Essay

Richard Meier

Several years ago I had occasion to return to the Smith House in Darien, Connecticut, with a photographer commissioned to document the building for publication. The particular day of our visit was quite extraordinary: a brilliant October day of very intense and colorful light, very sharp and clear as a fall day of little humidity is apt to be. I was pleased that we had this opportunity to see and record the house in such favorable conditions. When we arrived, however, and the photographer began to set up his equipment, a sudden change in wind direction brought from an adjoining property a great cloud of smoke where a neighbor was burning leaves. As the smoke thickened and enveloped the house – and as my frustration rose with the irony of such a beautiful light consumed in this gray fog - I noticed the photographer furiously taking pictures. My immediate reaction was one of alarm. I encouraged him to stop. He waved me off, insisting this was a fleeting and exceptional moment.

Several weeks later I had a chance to review these photographs. They were incredible. The image of the house as a clearly composed presence in light had been fundamentally modified. In many of these prints, the house was visible is if through an irregular scrim, circumscribed by a strange glow as the light radiated through the smoke. Its contours were only partially discernable and its precision as an object very much obscured. But this was not an image for which the house was designed; not, in any event, in the conscious operations of either myself or the owners as we had conceived the building. As the photographer took his pictures, I had been alarmed at the prospect of it being documented so uncharacteristically. In fact, it revealed to me something quite extraordinary about the building and its relationship to site.

I recall this particular experience because it illustrates to me one of the essential understandings we must all come to as architects. One likes to think that the architect has the ability to plan everything, but this is not so. In my work, I have come to rely more and more on the juxtaposition of that which one makes against that which one does not. This has to do with the play of architecture's inherent artificiality against an unpredictable and dynamic context. I believe that this dynamic quality of natural and urban phenomena is very much a part of man's experience of architecture. This is true not simply in the appreciation of the object from without – as this experience at the Smith house illustrates – but in the actual occupation of the building's interior spaces as well. This sense of the building is conditioned by many things – rotating shadows, changing seasons, expanding and contracting light, the world of change that takes place outside its limits – in such a way that the building acquires a life much more complex than the architect could ever hope to control. I believe there is an important moment in an architect's life when one gives up one's attempts at such control. Perhaps this is when a very real dialogue with context may begin.

My particular understanding of that dialogue has lead me to occupy a somewhat controversial position within the world of architectural criticism. I have been figuratively accused of placing buildings as if by helicopter onto the landscape. One might interpret this suggestion to mean that the buildings remain alien from their context; that they do not literally share the animate or organic qualities of their place. I confess that I cannot see how this might be otherwise. To the extent that buildings are made up of materials that, in a strict sense, cease to live – that are fallen and no longer grow, that are unearthed and are no longer part of a fluctuating and metamorphic cycle – one is engaged in an act of willful artificiality. Architecture is not the product of a natural process. It simply *is* what you make it. I have always thought this was a compliment being paid to me, this suggestion of the artificiality of the structure, this man-made presence that the buildings have. For some, this creates a distance between the viewer and the work, which I very much regret. I do not wish to alienate people from the landscape they choose to inhabit, nor do I wish them to feel in conflict with my work. It has simply been my intention to propose an alternate form of integration.

In my earlier work, this integration was pursued through a very intentional process of dematerialization. This has to do with an attempt to subvert the specific character of the architectural surface itself in favor of the character of light and shadow, of context and occupant, that plays

against it. One might think of this as a process aimed at neutralizing the matter of the frame so that the character of the framed is that much more intense. I am committed, however, to a rigorous investigation of the physical consequences of such an operation. To dematerialize does not mean to remove from weather and time. One must accept these things and let them inform one's construction. In this sense, the inevitability of enclosure comes to bear, and the continuity of inside and outside that was so important to early masters of the modern movement must be questioned.

I have gone through this exercise myself. In a very early house I wanted to develop this free relationship of inside to outside space. To that end – and very much in the spirit of Frank Lloyd Wright at Falling Water, an architect and a building I continue to admire very much – I proposed a brick wall running continuously through a living space to the adjacent garden. The house was constructed as such, and in the end proved unsatisfactory to me. In the garden this brick wall rapidly began to show the affects of water and wind, to assume a thin layer of moss, to stratify, so to speak, as its lower portion soiled and its parapet weathered. Within the house itself, the wall remained as it was at the time of construction. The two halves – one inside, the other outside – had acquired two lives. The myth was destroyed.

I have come to appreciate the completeness of this separation that occurs along the plane of the building enclosure. Glass does not change this fact. A wall of glass is as strong and as powerful a membrane as any material in describing the limits of enclosed space – in setting up two futures, as it were, for one wall.

With that understanding, I am no longer in pursuit of this conceptual interpenetration of interior and exterior space. My work has proceeded with an investigation of what it means to create enclosed space; in some cases, simply to create a room. I am fascinated by the interior world of light and shadow that exists free of the degenerative qualities of weather. I believe this to be the promise of architectural space. It is perhaps the promise of white, as well. But I am also intrigued by the very different way in which a building exists in the natural or urban worlds beyond its control.

Again, the Smith House comes to mind. Here the project was conceived so as to sit between two trees very close to the base of the building. It was very important to us that it be sited this way, and we took many precautions to insure that these trees not be lost during construction. We did this with a simple ambition: to preserve the landscape which had prompted its inhabitation. But we could not have anticipated the precise way in which those trees have grown and and affected the house over time. They have, in fact, created a virtual umbrella over both sides of the building, filtering light differently depending on the time of day or year and modelling its colors in ways much more intricate than we could ever have planned. I believe the success of the house lies in its capacity to absorb and enter into a dialogue with these temporal phenomena of light and context. They are, in the end, its material.