

Anyone

Campus Center

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R.E. Somol

Five Easy Mieses

What makes Mies such a great influence is that he is so easy to copy.

— Philip Johnson

In order to “sustain” metropolitan space, architecture seems obliged to become a spectre of itself. It is as if it were in this way expiating an original sin, which is nothing other than its own claim to the right of informing — solely with its own disciplinary means — the primary structures of the city. Surely it is significant that in the United States — the country in which this phenomenon is most evident — it is the university cities which, in a sort of museum of living architecture, collect the formal experiments expelled from Manhattan or Detroit. What the apodictic products of that enfant terrible of modern architecture, Mies van der Rohe, prophesied has now become a reality. In their absolutely asemantic quality the Seagram Building in New York or the Federal Center in Chicago are objects that “exist by means of their own death,” only in this way saving themselves from certain failure. All the same, Mies’s “silence” today seems out of date in comparison to the “noise” of the neo-avant-garde. But is there really something new in the neo-avant-garde in respect to the proposals of the historical avant-garde movements? It would not be difficult to demonstrate [that] . . . in comparison to the coherence of the historical avant-garde movements there is certainly something less.

— Manfredo Tafuri

Less is more.

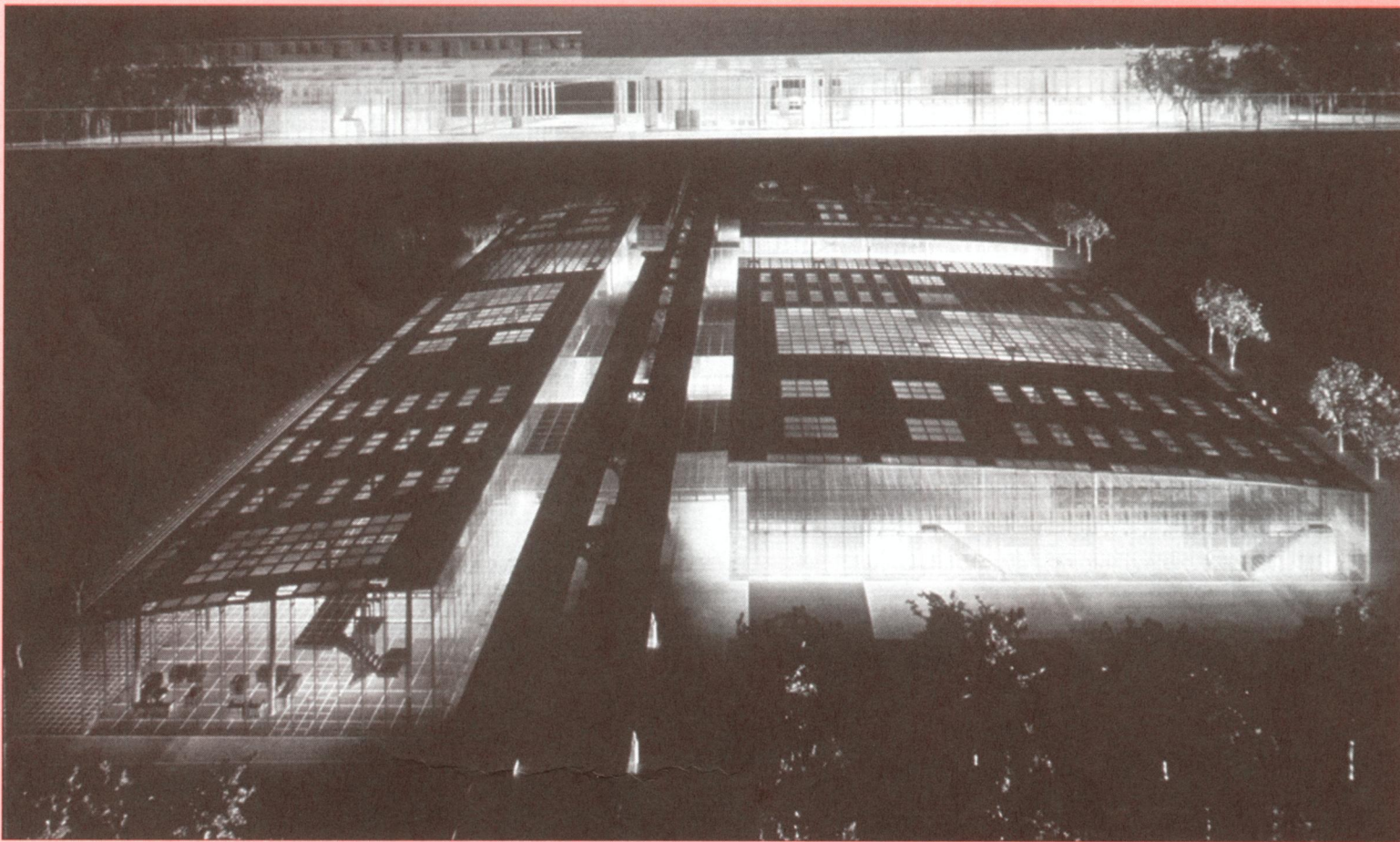
— Mies van der Rohe

The much denigrated architecture of Park Avenue known as “cold glass boxes” . . . have helped to create the entropic mood.

