

Fabrications

The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand

ISSN: 1033-1867 (Print) 2164-4756 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfab20>

Harry Seidler

Gevork Hartoonian

To cite this article: Gevork Hartoonian (2011) Harry Seidler, *Fabrications*, 20:1, 30-53, DOI: [10.1080/10331867.2011.10539670](https://doi.org/10.1080/10331867.2011.10539670)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10331867.2011.10539670>



Published online: 01 Aug 2012.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 288



View related articles [↗](#)



Figure 1: Australia Square.

Photo courtesy of Max Dupain.

© SAHANZ & Gevork Hartoonian. Published in *Fabrications: The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* 20, no. 1 (January 2011): 30-53. ISSN 1033-1867.

Harry Seidler

Revisiting Modernism

Gevork Hartoonian

Harry Seidler arrived in Australia in 1948 at which time the country had not yet tasted the full charm of modern architecture. Nevertheless, the situation in Sydney was ripe for an ambitious Seidler to publish the first monograph of his work in 1963, *Harry Seidler, 1955/63: houses, buildings, and projects*. The book is an important one. Not only did it include Reyner Banham's introductory remarks, but also the entire manuscript was translated into both French and German. Of further interest is Banham's praise for what would be a major aspect of Seidler's contribution to Australian architecture. In the British critic's words, "Few architects of Seidler's generation have shown themselves capable of riding out this translation from single to multiple dwelling, from suburban to downtown sites, and the illustrations of these new works of his will be closely studied wherever his fame has spread."¹ Banham's prognosis was accurate: Seidler's architecture of tall residential or commercial buildings soon introduced a major speculative arena to be explored over the next two decades. Having left the design of suburbia to developers, urban architecture occupied a major place in Seidler's oeuvre.

For a comprehensive understanding of the architectural sources informing Seidler's work, it would be important to explore briefly the situation of post-war architecture in America where Seidler completed his architectural education. Of interest is the educational system of the Graduate School of Design (GSD), Harvard University, where urban architecture was the core subject of upper level design teaching. Another key thing to consider would be the tendency for sculptural tectonics permeating Seidler's vision of architecture, a phenomenon best understood in relation to the architect's short tenure at the office of Marcel Breuer. But these two subjects will not be discussed at length in this essay,² even though they have considerable influence on Seidler's tall buildings designed for Sydney's CBD. The argument presented here focuses rather on the centrality of the three themes of landscape, geometry, and tectonics for Seidler's urban architecture.

Whereas landscape is integral to any tectonic discussion of the preparation of a terrace (the Semperian earth-work) to receive a constructed form, the inclusion of geometry needs explanation. There is no point in reminding the reader of the importance of geometry for Le Corbusier's formulation of "regulating lines," or in his reflections on Roman ruins where geometry, construction, and classification of various parts are considered essential for what the word

“Roman” means. The same geometrical order, according to him, was used for the “adornment of the surfaces,” upon which “light plays on pure forms, and repays them with interest.”³ Particular to the objectives of this essay, however, are the many implications of the role of geometry in the curriculum of the Bauhaus, for example the courses focusing on formal analysis, and/or graphic design. Among these, Josef Albers’s work and teaching played a significant role in the formation of the visual culture of early modernism in Germany. The intention is not to make a direct connection between Albers and the architecture of Seidler. However, the visual and conceptual modalities of early modern architecture that Walter Gropius included in the curriculum of the GSD were constants in Seidler’s work.

The years following 1948 are important for Sydney’s architecture in more ways than one. Recovering slowly from the depression years and in the light of the post-war economic situation, the scope of the city’s major architectural events remained limited. Nevertheless, Sydney architects began to feel free to borrow from stylistic motifs developed in Europe and America. Jennifer Taylor suggests that this development marked one of the many consequences of Australia’s post-war economic and military alliance with burgeoning American capitalism. In her words, “It was not Federation of 1901 but the commitment of World War II that accelerated the nation’s growth to adulthood. The decline of British power forced Australia to assess her own position unsustained by parental protection.” She continues, “It was obvious that it was to America she must turn....”⁴ During the next two decades, Sydney architects would search for alternatives to what is now called “high-modernism.” Subsequently, two major tendencies in the city’s architecture can be recognized. One is the Sydney School of architecture through which a number of architects, including Sydney Ancher, Peter Johnson, and Ken Woolley, sought to modify and tailor California regionalism to Sydney’s climatic and life-style conditions. The second tendency would draw from Seidler’s legacy in domestic and urban architecture. Even though there would be no Seidler school of architecture, his success “was to make a personal style out of modernism.” Andrew Metcalf further observes that “In Sydney during the 50s and 60s there was more of a school of Mies than a school of Seidler.”⁵ It is one of the intentions of this essay to discuss the apparent differences between these tendencies in Sydney architecture in reference to the three themes proposed above.

When Seidler arrived in Sydney in June 1948, he did not have any idea that he had stepped into a country where he would spend the rest of his life. He recalls, “I made my way from the old shed at Mascot that called itself an international terminal to the flat where my parents lived in Maroubra. Nothing could have been more depressing for me than seeing the suburban landscape after having lived on New York’s Riverside Drive and Copacabana in Rio.”⁶ Nor

was he aware that Australia would provide him with the opportunity to design and construct buildings that would bring him local and international fame and recognition. The state of Australian architecture was on his side. Educated in America and having worked for Breuer, Seidler's work was discussed in Robin Boyd's popular book, *Australia's Home*.⁷ The book tells the remarkable story of how, in just four years, Seidler secured a privileged position.

To promote the culture of modernism, Boyd mapped the entire architecture of Australia into two camps: the "cottage style" and international functionalism.⁸ According to Boyd, during the first half of the twentieth century "eclecticism died slowly. Progressive architecture, however, was still in two minds. The principal movement developed in central Europe, where pioneers before World War I cleared the ground for the sharp white cubes of Functionalism." The second tendency followed the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright whose work "always had a fondness for ornament when it grew from the building organically as it happens in nature." In addition to the mutual interest of these two camps in simplicity, spatial composition, and function, Boyd observed that, while the work of the former group was defiant and proud, the latter's was "sympathetic with and subservient to the landscape." No matter how simplistic and historically accurate Boyd's observation might be, Seidler's three early built houses were vigorous enough for Boyd to claim that the young architect was the first "to revive the original principles of anti-natural architectural design...."⁹ The claim suited Boyd who wanted to promote his own vision of modernism in Australia. On another occasion, and in criticism of what he called a "featurist mess," Boyd compared Seidler's design approach to Sydney Ancher's, highlighting the former's radical tendency to cantilever the house as if it was tailored for a slope by Sydney Harbour.¹⁰

Interestingly enough, in his 1979 "afterword" to Boyd's book, Seidler's dislike of Sydney's ill-advised and ugly development disclosed two problematic themes. Criticizing the post 1950s economic boom and the rush that had occurred to express new ideas in a superficial way, Seidler criticized in particular the:

glass-walled, office buildings that were (and are!) going up in every capital city—an unintelligent import if ever there was one, more at home in their original settings in cloudy northern climates than in our towns, besides being inappropriate in an age of energy conservation. Thrust before the public eye in the name of progress and keeping up with Joneses in New York, they are generally disliked and find no positive response from the consumer.¹¹

The second topic that Seidler addressed was the state of architectural education during the late 1970s. In his criticism of the imported British professors of architecture, Seidler wrote that "students developed a rather paranoid attitude to anything 'imported,' and the result was a superficial tendency for a "uniquely Australian mode of design.... nicknamed the 'nuts and berries' school of heavily

textured, peasant type buildings....”¹² Seidler had opted for a different vision of the tall building. The exclamation mark in the quotation, ‘are!’, speaks to the fact that Australia Square, Seidler’s exemplary high-rise and one of his finest buildings in Sydney, was by then almost two decades old.

