

## Bridgeport Center: Re-Minding Richard Meier

Gevork Hartoonian

To cite this article: Gevork Hartoonian (1990) Bridgeport Center: Re-Minding Richard Meier, Journal of Architectural Education, 44:1, 33-36, DOI: [10.1080/10464883.1990.11102665](https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.1990.11102665)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10464883.1990.11102665>



Published online: 31 Mar 2015.



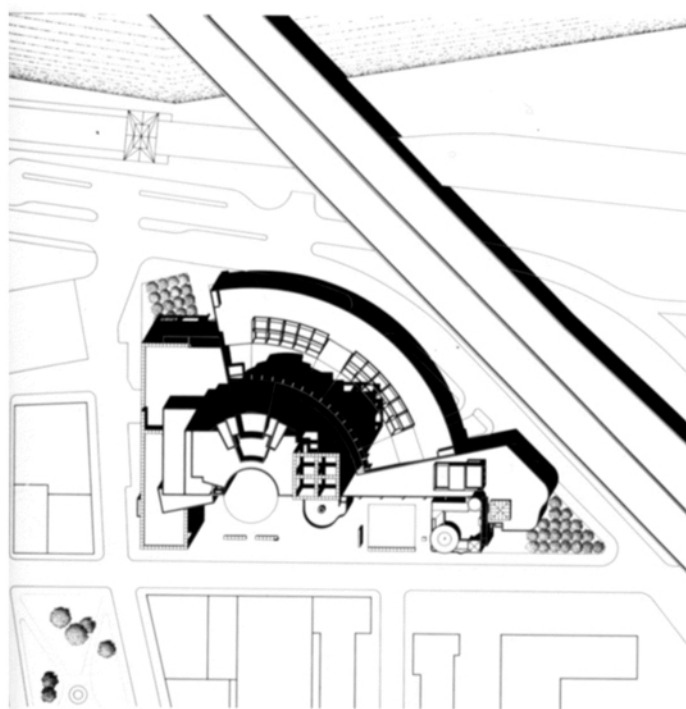
Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)

## Bridgeport Center: Re-Minding Richard Meier

GEVORK HARTOONIAN, *Drury College*



1. Site plan.



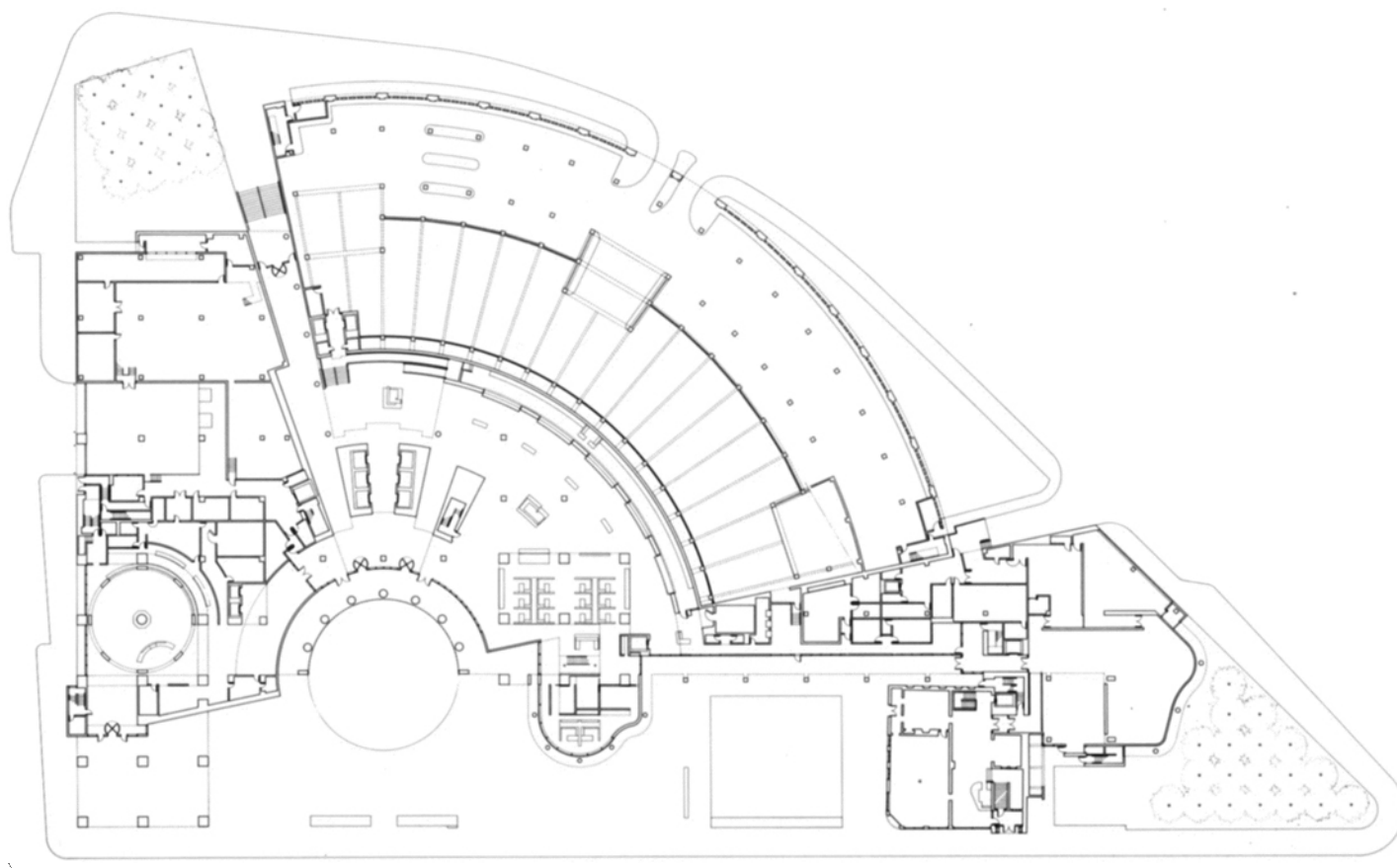
2. View of the eastern side on Main Street. (Photograph: Ezra Stoller © Esto)