— Robert Smithson

Inviting five contemporary architects to “play” Mies, the Illinois Institute of Technology’s international competition for a new campus center has staged an event where — with the spectre of Tafuri as absent conductor — noise meets silence. Perversely, this architectural noise is intended to block that of the elevated train, the last trace of the city that the campus was unable to expunge through its “experiment” in urban disappearance. For Tafuri, of course, the formations of late capital had appropriated and absorbed modernist architecture’s “ideology of the plan,” reducing the role of contemporary design to (at best) perpetually lamenting the end of its instrumental ambitions or (more than likely) simply accommodating the market forces that have assumed them. Perhaps the greatest confirmation for this diagnosis is that contemporary experimental architecture has largely become exiled to the theme park of the university campus, particularly (if perversely) as school administrations attempt to reorient themselves to a changing market.

While recent interventions on typical campuses may prove Tafuri’s point — the quest for brand names amidst a sea of the generic, as at Irvine or Cincinnati — the intervention on a Mies campus, where the generic has already been raised to the level of its own signature, complicates the situation and opens alternative possibilities. Despite the obvious irony (if not new urban fantasy) of retrofitting a modernist campus with a “center,” the IIT master plan and campus center program are in many ways the truly inventive documents in the competition, providing the material requests that provoke the most dynamic elements among the various entries. These requirements entail not only a response to the noise and the application of advanced technology in a discursive way, they also furnish organizational cues in their calls to densify the campus, “intensify the landscape,” and provide nonorthogonal pathways that follow the “‘lines of desire’ of the pedestrian.” Thus, for the IIT establishment, architecture still has an informing role to play, even an instrumental one: architecture as commentary, as infra-



"The Campus Center will deal with **light** as its guiding principle: Light inside the building, emanating from it and flowing through it. This is enhanced through natural air and flexible control of a dynamic envelope to create a **dynamic tool**, adjusting to the exterior conditions and the requested interior environment. Such an **innovative** environment and hardware require **new technologies** in construction and use. The building is of a **synthesized, integrated quality**. It is designed for **performance** through rational **engineering** and **construction** and choice of **material** and **systems**. There is less attempt for **design** and **styling**; rather the results are **realities** from solving the problems. Combining **nature** and **technology**, it establishes a technically facilitated revival of traditional prototypes." – Jahn and Sobek

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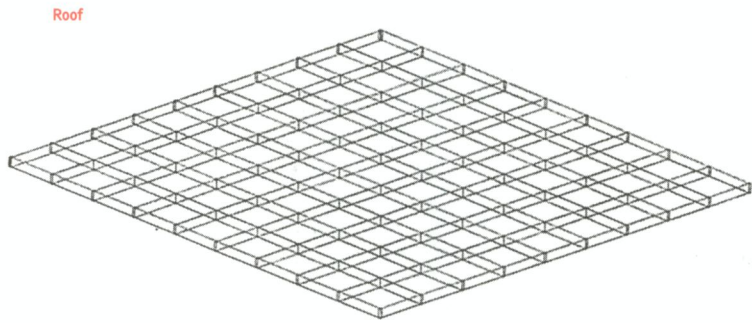
structure, as landscape. And if Tafuri is correct about the nature and validity of Mies's "prophetic" statements of withdrawal, then IIT is the only possible site for this investigation, as one would have to return to the scene of the crime in order to rewrite the postwar implications of Mies's built lessons. Ultimately, the competition poses the question of whether Chicago's perceived architectural legacy – from the loud "failure" of the White City to the silent confession of Mies – can become undone.

Perhaps more than any other 20th-century architect, Mies's authority has been constructed through repetition: both his own (as critique) and that of others (as consumption).¹ While expositions of the former have become largely the domain of academia, the latter has generally characterized postwar professional practice. This dual failure of "Miesian" modernism – rendering it a technological-developmental tool for capital (or, secondarily, a subject of academic canonization) – was evidenced as early as 1956, even as Mies was completing Crown Hall. In that same year, Colin Rowe wrote several articles that focused on Mies and that, in the midst of his American corporatization, attempted to elaborate a formal-linguistic project for modernism that was quickly being repressed. In part, this endeavor led Rowe to give reluctant approval to neoclassical and Palladian repetitions of Mies, such as those by John Johansen. Meanwhile, in his "Chicago Frame" essay, Rowe's juxtaposition of Burnham and Root's Reliance Building and Mies's Glass Skyscraper project was intended to contrast the American penchant for economic and functional rationalization – forces which Mies's work at the time was itself undergoing – with the European understanding of architecture as a larger ideological and cultural project. Curiously, it is precisely as a continued expression of this duality (architecture as tool of economic speculation or as ideological critique) that several of the entries pursue their own version of Miesian repetition.

