscious that can redeem wonder as it surpasses the

Fig. 4 Amsterdam Orphanage (image by author)

limitations of the nineteenth century's grasp at certainty — the shadow of which we continue to inhabit. Representation and the *styles* are left behind, but modern building materials and methods of construction are softened by abstraction, which, in these examples, reveals meaning directly to the body.

NOTES

[1] See Joseph Rykwert, *The First Moderns* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1980). See also, Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History, Third Edition* (London:Thames and Hudson, 1992).

[2] For an introduction to this idea of the modern see, Jürgen Habermas, ''Modern and Postmodern Architecture,'' reprinted in, *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, Ed. Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 1997), 227-235; Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1983); Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, Trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1988.

[3] See especially, Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, Trans. David Webb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1992). See also, Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, Trans. David Webb (California: Stamford, 1997).

[4] The best introduction to the Surrealist project is by Breton himself. See, André Breton, ''What is Surrealism?'' (1934); available from *http://pers-www.wlv.ac.uk/~fa1871/whatsurr.html*; Internet; accessed 6 August 2002.

[5] John Summerson, ''The Mischievous Analogy (1941),'' reprinted with revisions in, *Heavenly Mansions and Other Essays on Architecture*(New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963), pp. 195-218

[6] John Summerson, ''Architecture, Painting and Le Corbusier (1947),'' reprinted with revisions in, *Heavenly Mansions and Other Essays on Architecture* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963), pp. 177-194

[7] For a concise discussion of Surrealism, see André Breton, ''What is Surrealism?'' (1934); available from *http: /pers-www.wlv.ac.uk/~fa1871/whatsurr.html*; Internet; accessed 6 August 2002; André Breton, ''Limits not Frontiers of Surrealism,'' in *Surrealism* (1937), Ed. Herbert Read (New York: Praeger, 1971), pp. 93-116. And André Breton, ''Surrealism and Painting (1928),'' reprinted in *Theories of Modern Art*, Ed. Herschell B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California, 1968), pp. 402-409. For a concise discussion of Abstract Reality, See Mondrian, *Natural reality and Abstract Reality* (1919-20), Trans. Martin S. James (New York: George Braziller, 1995); Mondrian, ''Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art (1937), in *Modern Artists on Art*, Ed. Robert L. Herbert (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964), pp. 114-130; Mondrian, ''Statement (c. 1943),'' reprinted in *Theories of Modern Art*, Ed. Herschell B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California, 1968), pp. 362-364

[8] Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995)

[9] See, for example, Joseph Rykwert, ''Meaning and Building (1957),'' reprinted in, *The Necessity of Artifice* (New York: Rizzoli, 1982) p. 09

[10] Ibid, p. 15,16