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH RICHARD MEIER'S *BRIDGEPORT CENTER* comes from its publication in *Zodiac*, no. 1 (1989). The observer, trying to read the view of the western side on Main Street, can hardly locate the Barnum Museum (built in 1891 and later renovated with an addition by Meier) in the overall organization of the plan (Figure 1), part of which extends an arm and encircles the Barnum Museum. Close to this friendly contextual ensemble, there stands a Corbusian piloti whose white undulating piano-shape enclosure negates any expected contextualism (Figure 2). Later, visiting the site of this project, my initial impression of complexity and contradiction turned in favor of comprehending Meier's architectural statement on construction and city.

The current avid interest in high-rise corporate towers reveals that two courses of action are typically pursued. Learning from Philip Johnson, some architects ornament their steel-frame structures with stones carved to simulate historical forms. Others use Miesian steel and glass architecture with art-deco motifs. Both alternatives disregard Mies's concern for city and "construction," which is so evident in the Seagram Building. Meier's Bridgeport Center refines Miesian tradition by means of a critical comment on architectural language.

The Bridgeport Center's language is heterotopic; it questions classical and modern esteem for rigid and uniform geometrical forms. Both in plan and massing, Meier elaborates the notion of fragmentation, itself by now a modern tradition. The geometry of plan is organized in response to questions concerning the program, the placement of the entrance, the situation of the adjacent buildings, and the site (Figure 3). The radiating form of the plan around the main lobby and core area confirms the notion of frontality, while the straight extension of the northern side along State Street encloses the plan's radiating movement and emphasizes the entrance. Set back from the street front, this entrance presents the architectural motif of invitation by creating a semipublic realm within a large Palladian circular niche. This configuration is further strengthened by a series of setbacks on the rear of the building; their form follows the curve of the adjacent street (Figure 4). The same fragmentation occurs in massing, but the purpose is different: here, fragmentation is in the service of recollection of architectural language, not by simulation, but in tectonic form. Meier's language of fragmentation is a critical statement on the prevailing tendency to perceive monolithic forms as a logical prototype for tall buildings. By breaking down and dispersing the volume into different components, Meier has designed an office building that is sensitive to the scale and character of the place.

Meier refines his design by interlocking tactile sensibilities, color, and materials with the art of construction of purposeful space (Figure 5). I am thinking of the portico, the punctuated windows



3. Plan for the entrance level.

above it, and the treatment of its corners. The portico serves as the entrance to State and Main streets, but also allows the Barnum Museum to be seen from the main traffic intersection. The massive piers of the portico (Figure 6) and their proportion to the rest of the volume recall some aspects of Aldo Rossi's architecture. Meier's neorationalist language is refined by the color of its finish and stylistic density of the window sills, both of which mirror the brown color of the existing building's cast stone. Meier has chosen the same language and aesthetic coloration for the southern part of the main tower. The rest of the tower is more contemporary in its treatment, juxtaposing openings with enclosures.

The above reading suggests that, first, Meier rejects the possibility of any coherent architectural language; second, that as a good craftsman, he "has always worked as if no possible alternative existed." His work leans toward that tradition that attempts to expose "the tra-

ditional forms of modern architecture" (Joseph Rykwert, *Richard Meier Architect*, 1984). This second point has further implications worth noting.