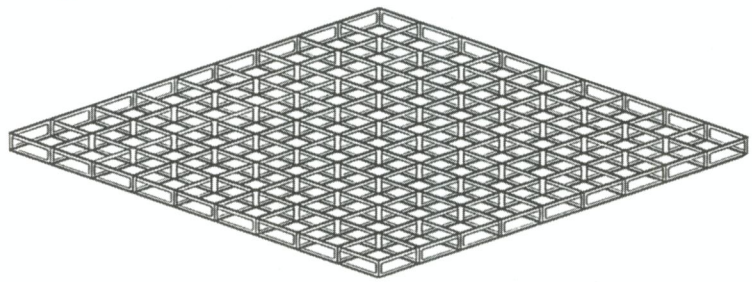
It is not surprising that among the current field Helmut Jahn most directly extends the corporate legacy of Mies's production, while Kazuyo Sejima assumes his most recent form of academic institutionalization. Though almost diametrically inverse propositions, the schemes by the corporate professional and the academic craft-artist are the most sensitive and predictable: repetitions that in one way or another point back directly to an ideal model of Mies. With seemingly little understanding of the context of the competition (aside from preventive remarks that his scheme is not about "form or aesthetics"), Jahn primarily addresses, and attempts to distinguish himself from, the corporate copyists of Mies. Jahn argues that, unlike the slavish disciples of Mies, his project applies the most advanced form of technology: adding, for good measure, that this is exactly what the master himself would do if he were alive today. There is apparently no reason to rethink the conceptual or organizational principles of Mies, but simply to employ a technological standard that has at last caught up to seventy-year-old practices. In the end, Jahn's scheme – more a campus terminal than center – can largely be viewed as merely building a better Mies trap, one where current building systems and materials provide the final solution to modernist space.

Jahn's proposal delivers a techno-environmental Mies, one where advances in glazing systems enable architecture to act more like nature, in a state of imagined equilibrium. It is a Miesian upgrade that simultaneously serves as belated compensation for Jahn's own State of Illinois Center and the infamous failure of its conditioning systems. Technology for Mies, however, was never simply technical. Rather, he pushed existing technologies to the point of collapse in order to reveal new social and aesthetic "diagrams," new modes of perception, occupation, and behavior: technology was never about adequacy but excess. Mies understood implicitly Deleuze's later observation that "tools or material machines have to be chosen first of all by a diagram and

