

IN CONTEXT: TSCHUMI AT LERNER HALL

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THERE IS NO ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT ACTION, NO ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT EVENTS, NO ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT PROGRAM.

BERNARD TSCHUMI

WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS THAT MAKE AN EVENT POSSIBLE? EVENTS ARE PRODUCED IN A CHAOS, IN A CHAOTIC MULTIPLICITY, BUT ONLY UNDER THE CONDITION THAT A SORT OF SCREEN INTERVENES.

GILLES DELEUZE

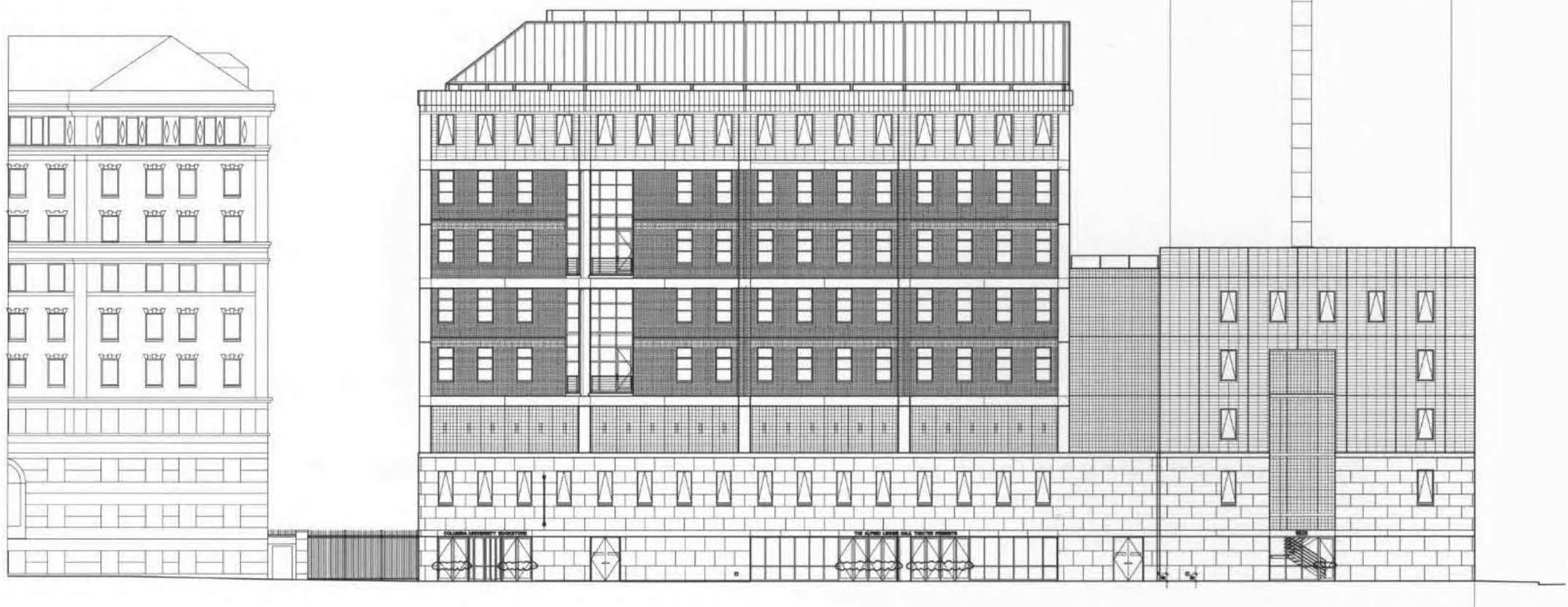
Bernard Tschumi's Lerner Hall at Columbia University opened its doors to incoming students in late August. Conceived as a hub of academic and social life on campus, the building houses student mailboxes, computer rooms, student lounges, offices, restaurants, seminar rooms, a bookstore, an auditorium, and a black box theater. Programmatically, the student center is a hybrid mix of academic order and urban buzz, curricular and extracurricular activities. Examined in relation to Tschumi's many writings on the notion of "event," the student center crystallizes the difficult moment when a theoretical model finds its architectural translation.