Commissioned in 1960, Australia Square is a unique example of urban architecture with no precedent in Sydney or the rest of Australia. The building’s uniqueness results from its impact on the morphology of the city. A distant analogy might be the Rockefeller Center in New York City (1939), particularly the way that this complex left its *mark* on the landscape of Manhattan. In addition to the scale issue, the difference between these two projects speaks for the semi-tropical climate of Sydney, and the fact that Manhattan was and still is the home for a capitalism that is programmed for an intense economic and operational logic not pertinent in Australia, even in Sydney. Seidler understood the difference in consideration of his tendency to design tall buildings that were inflected by Sydney’s topography. However, the fact remains that his architecture is in close rapport with the principles of early modernism. I have written elsewhere that,

Those who dislike him for personal reasons, or because of their own misconception of Modernism, should turn their critical eye away from the sky and look at a topographical section running through the east/west area of Sydney. The cut, connecting one of Seidler’s most recent buildings, the Cove, with that of Australia Square, demonstrates how good he was in moulding the horizon of topography with towering buildings. Speaking in architectural terms, this is perhaps his greatest legacy. He was also good in thinking of a hybrid image of tall buildings, incorporating tectonic experimentation, which Mies van der Rohe carried out during his American period, with the notion of corporality implied in Le Corbusier’s later architecture.¹³

If the implied topographical section is extended to include Seidler’s design for Grosvenor Place, the MLC Centre, and the Capita building, then one can claim that his vision of urban architecture was simultaneously projected both vertically and horizontally. The deep structure of Seidler’s design strategy, however, can be better grasped if the geometry evident in most of his work is considered along with the landscape and tectonic strategies embedded in his buildings. These three themes are integral to the projects discussed below.

Landscape

Landscape is taken here as a strategic concept to deconstruct the conventional understanding of a tall building as a freestanding object. It will also be used to comment on what makes Australian architecture - old and new - unique. While the architectonic implications of landscape as the unconscious of the country’s spatial experience remains to be assessed, for the purpose of this essay, it suffices to point to the obvious, that landscape occupies a major place in the cultural formation of Australia. It haunts the search for national identity,¹⁴ alternatively

fixing on the history of colonial settlement, and on the Australian bush. Aware of the historicity of the first, Australia's rapport with its bush landscape has never been easy either. An escape from colonial culture mostly ended either in the romanticism of picturesque, itself a nineteenth-century British phenomenon, or the nightmarish awareness that the country belongs to someone else, the Aboriginal people. The possibility that modernity could release Australian architecture from this historical paradox must be underlined. This was Boyd's intention when he set himself the task of theorising Australian architecture not through the narrow canon of national identity, but in terms of a project of nation *building*. This partly explains why he praised Seidler, and perhaps why the immigrant architect was in a position to approach landscape beyond the suggested paradox.¹⁵

In relation to this, mention should also be made that Australia is a huge country, and that only a small proportion of its landscape is transformed through built form. If this claim is interpreted in line with Leo Marx's discussion of American perception of space,¹⁶ then, landscape should be considered a subtext for any critical reading of Australian architecture. E. R. Hill writes: "the cultural problems are not so much the result of failing to tame a wild and inhuman environment as much as the result of a failure to come to terms with history and with the European heritage."¹⁷ The landscape paintings Hill discusses in the essay quoted here exemplify a Romantic interpretation of landscape. I would suggest that the same perception of landscape is also registered in the work of most contemporary Australian architecture. If the Sydney School ultimately dismissed landscape and opted instead for "cottage" architecture, Glenn Murcutt's work, for one, reinvigorates the notion of "touch this land lightly," an idea reputedly inspired by the Aboriginal symbiotic rapport with landscape.¹⁸ Using diverse design strategies, most Australian architects tend to dramatize the concept of landscape.

The interest of Seidler's tall buildings is their attention to the particulars of site, even though he did not theorize the subject of landscape. Seidler's two massive urban interventions, Australia Square (1961-67), and the MLC Centre (1972-78) are discussed here to highlight his tendency for terrace making as a public urban landscape, and to challenge the popular, formalistic apprehension of the tall building typology. Even though this might appear far-fetched, central to Seidler's strategy is Le Corbusier's unrealised urban image registered in the Algiers project. Contrary to Le Corbusier's early vision of the city, in this particular project, the landscape is infused with residential and institutional buildings. It stands in dialogue with an infrastructure that runs throughout the landscape. Australia Square and MLC are also conceived in association with the urban morphology of Sydney and its infrastructural elements, be it public transportation or pedestrian hubs.