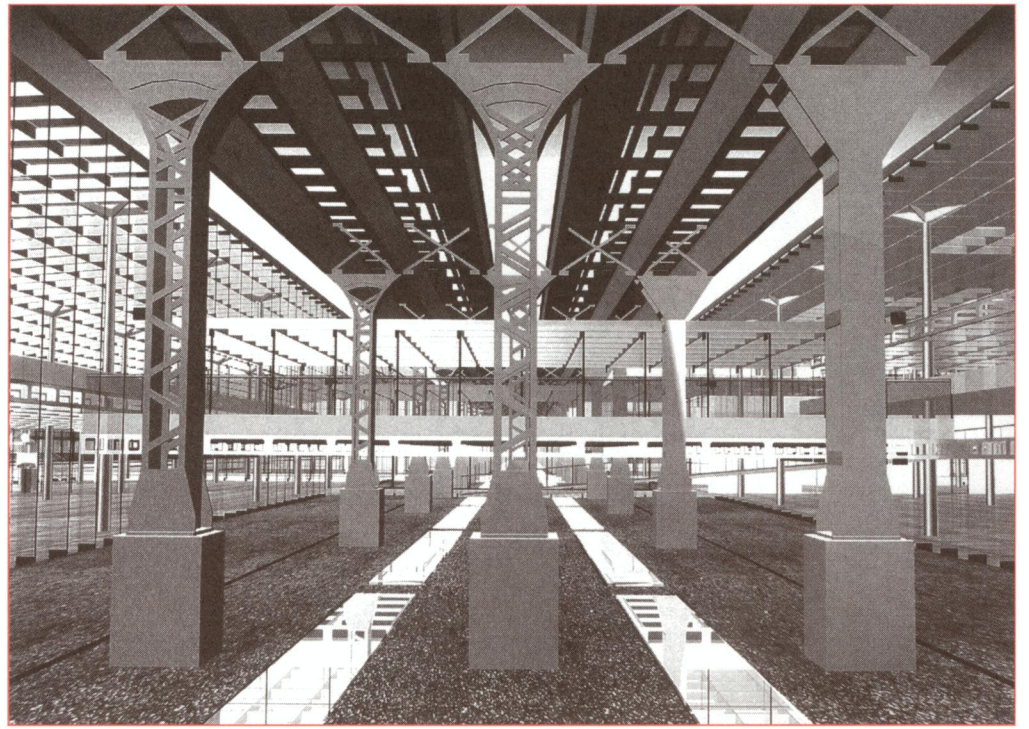
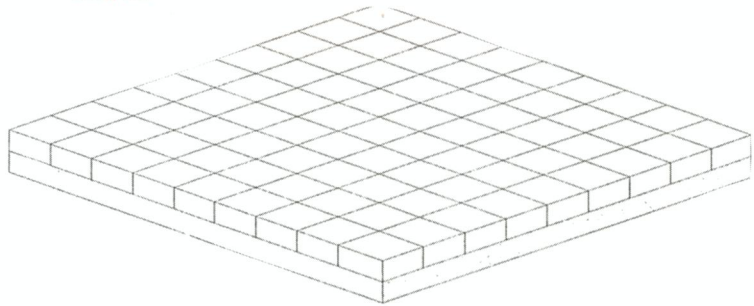
1. For the two accounts of this repetition, see K. Michael Hays, "Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form," *Perspecta* 21 (1984), and Stanley Tigerman, "Mies van der Rohe: A Moral Modernist Model," *Perspecta* 22 (1986).



Roof



Tray



The primary structure of Jahn and Sobek's campus center consists of steel columns with a 30-inch spacing that carry an isotropic mesh-grid roof structure. The facade and the floor tray system are secondary structures. The roof grid accommodates various types of cells for light transmission, exterior and interior heat absorption, solar energy conversion, ventilation, and acoustic damping. The floor tray sits on the slab and can be fitted with five-by-five concrete panels.

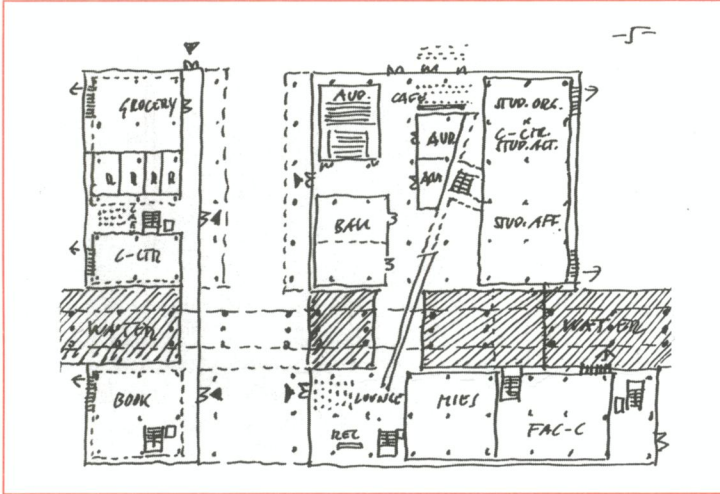
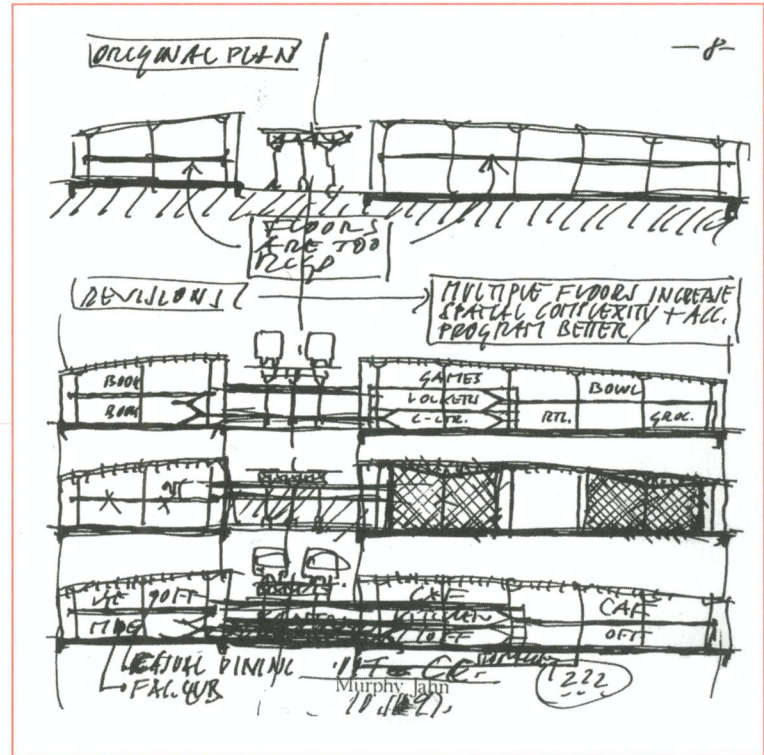
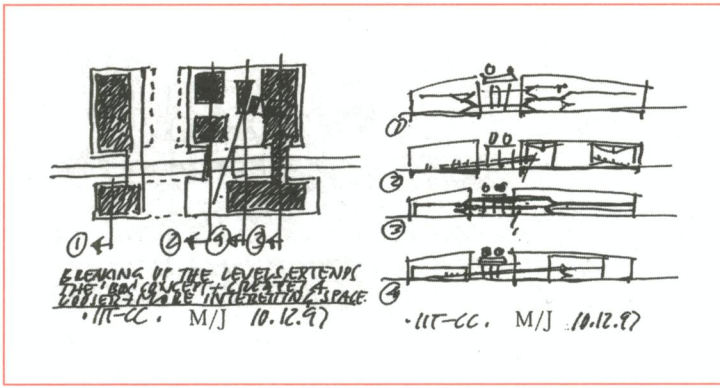
Above: The el connection, a glass lined link between the two halves of the Jahn/Sobek schemes, slips under the elevated train tracks