Exploring LeCorbusier's experience in the *Maison Domino*, Meier unfolds an architectural discourse where the notion of construction is critical. In *Bridgeport Center*, Meier departs from the Renaissance idea of construction as composition, as well as the neoplasticist interest in abstract constructs. Both in classical and neoplasticist architecture the rationality of construction is reconciled with expression. Renaissance architecture consolidated the aesthetics of anthropocentrism by rendering its facades in analogy to human body. To this end, detailing remains a critical element: it covers the construction joints and kindles the illusion of an organic unity. The appropriate use of fascia and cornice as detailing devices covers the proportional rise of a wall and signifies (as Andrea Palladio would



4. View of the southeast side from the roof terrace of the parking garage. (Photograph: Jeff Goldberg/Esto © 1989)

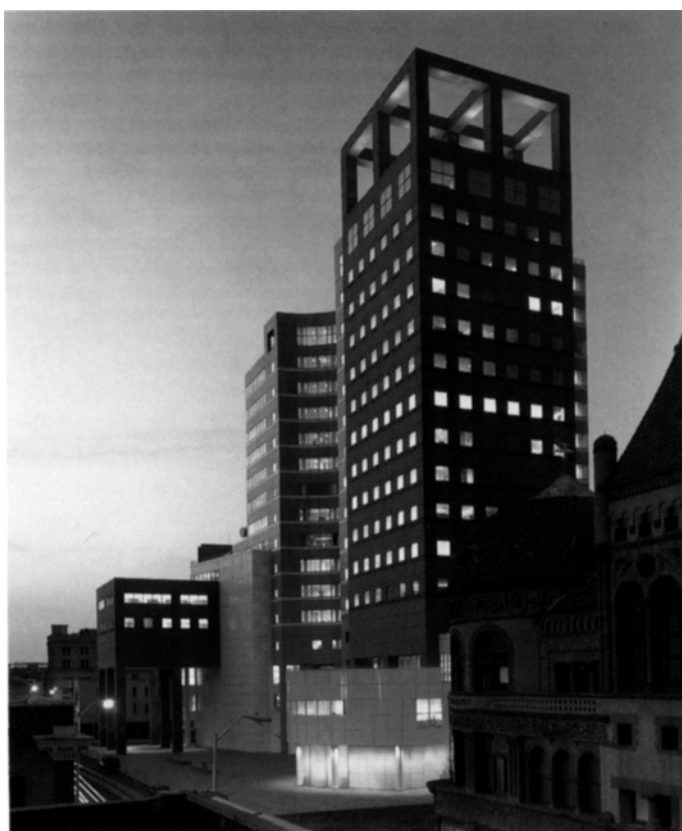


5. View of the central atrium. (Photograph: Jeff Goldberg/Esto © 1989)

maintain) arms holding the body of the building. Apart from this Renaissance interpretation, one can also identify another attitude toward construction in De Stijl, wherein the product displays the mere technique of fabrication. Meier's heterotropic language, on the other hand, and his emphasis on fragmentation, unfold a modernist concept of construction embedded in Theodor Adorno's triad of *abstraction*, *dissonance* and "*the new*" (*Aesthetic Theory*, 1984).

In Bridgeport Center, construction and expression are dialectically related to each other. Meier integrates materials and detailing in such a way that the final form preserves the aesthetics of fragmentation. The southern tower and the northern portico are conspicuously attached to their adjacent volumes. The language of these two parts is differentiated from the rest of the building, both in grammar and tone. However, the form that appears is in discord with the rationality of the construction and the homogeneous organization of the space

behind it. The organization of the facade of the southern tower does not correspond to its plan, as it might in a Rossi project. Rather, it designates the idea of an enclosure, in much the same way that the curtain wall of the other parts of the tower does. These two volumes are distinguished also by the color of their finish and the architectural treatment of the corners. The massive appearance of the corners in the southern tower contrasts with the transparent enclosure of the corners of the northern part. Meier's heterotropic language entails an idea of attachment that is able to express a joint of detachment (Figure 7). One might discern the formal effect of Meier's design from certain postmodern work, which uses the pictorial techniques of "papier colle" (Michael Graves) or "collage" (James Stirling) to achieve the same result. Meier's design technique, on the other hand, recalls the cinematographic idea of montage. The southern tower and the portico could be read as two separate parts of an overall plot. Yet, as is the



6. View of the western side on Main Street (Photograph: Jeff Goldberg/Esto © 1989)



7. Detail of the western side on Main Street with entrance. (Photograph: Ezra Stoller © Esto)

case with a well-crafted cinematography, the work does not eliminate the fragmented process of its production.

Finally, Meier's concept of construction elevates his metier to a critique of the existing architectural production. Having employed the so-called white architecture for many years, Meier now expresses his disagreement with the classical (and modern) esteem for total harmony. The Bridgeport Center is a significant statement of resistance to the on-going process of commodification of architecture, celebrated throughout the postmodern excursion to Las Vegas. Meier's craftsmanship has secured a position in the field that is less accessible to the temptation to market the new. It cannot be by chance that, in

a recent gathering of scholars and architects to assess the last fifteen years of American Architecture (Harvard School of Design, April 1989), no reference was made to Meier's work. A query about the reason for this omission elicited the response that Meier's architecture had not changed enough!

### Acknowledgment

My thanks to Richard Meier & Partners Architects for their cooperation in providing the illustrations.