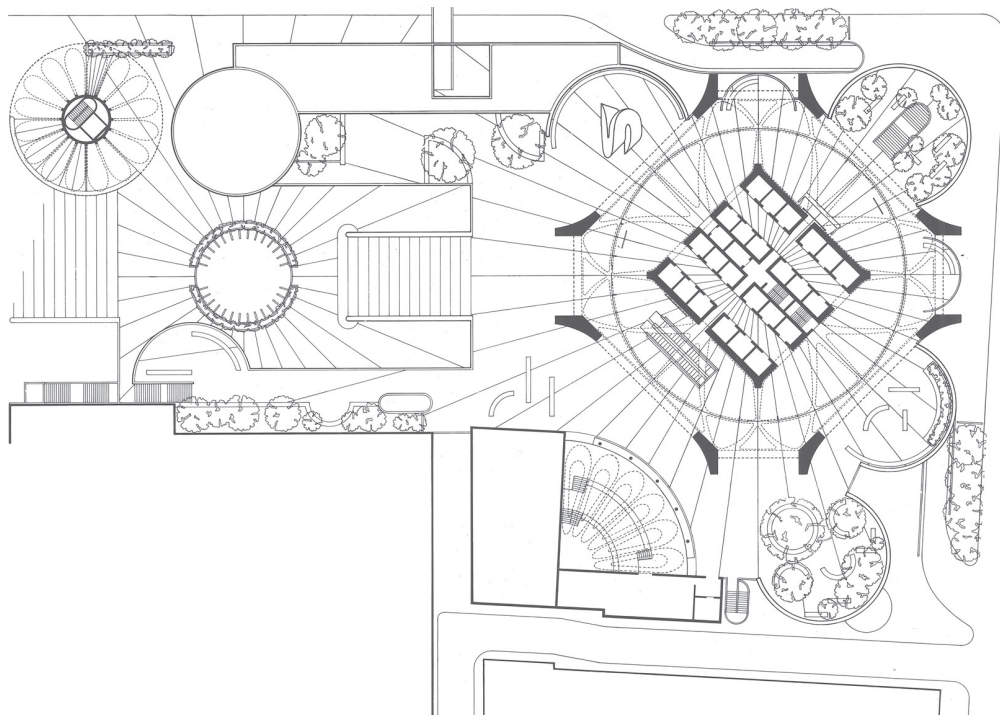


Figure 2: MLC Centre, Sydney, 1978, plan.
Drawing courtesy of Harry Seidler & Associates.

To shed further light on the claim that Seidler's design strategy offsets a deductive separation between the tower and its context, we can approach his urban projects from the point of view of the *expanded field*. Rosalind Krauss uses the term "the expanded field" to designate the site-specificity of sculptural works produced during the late sixties, differentiating them from what sculpture meant for the Renaissance or during the early decades of modernism. Discussing Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* as sculpture in the expanded field, Krauss describes how a different artwork emerges when sculpture unfolds into the landscape and then folds back into itself.¹⁹ As such, the work avoids the logic internal to sculpture, an object standing on a pedestal. Krauss's formulation of the expanded field is important in considering the essentiality of the vertical for any building. This last relates to the erect posture of the body, and the need to respond to gravitational forces tectonically. These two formal matrices can be modified if the design includes the horizontal implied both in the landscape and the body's movement in space. The expanded field to which most of Seidler's towers adhere demands an investigation into the two interrelated tropes, geometry and the tectonic.

There are two additional formulations of urban landscape that assist us in better understanding the importance of Seidler's design of Australia Square, and

the MLC Centre. In the background of semiotic theories permeating the 1960s, the American Kevin Lynch highlighted the city's edges and landmarks as two important urban sites for establishing a rapprochement between people and the built environment. Lynch wrote, "in the process of way-finding, the strategic link is the environmental image, the generalized mental picture of the exterior physical world that is held by an individual." He continues, "the image is the product of both the immediate sensation and of the memory of past experience, and it is used to interpret information and to guide action."²⁰ Thus, in addition to other attributes, urban architecture is expected to trigger a mental map of its context.

Looking back to the city from the entry stairs of the Sydney Opera House one cannot fail to notice the cylinder tower of Australia Square soaring solemnly. The MLC tower is equally notable. The position of this building is indeed critical for one's mental map of the city when approaching it from the south-east axis of the complex. Furthermore, the circulation processes giving form to the lower and the upper terraces of the MLC Centre (Fig 2), and the openings connecting them to each other reveal the city's topology. A three-story cylindrical volume marks the diagonal passage from Martin Plaza to the north of the complex where a theatre of 1100 seats is located. The position of these volumetric interventions and the above-mentioned terraces mark the beginning and the end of the city block, a landscape to which the MLC tower belongs.

We might deduce a second dimension of the concept of the expanded field from Dennis Sharp's introduction to Seidler's architecture. Discussing the many facets of regionalism detectable in Seidler's early residential work, Sharp claims that the architect's urban projects aim to bring "space back into the city."²¹ One implication of his observation is that space was already lost in contemporary cities. Having in mind the essentiality of the Cartesian grid for the modernist vision of the city, the space alluded to by Sharp refers either to a public arena, conventionally marked by a sculpture, or the space surrounded by monumental architecture of the kind permeating Renaissance cities.²² A third reading of Sharp's statement would rather highlight the idea of a *field*, a concept central to the topographical dimension of Seidler's urban projects. The significance of Australia Square and the MLC Centre is tied up with their respective orientations, and the way each assists a city stroller to obtain a mental map of Sydney's topography. Spatial mapping can be actualised when architecture is intertwined with the landscape.

To discuss the place of landscape in Seidler's work, attention should also be given to his strategy in positioning the main towers of both Australia Square and the MLC Centre. The towers of these two urban interventions, one fifty and the other sixty-five stories high, are each placed on their respective platforms with an eye to the city's morphology. While the rectangular form of the shorter

tower of Australia Square facilitates the continuation of the city's block ending at Pitt Street, the tall circular tower opens the entire landscape of its site to George Street, a major pedestrian and traffic route running north-south through Sydney's CBD (Fig 3). The configuration dictates an orientation that follows the east-west topographical section of the city. It runs from the higher to a lower plateau, connecting George Street to Pitt Street. While each tower has its own terrace, the two are designed in reference to the topography of the block, and the intention to establish a pleasant hierarchy between them. On closer inspection, the opening of the plaza to George Street compensates for the disappearance of the city's grid system, and the permeation of a morphological disorder that is congenial to pedestrian movement from the eastern to the western parts of the city.

Aspects of urban strategies that shape Australia Square also inform the design of the MLC Centre. Here too the position of the main tower is decided in relation to the placement of terraces within the morphology of the city. On the north side, the tower's plaza establishes a spatial rapport with Martin Place, one of Sydney's most popular public arenas. Originally intended to be twice its present width, Martin Place runs east-west connecting George Street to Macquarie Street. This pedestrian street has become an important urban hub. It is surrounded by both historical and contemporary buildings of considerable value, and houses a major underground train station. It also provides a route to the south part of the city diagonally and through the MLC Centre. Interestingly enough, a hypothetical extension of the north-south axis of the MLC tower meets the extended east-west axis of Australia Square. The intersection provides a mental map defining the city's topography. Therefore, one can argue that two things determine the placement of towers both of Australia Square and the MLC Centre. On the one hand, an attempt is made to relate their respective terraces to the topography of Sydney; on the other, they mark the city's orientation toward Circular Quay, arguably the most beautiful urban and commercial landscape of Sydney.