taken up by assemblages." Finally, Jahn's proposal assumes that technology exists only in and through the built object itself, and thus neglects advances in the processes of design and production (offered by the computer) as well as techniques of reception and communication (the mass media). Focussing narrowly on developments in building systems and materials represses the much larger field of contemporary techniques from which architecture (perhaps as opposed to "building") is fabricated.

Whereas Jahn's scheme is all-too-visible in its full "building-ness," Kazuyo Sejima's project is practically imperceptible: Mies's "almost nothing" raised by the power of electronic media. As Sejima explains, "instead of a material object" her entry suggests a "reflective, image-like architecture" with "t.v.-like spaces." In Sejima's project, one views the world as mediated (the roof plane that reflects clouds and sky; the glass barrier that frames the el train as a silent moving image through an equally artificial park-scape) while at the same time intensifying the experience of inhabiting a cool, abstract mise-en-scene. In some ways more Hilberseimer than Mies, Sejima's barcode garden-urbanism iterates and dematerializes the generic to such an extent that it produces a new ideal: silence as virtual. If Jahn's strategy was to get the building to work like nature (to simulate and supplement it), Sejima's was to frame and screen nature: thus, the former's interest in technologizing nature (in terms of production) and the latter's in formalizing it (through reception). This alternative is suggested by the fact that Jahn's most frequently used terms in describing his project are "building" and "technology," while Sejima's are "architecture" and "garden."

Wagering entirely on neominimal affect by turning Mies into the sign of Mies (or the sign of silence), Sejima precludes the possible elaboration of new spatial organizations that she has successfully developed in previous projects. Instead, the campus center is completely contained within a 12-foot-high pancake section, fully grounded and orthogonal, within which unrelent-

	EISENMAN	HADID	JAHN	KOOLHAAS	SEJIMA
Architecture	17	1	11	6	12
Building	9	23	63	17	4
Density	0	1	0	6	0
Diagram	2	2	2	7	0
Field	15	16	1	2	1
Garden	0	0	0	0	8
Grid	27	2	1	2	1
Interior	0	14	0	0	0
Landscape	9	26	0	0	1
Mies	45	2	4	19	1
Park	0	0	0	0	6
Technology	0	1	10	0	0
Transparency	0	7	0	0	1
Urban/-ism	0	8	0	18	0
Void	2	8	0	7	0



