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Lauren Kogod

A Commentary on the Work of Enric Miralles and Carme Pinós

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From among the various strains of architectural thought of the past twenty years in the United States and Western Europe two dominant and opposing strategies have evolved. The first explores the structure of cultural authority vested in an established architectural language from which “codes” are extracted in order to be either transformed or repeated and recombined (with or without parodic intent). In this position an originary model that is “arbitrary but motivated” can usually be provided for each project, which ensures its legibility as well as its legitimization. The idea of human occupation seems a secondary concern to be resolved within the development of representational figures or structures.

A second strategy, less prevalent in the United States, is centered around a unified conception of the body that eschews epistemological questions in favor of a phenomenological model. Drawing much of its inspiration from Louis Kahn, this work is characterized by either a gentle and ambiguous poeticism or a rationality that runs the risk of brutalizing the subject by nature of its often totalizing formal logic. Based on the “bottom line” of human experience, this position evades, for the most part, the challenges of struc-

turalist thought to the phenomenological conceptualization of the body.¹

More recently (though hardly new), a third strategy has emerged, critical of and tied to both of these positions, which attempts to reconceive the place of the bodily subject within or alongside its “decentering” by the codes of language and representation. Through an expansion of modernist methods of object manipulation (rotation, displacement, and fragmentation added to transparency, defamiliarization, and essentialization) and a common use of anticlassical perspectival organizations, this so-called poststructuralist strategy has produced, along with its critique of representation, projected and built works of torturous and poetic complexity. This approach seems, however, to oscillate, theoretically, on a double axis between the construction (or dissolution) of the human subject as an epistemological category, and as a corporeal viewer who is to be physically and sensorially engaged (or threatened).

While much of this latter program emerged with the effusions and anxieties of the American architectural scene of the 1960s and 1970s, design strategies of fragmentation and formal discontinuity are prevalent internationally, even if op-

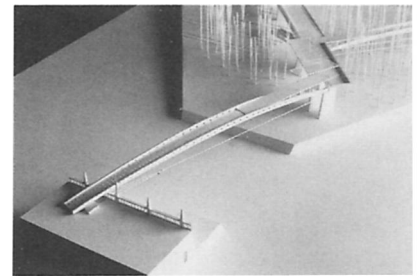
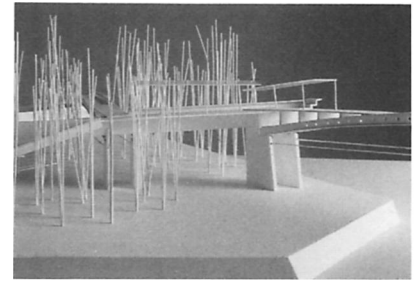
erating within different contexts and with varying principles. In Spain, with its fitful history of modern architecture (officially repressed by the government in favor of a neoacademic, nationalist architecture until long after the civil war), some such current schools of thought — most notably in Barcelona — are understood neither as anti- nor as deliberately postmodern, but as a critical and progressive continuation of the spatial research of the modern movement.² The work of Enric Miralles and Carme Pinós is part of this tendency. The predominant themes explored in their work are the relationships among circulation, form, and bodily perception, and the architectural representation of these relationships. The body is presented as an agent in motion, forcefully shaping the space that receives it, more a participant than a mere occupant. The technical resolution of the circulation elements (which are not warm and comforting objects but assertively industrialized constructions) emphasizes the relationships as sharply and fully sensual rather than merely graphic. While attention to circulation is surely an important part of any building practice, it becomes clear that movement and its representation are central to this work.

The project for a pedestrian bridge over the Segre River in Lérida marks the activity of moving through the landscape. Two arched segments frame into a central viewing platform at the end of a third, straight, segment that, in turn, gives access to a riverside park below. This suspended “crossroads” is less the result of a real point of connection or continuity between the three sections of the bridge than it is the residual evidence of their formal and structural disunity. Crossing the arched segments the pedestrian “jumps” over the river; the horizon line falls and rises, becoming a transitive point of reference. The thinness of the

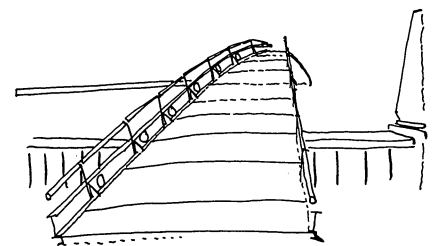
tectonic elements (the bladelike piers, the network of tensile cables, the perforation of the metal deck, and the “floating” wooden roof planes) has an overall effect of transparency. It is a minimalist formal intervention that intensifies experience. Unlike constructions for observation (the telescopes of Jorge Silvetti’s Tower in Leonforte, in particular, come to mind) that promote the voyeuristic quality of being able to look without being seen, the viewing platforms of the Lérida bridge are laid bare, exposing the viewer to the gaze of others, each becoming moving objects in the other’s shifting visual field.³ While this “mutual transitivity of seer and seen” is expected to occur routinely in landscape-integrated projects, the multiple views and perspectives would have been drastically reduced had the Lérida bridge been formed of only the single span required to fulfill its function of connecting two points. By providing three disparate and nonorthogonal “paths” (of which two are curved vertically) the bridge becomes a fully dimensional “field” of experience.