Geometry

Geometry is indispensable to architecture. Architecture attains its *form* when a particular purpose is assigned to geometry. The content of a form can carry a symbolic meaning if geometry recedes and when associations external to its form are overvalued. According to Rudolf Wittkower, the centrally-planned churches built during the Renaissance did not disclose form as such but rather an architecture of symbolic form.²³ The human body plotted in the interplay of circle and square, and the many circular and cruciform churches designed in the aftermath of Vitruvian discourse, need no further comment here. What should be noted instead is the natural interconnectivity assumed for many

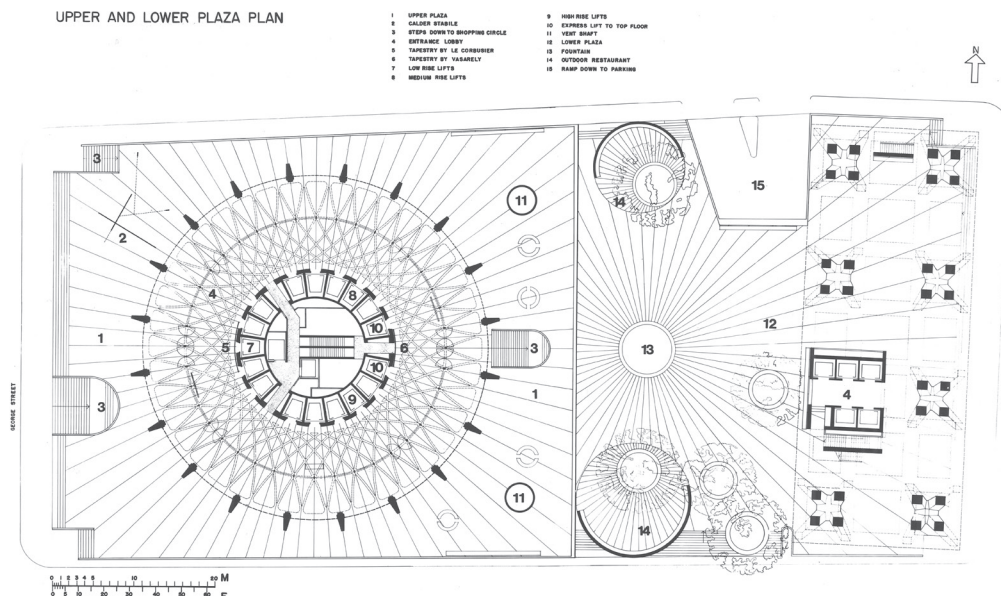


Figure 3: Australia Square, Sydney, 1967, plan.
Drawing courtesy of Harry Seidler & Associates.

centuries between geometry and the classical language of architecture. We have already noted Le Corbusier who saw Platonic geometries underpinning the classical language of architecture. And yet, the “right angle” he held so highly does indeed underline the phenomenological presence of the body and its excursion through architectural volume. Le Corbusier’s was a conceptual means of structurally framing geometry and architectural space. Alternatively, forms projected along the matrix of horizontal and vertical axes may set the framework for the tectonic articulation of geometry. Still, the geometry informing any planimetric organization should allude to the metaphor of the right angle if architectural drawing differs from painting.²⁴ Even plan drawings composed of curvilinear lines and surfaces speak for the virtual movement of the body. The congruity between geometry and space makes a drawing comprehensible as the planimetric organization of an edifice.

According to Robin Evans, architecture’s relation to geometry occurs in the zone of projection, the process of which supports the image an architect intends to represent. Merely responding to the forces of gravity might lead to an image that projects instability and lightness. Drawing from stereotomy, Evans claimed that, “a structure should always look stable as well as be stable.”²⁵ Following his discussion in “Paper and Stone,” one can argue that ideation in architecture involves three stages: drawing (painting), modelling (sculpture), and projection of the result of these two into tectonics. Putting aside the Bauhaus obsession with the impact of machine technologies on architecture, aspects of the three-part process were built into the pedagogical aims of the GSD.²⁶ Both Gropius

and Josef Albers had considerable influence on the Bauhaus approach to architecture, aspects of which are relevant to the modernism of Seidler's architecture. And yet, what makes his architecture unique is the recoding of geometries informing most of his plans into the tectonics of lightness and heaviness.

Albers entered the Bauhaus in 1920 and after graduation taught the basic design course of the school. He moved to the United States in 1933, and secured a full-time teaching position at Black Mountain College, North Carolina. In his new position, Albers continued teaching the Bauhaus principles even though his own paintings were then inclined towards expressionistic compositions made of lines and surfaces. This was obviously a move away from the constructivism informing the German period of his work.²⁷ With the advantage of hindsight, Albers's intricate geometric rhythms are "equally well realized both in forms that reflect craft and the mark of the artist's hand, and in ones whose embodiment is impersonal and technological."²⁸ What Seidler took from Albers's contribution to a particular brand of modern visuality, in general, and from a short visit to Black Mountain College before his departure to Brazil in particular, is important.

Albers's work shares aspects of modern painting characteristic of many painters associated with the Bauhaus school. In addition to Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, mention should be made of the constructivist techniques of composition, particularly the use of simple geometric elements evident in Konstantin Malevich's suprematism. In his teaching, Albers underlined the ambiguity involved in the perception of objects. Of particular interest is the importance given to colour, and what he called "Graphic Tectonics."²⁹ It is the geometric underpinning of the latter that prompts one to see geometry in Seidler's architecture not through the conventions of Renaissance architecture, nor through the purity of the French Revolutionary architects, Etienne-Louis Boullée for one, but through the constructivist idea of matter-of-factness evident in the tectonics of Mies van der Rohe. This association will be taken up under the next sub-heading of this essay. For now attention should be given to the tectonics implied in shapes and geometries that categorically cannot be associated with either the painterly or the sculptural.

Referring to his work in 1943, Albers wrote: "as the term 'tectonic' implies, the abstract compositions shown here are constructed, being built with elements that are produced by mechanical means and arranged in an emphasized mechanical order." It seems Albers was not interested in the way things are put together, but in the world separating physical facts from physical effects.³⁰ In his work, geometry plays a different role from that of forms existing in nature, and the organic structures explored by D'Arcy Thompson, for example.³¹ The comparison is important for understanding the tectonic nature of geometry in Seidler's work.



Figure 4: Ercildoune Apartments, East Sydney.
Photo courtesy of author.



Figure 5: Grosvenor Place, Sydney, plan.
Drawing courtesy of Harry Seidler & Associates.

The specificity of the geometry employed in Albers's paintings, however, is aesthetic in the first place. In the second, the geometry permeating his work is the result of a careful study of technique and material. This is evident from a series of experiments with glass, among which those carried out in late 1920, called "Bundled", and "Skyscraper III", are extremely architectural. The latter work, for example, is comparable to Albers's design for the rear brick wall of a fireplace built at the GSD in 1949. Here the Flemish bricklayers' bond is interrupted by a row of openings to match the height of a brick. If this built project of Albers might have inspired Seidler's design for the facade of Blues Point Tower in Sydney (1961), the architect's later work demonstrates an ingenious translation of "Graphic Tectonics" into architectonic forms. Also relevant are the series called "The Two Centres" and "Structural Constellation," produced by Albers in the late 1940s and early 1950s respectively. Depicted in perspective, the latter work brings about "a spatial pictorial happening, continually provocative to vision and perception." Eugen Gomringer continues: "It is time after time surprising to find how many, or rather, how few, lines Albers needs to create a work of art."³² The uncanny effect of the "open" folded shapes, composed of right-angled planes of the "Structural Constellation" anticipate Seidler's cubistic volumes of residential apartments he built in Potts Point, Sydney (Fig 4). "The Two Centres" series, on the other hand, is instrumental for the planimetric organization (geometry?) of the Grosvenor Place tower, 1982 (Fig 5).