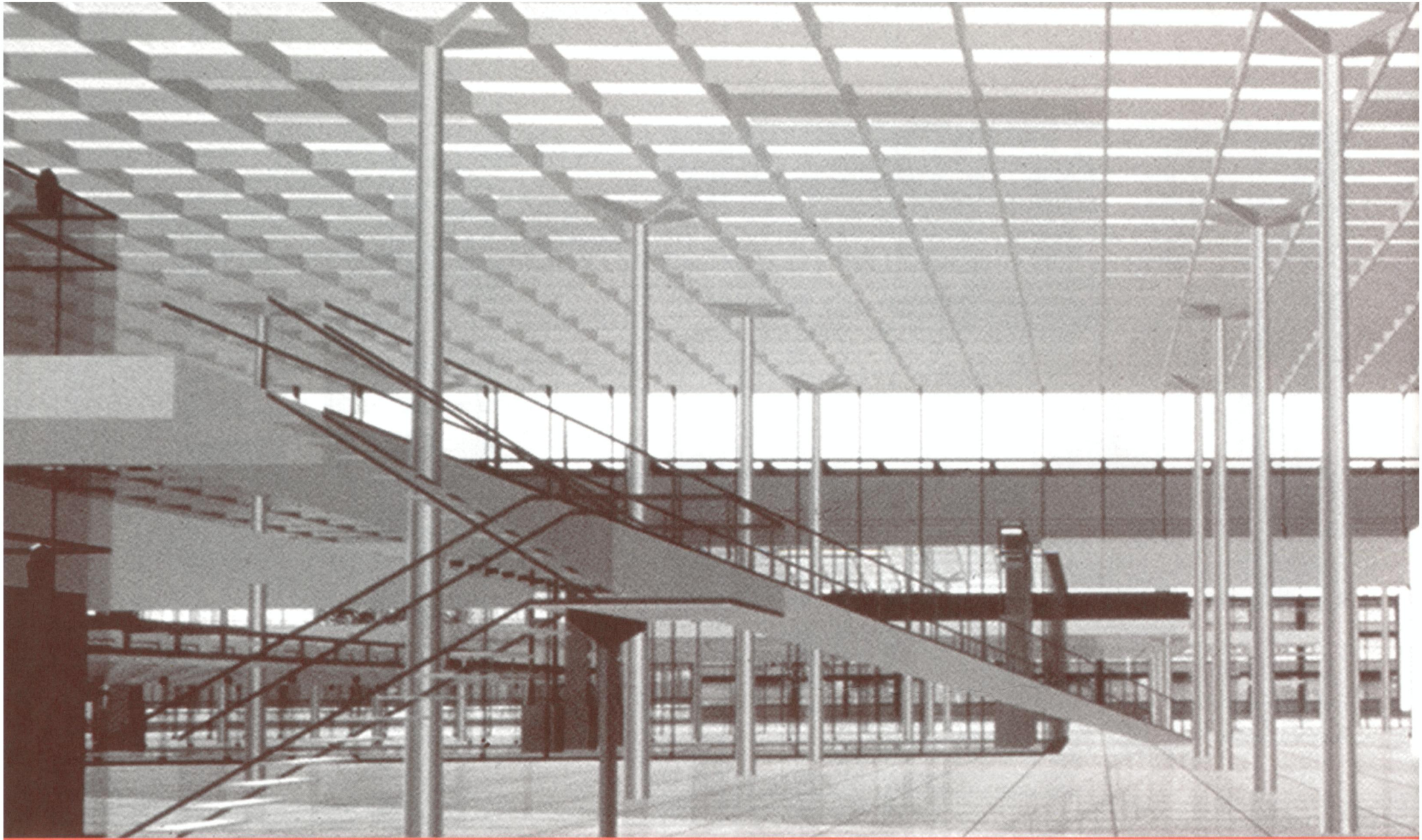
ing corridors parallel a series of endless cellular offices, occasionally bounded by one of five interior courtyards. In this way, both Jahn and Sejima “repeat” Mies by returning to reduced, currently dominant readings of his production, the one material-technical and the other aesthetic-formal. Rather than extend these tectonic or minimalist readings of Mies, Zaha Hadid suggests that these understandings of Mies are correct yet irrelevant for architectural production today, perhaps indirectly affirming Mies’s sometime invocation of the *zeitgeist*. Consequently, Hadid produces the only explicitly (or, should one say, exclusively?) critical project of the five, in many ways the most extreme proposal but one which nevertheless maintains a stable reading of Mies due to its predominantly oppositional character.

Through a computer-animated site analysis that reveals a field of potential forces, Hadid escapes the more static associations of Jahn’s *building* or Sejima’s *architecture* by initially conceiving the project as a sectional *landscape*. For Hadid, “beyond Mies” implies the avoidance of reduction and simple order. Ultimately, however, the initial solicitation of overlapping fields results in planar transparencies that are taken as cues for compositional complexity and ambiguity. As in much postwar formalism, horizontal fields become largely understood in vertical and optical (i.e., “painterly”) terms. Although the project proceeds through continuities of interior and exterior, the final effect of the project is oddly schizophrenic: uncharacteristically static in its massing and elevations; exceptionally sophisticated and developed in its planning and interior organizations. The interior landscape that weaves through the three levels, culminating in the Mies Interpretive Center, accommodates both “soft” and “hard” programs, the latter emerging in more bounded or cellular elaborations along the continuous surface. Meanwhile, particles of furniture modules are strewn across this surface organization as a kind of programmatic confetti that accumulate and disperse as necessary. In more formal though still flexible moments, as in the conference and

meeting rooms, telescoping walls serve as a miniaturized version of the sliding planes of the larger site analysis, so that the overall urban diagram comes to inform interior program clusters. In Hadid’s project, the city is in the details.