The distinction between “minimal” and “minimalist” is rather important. For the influence of minimalism as a specific sculptural program seems evident here, especially in the use of repetition (in this case, a functional redundancy), the avoidance of centering devices, and the unsentimental, industrialized quality of the constructional elements, none of which are grounded by the context or derived from the geometries of the site, but which act rather like what Rosalind Krauss has called “axiomatic structures” — interventions that affect and inform the features of the place, but that could seemingly be disassembled and reassembled anywhere.⁴

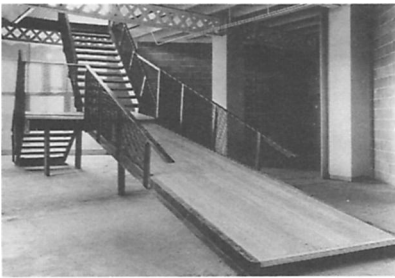
In the renovation of an unused factory into La Lluana school, the primary ele-



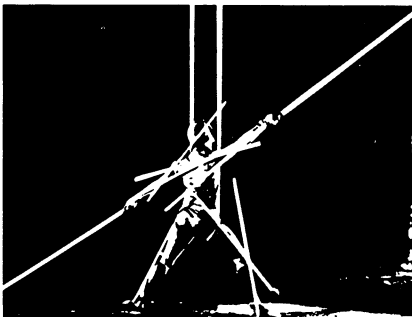
1. Lérida Bridge, views of the model



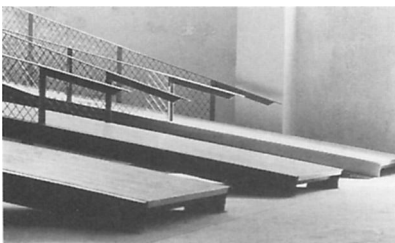
2. Lérida Bridge, sketch



3. La Lluana School, freestanding stair-ramp



4. Oskar Schlemmer, "Dance of Slats," 1927



5. La Lluana School, triple stair-ramp

ment of intervention is a ramp-and-stair combination used once as a freestanding object and again in triplicate as the major means of vertical circulation. The single unit, an assemblage of three parts, has an expressionistic and anthropomorphic quality, occupying space as a sculptural, transparent body. Already a hybrid, the stair evokes the fusion of two distinct images: Oskar Schlemmer's "Dance of Slats" (representing the three dimensions of the body's spatial extensions) and a Constructivist stage set (a gestural construction that invites participation, is accessed from many sides, and has platforms suspended in midair). Although these images are only two of a number of possible associations, they underscore the particular dual quality of the stair as representing both an active body and a site for action.

Where the stair unit is repeated, forming a series, it becomes a transparent "wall" of vertical circulation, its strong horizontal thrust aggressively challenging the viewer to choose among the possible paths. The redundancy of this construction seems to illustrate the Semperian theory of the three moments of man's vital extension, of which "the horizontal direction, the moment of movement in depth, is the demonstration of free will."⁵ Although the stair occupies space, its repetition and transparency emphasize the continuity of space through it; it is simultaneously a latticelike screen and a tectonic aspatial vestibule, serving as a transition zone between the artificially extended "outdoors" of the first floor (note the size of the metal grille door that slides open fully at the ground floor and pivots open above, as well as the use of outdoor park lighting) and the classrooms on the second floor. The stair is at once a kind of jungle gym that connects the play space below and the workrooms above and a stage set that frames the movement up, down, and across.

Like the Lérida bridge, the overt formalism of the functional redundancy pushes the stair to that edge of architecture often considered sculptural, much as some recent sculpture is explicitly architectural. For example, Mary Miss's "Mirror Way," installed in the Fogg Museum in 1980, is a multilayered stairway motivated in great part to actively, physically engage the viewer in a way that much modern public sculpture has been unable or unwilling to do.⁶ While many architects may believe that, unlike sculpture, architecture offers and fulfills such physical, intellectual, and emotional criteria as a matter of course, Miralles and Pinós' work suggests that, in a time of reduced direct contact with our buildings, even as other sensorial and communicative systems have radically expanded, more emphatic and intimate strategies of engagement are needed.