According to Jennifer Taylor, the "geometric curve has been a constant recurring theme in Seidler's architecture since the early 1960s."³³ The quadrants of Grosvenor Place are positioned in opposite directions. The composition

follows the planimetric organization of Seidler's design for the Australian Embassy, Paris (1968). As with this building, the geometry of Grosvenor Place is manipulated to orient the building to the best available views. The two quadrants are also rotated to achieve the greatest possible square footage on an otherwise irregular site. A bird's-eye view of the tower, however, shows discordance between the volume and the adjacent buildings. The disjunction, paradoxically, seems the right decision from the pedestrian's view. Following the curve of George Street, the plan facilitates appreciation of the building's geometric-order at the upper ground levels from where the harbour and the Opera House located in the near distance can be seen. Furthermore, similar to Albers's work, the planimetric organization of Grosvenor Place is informed by two elements: a service core located at the centre of the two quadrants, and two fire exit stairwells that connect the two quadrants. To these elements should be added a curved glass curtain-wall whose vertical mullions define the spatial extension of the entry lobby, the pavement of which runs the full length of its sloping site.

Needless to say, the geometrical scheme used at Grosvenor Place had already been tested in Seidler's two most important buildings, Australia Square and the MLC Centre. Of interest is the importance of geometry to the planimetric organization of these two schemes, and their tectonic figuration. The geometry of the plan of the taller Australia Square was revised many times. Beginning with a rectangle, the final design resulted in a twenty-sided polygon. Another factor critical to the form of the two towers of Australia Square relates to the setbacks and limits dictated by the city council. According to Philip Drew, the circular tower was desirable because "an area of 1,320 square metres, or 25% of the site, could be achieved within a 41 metre diameter circular plan."³⁴ While the short rectangular tower is placed parallel to its adjacent street, the cylindrical form of the main tower disguises the irregular shape of the site, marking the main entry to the complex. This aspect of the design is emphasized by the height of the tower, a choice consistent with the topography of the site, which in turn establishes its terrace as a public podium.

How, then, do the geometries of the two towers at Australia Square relate to each other? We have already noted the interest of early modern architects in elementary geometry. Even though the circular and rectangular volumes of Australia Square stand apart from each other, their underlying plan recalls Frank Lloyd Wright's design for the Guggenheim Museum (1959) in New York City. In its original scheme, and considering the recent addition, Wright's proposal comprised a curvilinear volume attached to a rectangular prism. Close inspection of the plan of Australia Square reveals the presence of a discrete line linking its two towers. This observation is supported by the openings cut in the floor of the main entry podium. More important is the orientation of the

pair of crisscrossing fire-exit staircases of the circular tower. In their east-west orientation, these exit stairs occupy one area of the four circles emanating from the centre of the main tower. The main lobby, the elevator volume, and what might be called a promenade (circulation area) occupy the remaining three circular areas of the plan. The logic of this geometric order is tectonic in nature; it evokes a move from heaviness to lightness, from the cylindrical concrete core-wall to the freestanding columns surrounding the tower's promenade. The image of this sequential movement is inscribed in the geometry of the pavement of the main lobby, which extends to the promenade's paving. Thus, the placement of the centre of an outward movement - the direction of the exit stairs of the tall tower and the staircase connecting the two terraces - is part of a design strategy that establishes an invisible axis comprising the geometric spine of Seidler's final scheme. It is of further interest to note that this axis is in contact with the northern wall of the elevator-core of the short tower.

The MLC tower is also placed at the intersection of two perpendicular axes running north-south, and east-west respectively (Fig 5). The north-south axis, however, orchestrates the tower's orientation towards the city. Because of the irregular shape of its site, and the existing volume of the Theatre Royal, the ordering principle of the design's geometry draws its strength from the placement of a square tower that is centred on the intersection of the two above-mentioned axes. The square tower is rotated 45 degrees, a move supported by the site's topography. Standing on its terrace, that is placed higher than its three surrounding streets, the MLC tower frees itself from the street structure of the city. Instead of occupying its block, as is the case with most of Seidler's towers, it gives priority to the landscape of the city. According to Kenneth Frampton, every urban building for Seidler "must assume the burden of the entire city; as though every commission is potentially a 'miniature city' standing in place of the absent or ruined metropolis that surrounds it."³⁵ Motivated by the urge to transform geometry into a tectonic figuration, under Seidler's hand, geometry is turned into a means of freeing the vertical posture of the tower from any surrounding hindrances, except its own fabricated landscape.

What is involved in this transformation? The plan of the MLC tower is composed of two centrifugal squares. The inner one houses the elevators and fire-exit stairs, the enclosing concrete wall of which is clad in stone. With the chamfering of the corners, the geometry of the outer square is thus weakened, and its edges are transformed into eight columns. The space between these columns is filled with window glazing. This is Seidler's way of transforming a square into a octagonal tectonic form. His strategy establishes a complex rapport between the chamfered columns and the main sides of the outer square as the tower soars. The plan's octagonal geometry is emphasized at the entry level by pulling and extending the corner point of the inner rectangle along the two

perpendicular axes. Here, too, the space between the two squares is allocated to the entry lobby. The two are related to each other by a web of geometric articulation visible in the structure of the lobby's ceiling. The reticulated structural soffit of Australia Square and the MLC Centre, Frampton observes, is influenced not only by Pier Luigi Nervi, but also by the coffered ceiling of Borromini's San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane in Rome.³⁶ The analogy can be extended to include Louis Kahn's design of the ceiling of the Art Gallery at Yale University. Apart from the suggested historical precedents, the analogy with Kahn is of tectonic significance.

The tectonic

The tectonic is a theory addressing aesthetic possibilities that relate the core-form of a building to its art-form.³⁷ While Renaissance architects covered the surfaces of masonry buildings with symbolism derived from the classical Orders, in modern times architects had to re-think the artistry of the art of building. Not only did industrial building techniques have the potential to cover large spans, but also most architects eventually came to recognize that one consequence of the nineteenth-century debate on style was the impossibility of continuing the Orders.³⁸ A different theory of architecture was needed to pave the way for the realization of architecture that, in the ambience of the historicism of the early decades of the last century, would respond to the functional and aesthetic needs previously unavailable to architects.