While the interior views suggest an almost Piranesian endlessness, the properties of the folded landscape are much more delimited in relation to the expanded field of site and context. The most vertical scheme, Hadid’s is also the only one to remain exclusively west of the el tracks, which effectively turns her project into an edge that defines the State Street corridor and privileges an orientation to the academic campus. Contextually, the proposal exists as a bar of massing that establishes and frames a new centralized quad, just as the recessed and centered entry, combined with a dominant frontality, produces a strangely hierarchical object despite its presumed emergence from a field of visual and physical forces. Whereas the interior is susceptible to a strong centrifugal pull, the exterior is fully centripetal. In the end, the project appears as a figure on a field rather than one emerging from a field, and its notable ambitions of permeability and transience are unable to compensate for its ultimate status as a sculptural barrier.

Rather than either simply confirm or oppose dominant framings of Mies, the proposals by Peter Eisenman and Rem Koolhaas make possible alternative configurations of modernist discourse precisely by producing “copies” that serve to question the stable traits of the presumed “original.” Operating “diagrammatically” — either by reworking a disciplinary opposition or aligning disparate cultural realms — the projects engender difference from their repetitions. “Mies” is here understood as a discursive and institutional effect that enfolds within itself, in one genealogical or untimely moment, the premodern history of the discipline alongside contemporary technologies and experiences, as well as formulations from Rowe, Tafuri, and Venturi to those of Superstudio and postminimalist art, and so on. It is not surprising, then, that



“Mies” is the most frequently invoked of 15 terms in the presentations of both Eisenman and Koolhaas, and it may well be that Mies’s collage for the Resor House – where architecture’s identification with the “wall” is displaced by continuous surfaces of landscape with interior objects and finishes – provokes the two directions respectively pursued by both. Significantly, Eisenman’s second most used term is “grid,” while Koolhaas’s is “urban(ism).” In this way, their swerves from Mies are informed by specific and long-standing research agendas: for Eisenman, the geometric infrastructure of architectural organization (from the extended analyses of Palladio, Bramante, Serlio, etc.); for Koolhaas, the work on shopping and on the city in both its contemporary and Roman guises. Both attempt to expose and extend the dark side, or perhaps the “optical unconscious,” of Mies’s supposed idealism: Eisenman by turning geometry against itself, Koolhaas by invoking the “stuff” of cultural matter. And thus the promise of new disciplinary diagrams: form without beauty, function without efficiency.

Less is a Bore.

– Robert Venturi

Boring, if seen as a discrete step in the development of an entire site, has an esthetic value. It is an invisible hole. . . . One does not impose, but rather exposes the site – be it interior or exterior. Interiors may be treated as exteriors or vice versa.

– Robert Smithson

As one of the primary ideologues for “design after Mies,” Robert Venturi opposes the legacy of modernism found in both the “building-as-city” (the mini-megastructure) as well as the “building-as-sculpture” (the duck). It is precisely these two

options that are respectively pursued – at once solicited and subverted – by the Pompeiian carpet of OMA and the folded ground cocoons of Eisenman. In this manner, both proposals imply that it is only possible to revisit Mies by introducing variation (or perhaps more accurately in the case of these two schemes, “noise” or “interference”) in the terms of a contemporary configuration. Thus the term *building* is now replaced as Koolhaas reads Venturi’s “city” through the lens of the *interior* (hence, the mall), whereas Eisenman sees “sculpture” as a species of *landscape* (via postminimalist environmental art). Significantly, both the internalized city and the grounded duck exhibit aspects of “entropy” – the trait that Smithson associates with the possibility of a new monumentality, one evinced not only in the “cold glass boxes” of Sixth Avenue but also in the continuous development of suburban sprawl (Koolhaas’s consumerist mat) as well as the crystalline structures of geology and mineralogy (Eisenman’s faceted figures submerged in the earth). As Smithson writes in “The Crystal Land”:

The highways crisscross through the towns and become man-made geological networks of concrete. In fact, the entire landscape has a mineral presence. From the shiny chrome diners to glass window shopping centers, a sense of the crystalline prevails.

A hybrid of consumption and geology, both projects are buried: Eisenman’s literally, Koolhaas’s under a folded plate roofscape that “grounds” the raised datum of the elevated platform: a past, present, and future context for OMA’s campus center as socle.