Tschumi's notion of "event space," which he developed in a series of articles in the 1970s and 1980s and compiled in the book *Questions of Space*, emphasizes the programmatic, non-material as the essence of architecture: "There is no architecture without action, no architecture without events, no architecture without program."¹ In these essays Tschumi directs his criticism against both modernist and postmodernist practices, which had "turned architecture into a passive 'object' of contemplation instead of the place that confronts spaces and actions."² He seeks to challenge the dominant notion of "space", which emphasizes its bounded-ness; its quality is as a "lump of matter" sculpted into a static three-dimensional autonomous object. Tschumi prefers the concept of "event" to that of a "thing" because it captures the dynamism and processes involved in both urban and internal spatial strategies.

1: Bernard Tschumi, "Architecture and Violence," from *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), p. 121.

2: Bernard Tschumi, "Spaces and Event" from *Questions of Space: Lectures on Architecture* (London, Architectural Association, 1960), p. 89.

3: Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 76.



The Broadway facade of Lerner Hall

Tschumi's interest in dynamic events as opposed to static objects can be traced to the influence of Gilles Deleuze, whose underlying premise is that the world—nature, identity, social structures, and economics—is constantly in flux. Deleuze posited a new model for these systems, appropriate to an era when global economy, blurring of national boundaries, multiplicity of gender and race, and climactic fluctuations make Marx's systematic dialectics untenable. When Deleuze talks about "events" the word implies that every individual, every "thing," is engaged in and has to be understood in relationship to these dynamic processes and multitudinous possibilities, and that all these relationships are spatial.

In his book *The Fold* Deleuze explores the question of what it means to exist in a world permeated with flux and impermanence, where the individual is no longer a closed monad, whose task is to interpret the world around at distance, but rather a nomad,

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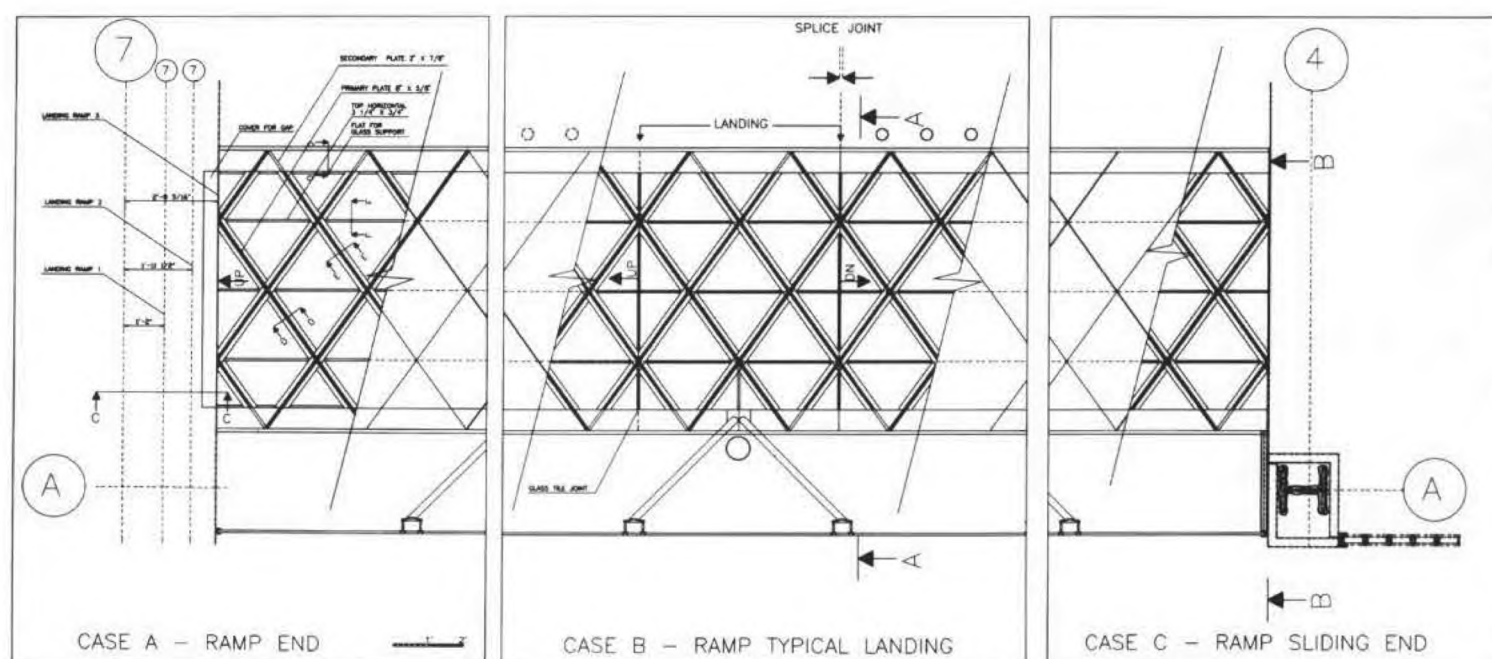
continuously conditioned and transformed by changing conditions and relations. Baroque architecture is used to demonstrate such dynamic relationships between physical environment and an experiencing subject. Deleuze calls this moment an "event" after Alfred North Whitehead who defined the term as a temporal and spatial moment constituted by "extensions," "intensities," and "individuals,"⁴ which produce constantly altering relationships. For Deleuze "events are fluvia,"⁵ always in the process of becoming.