Even though the best account of Seidler's work is centred on the nineteenth-century structural rationalist views articulated by Viollet-le-Duc,³⁹ it is also useful to consider Seidler's tectonics in relation to Mies van der Rohe. Of interest here is not Mies's steel and glass architecture per se, but rather a series of unbuilt projects central to his American period, the significance of which resides in how they sought to frame an *image* that would have tectonic rapport with gravitational forces. In this, these projects reflect Mies's interest in the German thinker, Arthur Schopenhauer, who claimed that the task of every architect was to hold in balance the dynamic play of gravitational forces. While such an intuitive understanding of architecture was central to the nineteenth-century debate on the tectonic, the subject remained in the mind of Seidler, an Austrian architect who was trained by Walter Gropius and had worked in Marcel Breuer's firm.

Even though Mies's unrealized designs for the Drive-In Restaurant (1946), and the Convention Hall (1953) are conceived in steel and glass, their tectonics convey an image of the constructed form that is either *hung from* or *held up by* its support system. Mies explained his intentions in the following words:

I frequently employ the example of Viollet-le-Duc in my teaching. He has shown that the three hundred years it took to develop the Gothic cathedral were above all

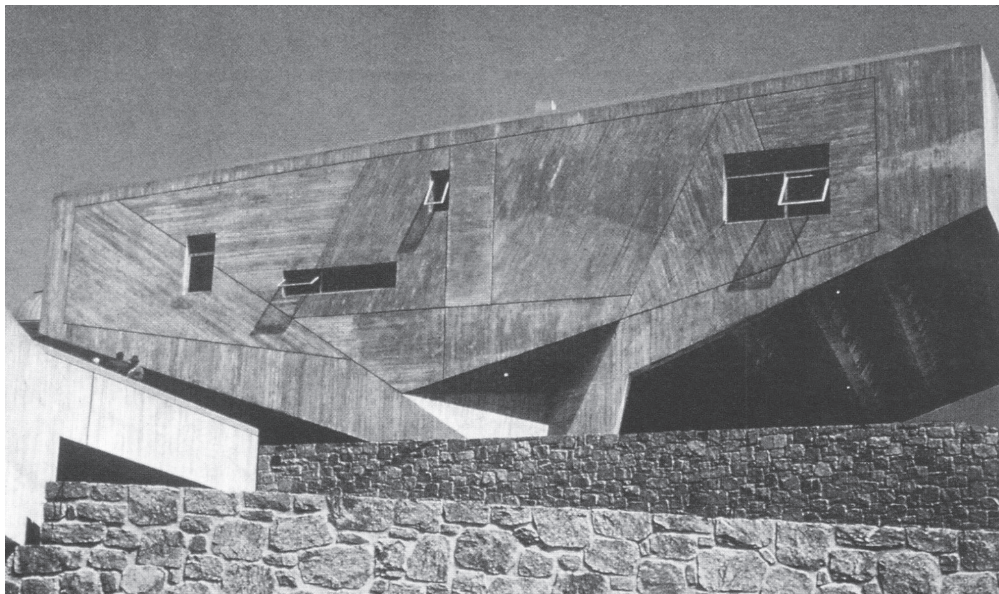


Figure 6: Marcel Breuer, University Heights, New York University, New York, 1961.

Photo courtesy of author.

due to a working through and improving of the same construction type. We limit ourselves to the construction that is possible at the moment and attempt to clarify it in all details. In this way we want to lay a basis for future development.⁴⁰

Apart from Mies's futuristic tone, Seidler's architecture affirms the significance of the German architect's tectonic experimentation. The "clarity" implied in Mies's statement is central for a comprehensive understanding of the tectonics of Seidler's tall buildings.

Using the term "isostatic," Frampton underlines the influence on Seidler of August Perret's tectonics of concrete construction. According to Frampton, the so-called baroque turn in Seidler's work, dating roughly from the mid 1960s, can be associated with the "layered quality of Seidler's later site planning," and the phenomenon of "curvilinear mass that governs his public work."⁴¹ The suggested turn is significant for a critical understanding of Seidler's architecture even though the idea was already at work in Breuer's UNESCO headquarters project of 1954. Breuer described the architecture of the twenties and thirties thus: "... there was a thin structure, a thin skin, transparent, only space." Ascribing his own departure from this early phase of architectural modernism to a number of developments, including "a change in the spirit of time," Breuer suggested that "mass appealed to us, gravity, solidity, a wall you can lean against and not just a glass wall" (Fig 6). In his words, this change "pushed architecture into what we call a more sculptural concept of architecture."⁴² While the post-war turn to rough surfaces and the aesthetics of *beton brut* can be traced to Le Corbusier's

design for the Villa le Sextant dated from the 1930s, this tendency also reflected the images of destruction and distorted objects left by the war.⁴³

What is most obvious in this contextualisation of Seidler's architecture is the work's indebtedness to Breuer's architectural vision. The inclination to sculptural mass was one of Seidler's major strengths. In a recent interview with this author, Wendy Lewin, a Sydney based architect, suggested that "he [Seidler] selectively used what he could in response to certain climatic issues, but only as far as it would inform a sculptural or an artistic form of response. And that to me has become one of the great strengths of his work."⁴⁴ The singularity of Seidler's architecture is better understood when Mies's tectonic experimentation is reworked through a monolithic perception of form derived from Breuer.

Consider the short tower of Australia Square. While the building's columns are placed to avoid underground watercourses, in addition to this pragmatic consideration, Seidler's strategy recalls Mies's tectonic figuration implemented in the already mentioned Convention Hall. Both in Australia Square and in Grosvenor Place, a cluster of four V-shaped columns holds up the building mass with each column sitting on a concrete base (Fig 7). Therefore, the twenty-eight columns of the upper stories of the short tower of Australia Square are reduced to seven short concrete pylons at the piloti level (Fig 8). This solution might have its roots in vernacular buildings. It also draws from one of Viollet-le-Duc's visionary projects. In what seems to be a public hall, the French architect depicts an image where a finger-like iron structure supports parts of a vaulted ceiling. If this association seems far-fetched, a minimal familiarity with the architecture of Breuer provides ample references for Seidler's tectonics. At Breuer's UNESCO Headquarters (1952) the entire mass is lifted up by a V-shaped concrete supports. There are indeed numerous examples in Breuer's public buildings of such a structural system. It seems that the architect wanted to re-think and transform Le Corbusier's vision of the piloti into an image where weight is expressed through tectonic figuration rather than through volume.

The cylindrical tower of Australia Square projects a different tectonic image. Here the volume looks as if it is hung from its 20 reinforced concrete columns positioned around the building's central core. The image is reinforced by various factors including the tapering of the columns as they soar, revealing the circular geometry of the tower (Fig 1). Mention should also be made of the exposed waffle slab of both the lobby and the first floor where a reticulated structural soffit spans the entry level (Fig 9). The tectonic articulation between the columns and the lobby's ceiling instead recalls the tectonic image permeating Mies's Farnsworth House (1951). The volume of the house looks as if it is hung from its steel frame while separating the enclosure from the vertical support system. This is also clear from details connecting the columns of the cylindrical tower of Australia Square to the horizontal perimeter beams at its roof. Assisted by Nervi,



Figure 7: Grosvenor Place, Sydney.
Photo courtesy of author.

the tower was conceived by Seidler as a perforated structure made of a central concrete cylindrical core woven into the ceiling-web of the first two floors. The task of the spandrel beams of the remaining floors is merely to connect the peripheral columns to the suggested virtual structural fabric.