By wrapping the el platform in a chromium-plated steel tube, the OMA proposal reframes the train as a kind of horizontal ele-



Columns in the Jahn/Sobek scheme are tapered steel tubes with supporting cross arms at slab locations and at the roof grid mesh. The center is designed "to highlight in an architectural setting the research interests of the schools of engineering, thermodynamics, materials research, performance of fabrication . . . within the design of the dynamic and technically advanced building envelope."

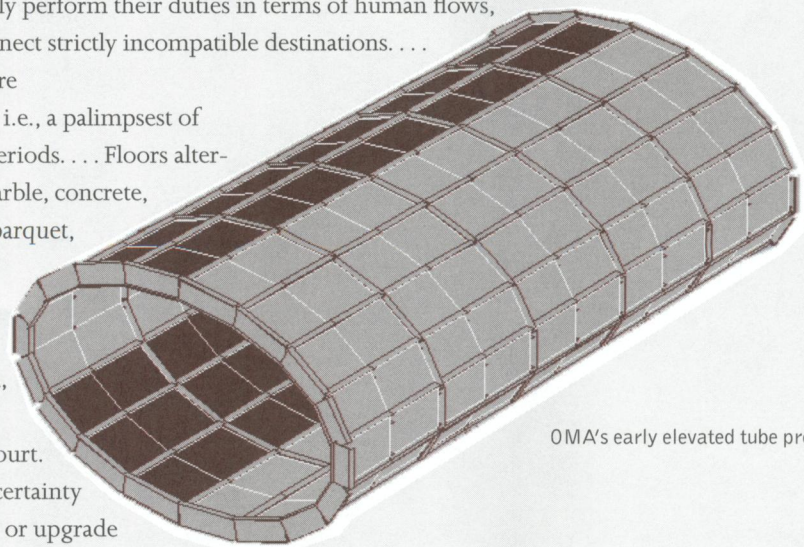
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vator connecting the building to the city so that a larger urban infrastructure assumes the site traditionally occupied by a Miesian mechanical penthouse. Beneath this new urban datum, a thickened field condition emerges, one distinct from the "open," well-lit fields of Mies. In the OMA project – more a material phase space than a field – dense "islands" of program are broken by five diagonal "shortcuts" that operate as gradient edges between the disparate activities and substances of the islands. In fact, just as Koolhaas inscribed the skyscraper lessons identified in *Delirious New York* in earlier OMA projects, the campus center proposal experiments with the new paradigms introduced by the space of shopping. The material phase space of the project might be seen as a response to what Koolhaas has recently referred to as "junk space," his description of which has multiple correlates to the IIT proposal:

Junk space looks as if a hurricane has rearranged a previously ordered condition, but that impression is misleading. It never did achieve coherence, and it never aspired to it. . . . Junk space: consider it as a site, a web site, designed or conceived or assembled by Photoshop, with the same promiscuous ease of collecting and accumulating desirable conditions, a field, a trajectory that may start as web, turn horizontal without warning, intersect, step down, suddenly confront an immense void from a glass elevator, brutally shift to a seemingly blocked perspective from which an escalator picks you up at the last moment to drop you off at the monumental granite staircase, that leads to a vista of sheetrock that hides the treasures of an upgrade. In plan all episodes seem uncoordinated, except for the needs of emergency evacuation. The presumption of geometry is routinely deflected. In fact, survivals of former geometries now create new havoc, offering forlorn nodes of

resistance that create unstable eddies of opportunistic flows. . . . The ceiling, too, is like a folded, crumpled plate, agitated like the Alps. Deep chasms between joints, former caverns of asbestos, which, for all we know, may still be preserved, reveal harsh beams and brute concrete in expectant ceiling voids that represent undefined latencies. . . . Corridors, tunnels of turbulence, not only perform their duties in terms of human flows, they also connect strictly incompatible destinations. . . . All surfaces are ideological – i.e., a palimpsest of uncounted periods. . . . Floors alternate shag, marble, concrete, rubber, tile, parquet, travertine, vinyl. . . . After explosions of trash, suddenly the luxury of a court. . . . The only certainty is conversion or upgrade followed, in rare cases, by restoration.²

Junk space is the new species of minimum architecture; flexible like its historical correlate, the Roman city, the neutrality of its field exists as a perverse apotheosis of Miesian space. A contemporary response to alternate technologies and ecologies, junk space is entropic space: the path of least resistance. The OMA project thus actualizes a bizarre and virtual trajectory from Mies through Superstudio to the mall – a continuous monument for the slacker, a stockpile of opportunity. What was open (or at least



OMA's early elevated tube proposal.

2. From Koolhaas's keynote lecture for the "Learning from the Mall of America" conference, 22 November 1997, held in Minneapolis.