THE INTENTION BEHIND LERNER HALL IS TO ENCOURAGE AND "ACCELERATE" SUCH DYNAMIC PROCESSES AND TO ALLOW NON-NORMATIVE BEHAVIOR AND UNPREDICATABLE ENCOUNTERS.

If Deleuze's project is to find a philosophy that does not flatten the inherent dynamism of the world into a static "world picture" or model, Tschumi tries to find architecture that does not prescribe behavior. The intention behind Lerner Hall is to encourage and "accelerate" such dynamic processes and to allow non-normative behavior and unpredictable encounters. As Tschumi points out in the interview in this magazine, the function of the glass court was to allow students to appropriate the space. His notion of "event space" is informed by the French intellectual and artistic culture of the 1960s dominated by radical left wing politics and social critique based on the belief that each individual is able to transgress the existing socio-political order and experience moments of self-realization.

4: Ibid. p. 79

5: Ibid p. 79



Plan detail of the steel and glass ramps

While the formal imagery of Lerner Hall is informed by various avant-garde architectures—the hyper-articulation of various elements, particularly circulation elements, pays homage to Russian constructivism and futurism—the idea of the unprogrammed space is reminiscent of the Situationist architect Constant. Tschumi shares with these previously avant-garde movements the desire to question what contributes to the perpetual production of novelty and self-realization. He insists that the answer to the production of such moments is not in the realm of the visual, that is, in formal innovation, but in the coexistence of the movements of the body and what Deleuze calls "movements of the soul." Like Deleuze, Tschumi does not hesitate to use words like "passion," "mood," and "atmosphere." Yet compared with Deleuze's and Whitehead's notion of event space as a constantly fluid condition marked only by shifting intensities, Tschumi's new event space at the Lerner Hall remains curiously trapped in a dialectic between static and dynamic, between the campus and the city.

Taking the original McKim, Mead and White plan for the Columbia campus with its double building-slab organization as a starting point, Tschumi uses the leftover, in-between space as a site to celebrate the unpredictable that characterizes urban life in general and student life in particular. The double strategy so conceived—"a quiet building on the outside; a stimulating building on the inside"—has both material and spatial implications: the two rectangular wings, one bordering Broadway, the other the side wall of university's main library, mimic the existing masonry structures and their spatial organization, whereas the high void space in the middle has a huge glass wall that reads as a continuum of the outside space. This large open space with zigzagging glass and stainless steel ramps hung from the steel trusses above celebrates the energy of the students moving through this in-between space before and after their classes. As the clearly definable functional requirements are housed in the slabs on both sides, the void in the middle thrives on the mix of multi-use programmatic elements.

