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re:assemblage

Re: Miralles and Pinós

By John Knesl

I would like to take the opportunity for a lively dialogue offered by *Re:assemblage* to respond to the work of Miralles and Pinós and to the commentary by Lauren Kogod (*Assemblage* 7). It is questionable whether Kogod's introductory opposition of architecture as language and architecture as experience for and of the body is either sustainable or useful as a framework for the subsequent critique without much further discussion of body, mind, subject, object, and so forth. Nevertheless Kogod's observations show some interesting and perhaps telling vacillations. While she sets the tone by declaring that *movement* and its *representation* are central to this work, she describes the stairs in the La Lluana school alternately as having an "expressionistic and anthropomorphic quality" and as "representing both an active body and a site for action," a "jungle gym and a stage set." In the end, the (classical) idea of architecture as representation prevails: "The body is presented as an agent in motion"; there is a "narrative of human scale," even the "proposition of a *promenade architecturale*." This would take us right back to the Beaux Arts.

Admittedly, it would seem that the work itself may suffer from a certain ambiva-

lence in this respect, and statements made by Enric Miralles in the course of an interview earlier this year seem to betray the same ambivalence in the architects' thinking: On the one side, *representation* and the *communication of meaning* as the principal aim for architecture — as when Miralles refers to his interest in Serra's work "because it deals in a very pure and conceptual way with problems of the body's movement through space" — and, on the other side, *direct bodily experience* — as when he speaks about his interest in "how one's eyes can be made to go deeper into things . . . : where your eyes stop seeing, there you start thinking" — this latter, a total reversal of the traditional classicist use of architecture as depiction, allegory, or exemplification of a certain "content" (see *GSAPP Newslines*, Columbia University, March 1989, p. 2). I would, however, argue that the work in its forcefulness brings up issues that the comments fail to pursue. These issues pertain to two questions that are, in my opinion, the most critical for architecture today: architecture as *representation* of the body and of the movement of the body; and architecture as a fundamentally *structural order* subject to collisions and displacements.

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It would appear that any priestly or academic theory of architecture — and thus also that school of thought called classical humanism — proceeds by reducing architectural form and space to a sign of some absent content, a truth, a fiction, a command, a threat, a seduction, a reference to an infinitely recursive chain of meanings that would direct and discipline thinking, body, and life into conformance with a certain order of things. Renaissance architectural theory therefore seeks to *represent* in the *image* of the building the purified body of man, which, in turn, represents the body and spiritual power of god. The magic (and the trickery) of an architecture that could actually transform people into something else in a wild dance of body and world is repressed behind the (distancing) screens of representation. Hand in hand with representation goes the elevation of structural order to the place of the ideal and of the divine/absolute that the physical model of such order is to represent symbolically. Structural order is based on a flow of hierarchical power from the apex/center/god and on laws of transformation/transposition between the codified members constitutive to the structure. These principles, by exchanging bodily life (and death) for a system of symbols, assure the structure an unchanging identity.

It must suffice here merely to adumbrate two views that leave these classical ideas behind. First, while representation serves to absorb and transform intensities and forces into (structural) sign systems, non-representative (“abstract”) form is free directly to engage the body and life and to be engaged by it. Second, although structural orders of space remain tied up with the classical structuring of space, time, ethics, and so forth, we are today at the threshold of a more powerful order made of nonstructural, multiplicitous, transver-

sal engagements between othernesses that open up new dimensions of intensity.

A closer look at the work of Miralles and Pinós reveals it to be much less representational than it seems. It also goes beyond mounting a neomodernist negation of classical structural order, a negation represented in images of antistructural order — whether or not the architects’ own statements confirm this. I think that their practice, driven by their engagements rather than by a desire to represent, runs ahead of their “theory” (which is, at any rate, problematic only for the classical subject/author).

In the La Lluana school, notice, for instance, that the slope of the handrails of the ramps is steeper than the ramps themselves. While seemingly an insignificant detail, there is clearly here a suppression of the echoing of the ramp slope, which would have worked in the direction of a representation of the movement of the body. The section shows that the stair-ramps are slid into the existing building less to produce a collision within a structural order than to open up a new dimension of experience and space. The stair is not treated as an object and is therefore not a stage set (which would have required some framing to make a scene), but an assemblage of planes, shafts of space, screens, plates, steps. Notice, too, that the ramps stop short of touching the floor: not continuity, not movement represented, but an encounter between the ground and an open series of planes that are “moving” up. The sides of the stairs are formed by wild screens that form an airy shaft of space and have but the thinnest of edges for handrails. Again, the movement and touch of the hand is not represented; instead, the architects emphasize the openings cut into the floors and the shaft of vertical space. Likewise, the freestanding diagonal wall

on the second floor is neither a representation of movement nor primarily a collision, but the opening up of a multiplicity of spaces in front, behind, and to the sides.

In Miralles and Pinós’s social center in Barcelona, there is, despite appearances, little representation. The outside ramps, while dramatic, are, in my opinion, inessential to the project. The critical question is whether the spatial order employed is structural or a type of nonstructural, collusive multiple assemblage. A (relatively) prevailing assemblage does exist. The serrated ramped wall and the long, curving outer wall encounter one another to form a corner. The erosion of this corner where the walls join creates a full-height entry space into the sunken great hall inside and, with an abrupt turn by way of a stair between outer and inner wall, an entry to the first floor. The encounter between various public spaces, from the open street to the walled-off court above to the spaces within the building, is intensely concentrated. The setovers in both walls (and the shifts in the ramps) correspond to the points at which the trusses impact; trusses and walls meet one another, rather than being integrated under the dominance of one structural order. This leads to what might be read as dramatic representations of displacements arising from collisions. But is a (diverting) story being told here or do these engagements open up intensive feelings about the trusses, about vigorous but light-footed spanning, about the sky and the sun that penetrate the building at that spot? And what would such intensities mean for the people meeting in these spaces? As the three spanning platforms leave slits in roof and wall, the superimposed planes set back and rotate toward the corner, topped finally by a triangular roof plate. This overshoots the façade and follows the plane of the curving outer

wall, leaving a long tensed-up slit that joins the vertical slit through which one enters. Light from above follows the descent of the slit into the space between the double walls into which the staircases are squeezed. The strongest intensity arising from all these encounters is that of a hollow in the ground entered through its corner, where bridges float between walls that are so fragmented as to make the suspension most precarious. While the cross section looks more like the conventional idea of assemblage as a mounting and a colliding of readymades, I think that the engagement is greater between trusses, vertical and horizontal planes,

terraces, and upwardly inclined planes as well as between such “walls” and the outside spaces.

To see in the work of Miralles and Pinós a variety of Catalanian regionalism could be justified only were that concept to be sharpened into a truly critical tool. The critical action in regionalism should not be sought in (negative) resistance, but in the very unreserved affirmation of what ought to be called the *body of a place*, that is, of the nonstructural, heterogeneous, multiplicitous, “assemblagist” orders of space, of social relations, of local culture that suffuse the more obvious

structural types of order. This order is not distilled and reduced to a concept and style but absorbed by the body and lived directly. Clearly the work of Miralles and Pinós counters — but does not negate — the local character (the Barcelona street wall, for instance); but, more important, it begins to assemble new orders of and for life. On balance, I think (despite the architects’ own statements and perhaps more interestingly so for them), one should see here more than a regionally colored resumption of early modernism, but rather steps in directions that modernism has lost the courage to follow.