The strategy for connecting the upward tapering columns to the geometry of the plan is also implemented in the MLC Centre (Fig 10). The uneven-sided octagonal footprint of this tower makes its long sides look as if they are four surface-enclosures supporting the volume's monolithic form. On closer inspection, however, what looks like "surface" is actually a series of structural beams separated by bands of windows. To emulate an I-beam cut, the section of these beams tapers into a rectangular shape at both ends. The upward tapering of the external columns visually suggests that these columns are the main structural support system of the tower. At the same time, the external configuration of the tower's built elements suggests on the long sides of the octagon a surface-enclosure, a wall structural system. Even though the ribbed isostatic forms furnish the tower's soffit, the entire play between geometry, form, and the support system stop short of representing the tectonic of a skeletal structure of the kind readable in the main tower of Australia Square. The solution again recalls Breuer for whom one characteristic of concrete is

to present “both structure and enclosure and per consequence it expresses structure more directly than any other material.”⁴⁵ If this statement epitomises aspects of aesthetic sensibilities permeating the architecture of New Brutalism, in Seidler’s hand architectural developments unfolding at an international level had to be modified to accommodate a perception of building that is not dissociable from the concept of landscape discussed previously in this paper.

Coda

Most architects attempt to address the culture of building and its latest available re-interpretations informed by the contingencies of *time*. The inflections entailed in design that this implies work through both universal aspects of the culture of building and local conditions. How to use the Domino frame, for example, and still subject the design to the specifics of a given climate? Proceeding from this observation, through analysis of landscape, geometry and the tectonic in two of Seidler’s key urban projects, my aim has been to express the historicity of his architecture, one more time. Philip Drew writes, “Seidler was in distinct advantage, because his devotion to modern architecture was based on a heritage won by personal experience, rather than a tasteful eclecticism.”⁴⁶ While it is impossible to neglect the architectonic questions post-war architects took as their task to address, the singularity of Seidler’s urban work, as discussed throughout this essay, cannot be dissociated from a theoretical paradox that juxtaposes the concept of landscape with the project of modernity.

While many Australian architects were still using and abusing the architectural language of modernism developed in Europe and America, and when the New Brutalism in particular was a hot subject, Seidler declined to consider the movement’s sensibilities towards material and technique as a straightjacket solution. While there might be “no mystery, no romanticism, no obscurities about function and circulation,” to recall the late Banham’s elaboration of the architecture of brutalism, Seidler’s urban architecture carries this suggested matter-of-factness through a tectonics that signifies many things, including the idea that most of his buildings are “beautiful” sculpted masses. His urban projects are *singular* in that each is conceived in dialectical rapport with landscape, geometry, and their tectonic means. In this highly significant amalgamation, the “local” is weakened by the aesthetic of cosmopolitanism. Frampton observes that, “unlike Australian regionalists, whose output has varied in quality from romantic pastiche to sublime invention, Seidler’s architecture has always maintained a tension between a universal paradigm and its local variation. This dialectic is always there, wherein the one can be read against the other and vice versa and this oscillation has helped to save him from lapsing into sentimentality.”⁴⁷ Nowhere is the implied difference better understood than in the “plastic” form of Grosvenor Place. Here the angle of *brise soleil* is shifted



Figure 8: Australia Square, Sydney.
Photo courtesy of author.



Figure 9: MLC Centre Sydney.
Photo courtesy of Max Dupain.

from the vertical on the eastern and western enclosures (against the low angled sun) into the horizontal on the north where the sun is high.

There is another dimension to the *singular* attributed to Seidler's architecture, which relates to the project of modernity. While the dialectics of universal and local avoid legitimising the ready-made architectonic language available in current media-oriented global localities, the work of Seidler, among a few other Australian architects, is significant when compared to the architecture produced in countries with conditions similar to Australia. If this claim is mapped in the context of the idea of modernity as an incomplete project, then the task of a committed architect like Seidler should have been more difficult than that of his colleagues in Spain or Portugal, to mention two countries whose landscapes are also not yet totally commercialised. In Spain, for example, the rich historicity of the country's culture of building (for example, in the Catalan vault), and the late blossoming of its modernity (at the end of Franco's dictatorship) provided Spanish architects with an opportunity to produce a body of work most of which is unique. In the buildings of the so-called *La Transición*, spanning roughly 1975 to 1981, for example,



Figure 10: Australia Square.
Photo courtesy of Max Dupain.

... one can see that they remained to a high degree unaffected by the postmodernist crisis in architecture that dominated most of the West, casting doubt on the idea of modern architecture, its optimistic stance in respect to its role to improve human conditions, and its positive attitude towards rational techniques. In doing so Spanish architecture not only contributed a number of most original buildings but also succeeded to enrich modern architecture at that historical time.⁴⁸

Facing the invasion of global capital, Spanish architecture is sensitively guarded against the theatricalization permeating current neo-avant-garde architecture.⁴⁹ On the one hand, this is possible because of the role provincial cities play in delivering commissions to Spanish architects. On the other, it speaks for “an instinctive and profound feeling for the architecture of the ground, which was all the more intense, perhaps because until recently there has been no separate metier of landscape architecture in Spain.” Accordingly, Spanish architects “habitually inflect the contours of the ground to reinforce the expressive attributes of the form.”⁵⁰ Neither of these general conditions applies in Australian architecture.

The task facing Australian architects and historians seems more challenging today. Most architects in Sydney are split between the traditions of Sydney school architecture, and the architectonics of regionalism and internationalism in vogue in other places. If Seidler's urban projects in Sydney did map the spatial vicissitudes of cosmopolitanism, the fact that ninety percent of Australia's population today inhabits the everydayness of its urban areas reveals a distinctive feature of Australian architecture now. The central regions of the country are barely known territories, thus distinguishing the Australian experience from the American conquest of the west, which in turn had major bearing on the country's appropriation of modernity, read as capitalism, if you wish. Adding to the uniqueness of Australia is the historical fact that its indigenous peoples were mobile and never cultivated the culture of *dwelling*, in the Western sense. Urban concentration along the coast illustrates the uneven progress of Australian modernization. And this, in consideration of the present globalization of capital and information, suggests not only that the concept of landscape should be revisited, but also that Australian historians should check the libratory potential of globalization in their reassessment of the historicity of the paradox mentioned above and discussed in the opening pages of this essay. This project is a minor attempt to establish the following two points: firstly, to further clarify the theoretical specificity (there is no historiography without prejudice!) of this author's reading of Seidler's urban work; and secondly, to point out a historical fact that, similar to Spain and Portugal, Australia did not have the historical opportunity to be a major player in the destructive opening of the project of modernity. This is evident from the photographs of the country's built-environment taken during the early decades of the last century where both the image and its ambience resonate with the America of the mid-nineteenth century. The difference is explained better when these photographs are compared with images of European cities of the same period. What this comparison says is obvious: that as a nation Australia is a young country, and that for historical reasons it has not yet been able to develop its own language of civic architecture. Even though now might not be the time to think of the architecture of monumentality, one can still claim the following: that the very *delay* in formulating the historicity of the project of modernity for Australian architecture provides a critical platform for re-thinking and cultivating future architectural scenarios beyond Seidler's accomplishments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is dedicated to Nick Murcutt (1964-2011).