While the circulation elements in the Lluana renovation are short sequences of a fragmented and abstract narrative of human scale threaded through the existing building, the proposition of a *promenade architecturale* is more pronounced in the Social Center in Hostalets, in which the ramps are not installed as freestanding objects, but actively define the overall form of the building. This project resists any expectations of a figure-ground relationship, despite its rotating "beams" or planes of habitable space. Circulation, structure, space, and volume are knotted into the dense layers of a figure-figure relationship, and every edge is invested with the intensity of friction between two salient forms. Paradoxically, the planes and spaces of the building, both interior and exterior, seem to recede from the viewer, straining away into a distance with multiple vanishing points. Surface and depth are made ambiguous no less by the complex geometries than by the use of sunshades at the entrance and

across the south elevation that fold up vertically, causing those façades to “disappear” and the irregular contained space of the large hall perceptually to dissolve. The theme of direct contact with the viewer is inverted in this project — any sense of easy or passive occupation is defeated, and the (Heideggerian) *there* of the place is shifting, elusive, and fragmented; the experience is intensified by the difficulty of habitation.

This project may seem to bear a formal resemblance to some of the work of Alvaro Siza. But while Siza’s buildings are often formed by responding morphologically to the physical elements and forces generated by a particular site,⁷ the fragmentations and collisions of the social center have no such external referents that might legitimize such disturbances. The building does not represent any contextual reality, existing or proposed; rather, it presents itself as a site of transactions between itself and the moving subject, to whom its rotations and spatial shelves are revealed.

For Enric Miralles and Carme Pinós the late modern idea of dynamic space is transformed into a conception of a dynamic *subject*. The formal complexities and reduced referential content resist being “completed” or “solved” by the construction of ideated figures; however, the reintroduction of phenomenological values is not accompanied by a direct privileging of the individual. For, while there is clearly a revaluation of open-ended discovery and active engagement, there is simultaneously a decisive insistence on the representation, description, and inscription of that viewing subject into each project. The minimalism of their work, their understated presentations and attention to the resolution of technical details serve to substantiate this *transactive* vision of architecture as particularly convincing and compelling.

Notes

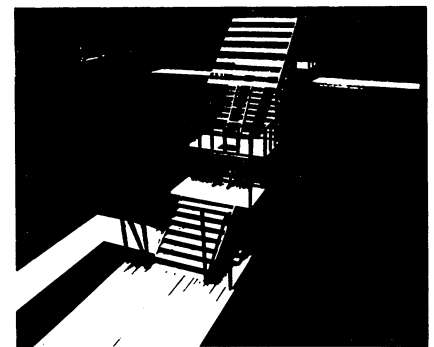
1. For a discussion see Frederic Jameson, “Architecture and the Critique of Ideology,” in Joan Ockman et al., eds., *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985), esp. 51–55.
2. See Antò Capitel, “The Modern Adventure of Spanish Architecture,” in *Contemporary Spanish Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli Publications, 1986), and Josep Maria Montaner, “Surveying Catalan Architecture,” *SITES* 20 (1988).
3. The visual “field” is explicated in Rosalind Krauss, “Richard Serra, a Translation,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).
4. Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*.
5. Cornelius van de Ven, *Space in Architecture* (The Hague: Van Gorcum Assen, 1980), 75.
6. See Mary Miss, “On a Redefinition of Public Sculpture,” *Perspecta* 21 (1984).
7. See Peter Testa, “Unity of the Discontinuous: Alvaro Siza’s Berlin Works,” *Assemblage* 2 (1987).

Figure Credits

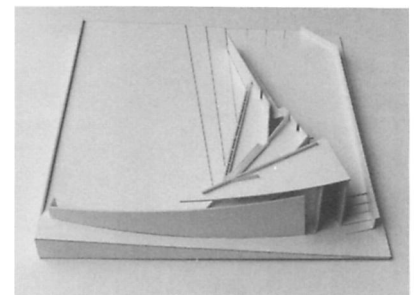
- 1–3, 5, 6, 8. Courtesy of Enric Miralles and Carme Pinós.
4. RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art From Futurism to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1978).
7. Mary Miss, “On a Redefinition of Public Sculpture,” *Perspecta* 21 (1984): 66.



6. La Lluana School, triple stair-ramp



7. Mary Miss, “Mirror Way,”
Fogg Museum installation, 1980



8. Social Center, model