NOTES

1. Reyner Banham, introduction to *Harry Seidler, 1955/63: houses, buildings, and projects*, by Harry Seidler (Sydney: Horwitz Publications, 1963), 7.
2. These ideas are explored in an expanded version of the present text. The original manuscript was written in late 2006. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the authors of the two review reports which assisted me in refining the essay at hand.
3. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. F. Etchells (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), 146.
4. Jennifer Taylor, *Australian Architecture Since 1960* (Sydney: Law Book Company, 1986), 12.
5. Andrew Metcalf, *Architecture in Transition: The Sulman Award 1932-1996* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of NSW, 1997), 39.
6. Quoted in Alice Spigelman, *Almost full circle: Harry Seidler a biography* (Rose Bay, NSW: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2001), 169.
7. Robin Boyd, *Australia's Home: its origins, builders and occupiers* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1952).
8. Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 145.
9. Boyd, *Australia's Home*, 146.
10. See Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1963), 144-45.
11. Harry Seidler, afterword 1979 in *The Australian Ugliness*, by Robin Boyd, rev. ed. (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Australia, 1979), 261.
12. On this subject see my remarks, "In Lieu of a Response to ATR's call," *Architectural Theory Review* 11, no. 1 (2006): 1-4.
13. Gevork Hartoonian, "In Lieu of a Response to ATR's call," 1-4.
14. See for example, Paul Hogben, "Uncovering the Strategic: the appeal to nature in early twentieth century architectural discourse in Australia," *Interstices, Journal of Architecture and Related Arts*, no. 10 (2009): 75-88.
15. These ideas are unpacked in narrative form in Julie Willis & Philip Goad, "A Bigger Picture, Reformulating Australian Architectural History," *Fabrications* 18, no. 1 (2008): 7-23. I say narrative because in the absence of any suggested historiographic paradigm (theory?), the authors' "big picture" establishes nothing but a transparent rapport between the historian's eye and the subject of investigation, Australian architecture.
16. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: technology and the pastoral ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).
17. E. R. Hill, "The imaginary life: landscape and culture in Australia," *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 29 (1991): 12-27.
18. See Philip Drew, *Leaves of Iron: Glenn Murcutt, pioneer of an Australian architectural form* (Sydney: North Ryde, 1991).
19. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 33-44.
20. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960).
21. Dennis Sharp, introduction to *Harry Seidler*, by Harry Seidler (Mulgrave, Vic.: Images Publication Group, 1997), 10.
22. On this subject see Philip Drew, *Two Towers* (Sydney: Horwitz Grahame, 1980).
23. Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949).
24. On this subject see Gevork Hartoonian, "The Position of Drawing," *Architectural Theory Review* 14, no. 3 (2009): 248-259.
25. Robin Evans, *The Projective Cast: architecture and its three geometries* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 180.

26. The following pages on the Bauhaus school were written prior to this author's reading of the catalogue of the Bauhaus exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 2010.
27. See Eugen Gomringer, *Josef Albers* (New York: George Wittenborn Inc., 1966), 50.
28. Barry Schwabsky, "'Modernism: Designing a New World 1914-1939'; Victoria & Albert Museum, London," *Artforum International* 45, no. 1 (2006): 370-71
29. Gomringer, *Josef Albers*, 75-76.
30. He also said that in GraphicTectonics "surfaces are evoked by bands of parallel lines." Gomringer, *Josef Albers*, 76.
31. D'ArcyThompson, *On Growth and Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), originally published in 1917. Exploring natural forms, Thompson made an attempt to present a mathematical explanation for the structural geometry of natural forms. He also argued that the tension existing between joints of a geometrical structure is the same that informs artificial structures. Thompson's text motivated architects like Ann Tyng to turn to the design of space frame structures.
32. Gomringer, *Josef Albers*, 120.
33. Taylor, *Australian Architecture Since 1960*, 56.
34. Drew, *Leaves of Iron*, 6.
35. Kenneth Frampton, "Isostatic Architecture," in *Harry Seidler: Four Decades of Architecture*, ed. Kenneth Frampton & Philip Drew (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), 110.
36. Frampton, "Isostatic Architecture," 106.
37. Here I am drawing from my reading of Gottfried Semper, but also the work of many other architects associated with nineteenth-century German Romanticism. For an in-depth understanding of the concept of tectonic, I refer the reader to the following three books: Harry F. Mallgrave, *Gottfried Semper, architect of the nineteenth-century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995); and Gevork Hartoonian, *Ontology of Construction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
38. On the subject of style see Gevork Hartoonian, "In What Style Could they Have Built?" *Fabrications* 17, no. 2 (2007): 72-91.
39. See Drew, "Isostatic Architecture," 6.
40. Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe on the art of building*, trans. Mark Jarzombek (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 338-39.
41. Frampton, "Isostatic Architecture," 108.
42. Isabelle Hyman, *Marcel Breuer, the Career and the Buildings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 150.
43. Arata Isozaki, *Japan-ness in Architecture*, trans. Toshiko Mori (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 43.
44. Wendy Lewin, "Conversation," *Architectural Theory Review* 11, no. 1 (2006): 43.
45. Hyman, *Marcel Breuer, the Career and the Buildings*, 157.
46. Philip Drew, "Ethic and Form: The Architecture of Harry Seidler, 1948-1980," *Space Design* 81, no. 2 (1981): 89-90.
47. Frampton, "Isostatic Architecture," 110.
48. AlexanderTzonis & Liane Lefaivre, "Time of Transition," in *Spain Builds, 1975-2005*, ed. Luis Fernández-Galiano (Madrid: Arquitectura Viva, 2005), 53.
49. On this subject see Gevork Hartoonian, *Crisis of the Object: the architecture of theatricality* (London: Routledge, 2006).
50. Kenneth Frampton, "The Flag Was in the Breeze," in *Spain Builds, 1975-2005*, ed. Luis Fernández-Galiano (Madrid: Arquitectura Viva, 2005), 87.