**TSCHUMI'S NEW EVENT SPACE AT THE LERNER CENTER
REMAINS CURIOUSLY TRAPPED IN A DIALECTIC BETWEEN
STATIC AND DYNAMIC, BETWEEN CAMPUS AND THE CITY.**

The strategy makes a clear statement about the relationship to the McKim, Mead and White campus plan, but is perhaps less successful in integrating the building into its urban context. I would argue that the building undermines its strategic location between Broadway and the central plaza of the campus: programmatically, the building functions as a gateway into the campus, yet formally, it appears to turn in on itself. Viewed from the



Interior of the "Hub"



Uppermost level of the concrete ramps

Broadway side the building gives very little indication of its function as a mediator between the street and the interior of the campus. Viewed from the main lawn, the circulation zone, with its large glass wall, appears as an isolated element trapped between the two slab buildings, as people moving along the ramps disappear at each landing into the blind end-pieces. A clearer articulation of the ramps' relation to the entrance sequences on both sides would have allowed the circulation system within the building to read as an extension of that outside of the building. In the manner of Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center at Harvard, the building might have functioned as a link, a passageway, between different parts of the campus. So conceived the circulation would have become the main contextual strategy of the building by formally supporting the idea that it functions as a gateway.

Instead, Tschumi has settled into a more conventional contextual strategy by matching bricks with more bricks, cornice with cornice. With this strategy the building announces that its context is first and foremost the existing campus and not the campus and the city. This contextual strategy has wider social undertones. Formally the building turns its back to the city and reinforces its edge on Broadway. A counter-example of how an institutional building can profit from a similar edge condition is Louis Kahn's British Art Center at Yale. Located along Chapel Street, the busiest shopping street in New Haven, the building includes a variety of shops on the street level. The demand to give something back to the city came from Yale students. The Broadway side of the Lerner Center could have profited similarly, both programmatically and formally, from a more diverse occupation at ground level.

**THIS DESIRE TO CELEBRATE EVEN THE MOST BANAL ELEMENTS
OF DAILY ACTIVITIES IS THE ESSENCE OF THE PROJECT.**

Within the building, Tschumi has strategized to activate the glass court through innovative programming. The boldest move has been to compose the back wall of the glass court of thousands of mailboxes and to integrate them into the circulation ramps. This desire to celebrate even the most banal elements of daily activities is the essence of the project. Tschumi's architecture celebrates the activity at hand, choreographs it, and thereby gives it a larger dimension. Here, circulation does not merely entail moving from point A to point B; instead the ramps are unusually wide to allow people and functions to mingle.

To the detriment of this fine idea is a predominantly high-tech articulation in the glass court. Complicated railing details seem to undermine the power of the simple mailboxes and the life that goes around them. The sheer abundance of cable railings makes the space appear smaller and

visually over-stimulating. Perhaps a rougher and less precision-driven approach to detailing would have also been better suited to the casual way in which students use and occupy such places. Ad-hoc banners and ubiquitous postings have already overtaken the precision of the high-tech. The attempt at precision is also undermined by somewhat shabby craftsmanship: welding seams are badly done and concrete ramps have cracks in them.

Some of the less heroic formal and material articulations of space seem more appropriate to a celebration of program and activity. A lot of thought has been given to the way in which materials correspond to functions. The computer room walls are made of glass brick, which offers a diffuse light perfect for their use. The uppermost lobby under the skylights benefits from subtle shifts in flooring material which mark shifts in occupation: glass for the end of the ramp, terrazzo for the wide "interior street" and wooden floor and seats for a sitting area.

IN THE END THE FRICTION BETWEEN PROGRAMMATIC AND FORMAL STRATEGIES CONSTITUTES THE MAIN PROBLEM OF THE BUILDING.

The friction between programmatic and formal strategies constitutes the main problem of the building. Yet, to the extent that the Lerner Student Center represents an attempt to make the viewer an active participant and an integral part of the architecture, its value is already in evidence. In his writings Tschumi presents the idea of "events," "incidents," and "actions" as a kind of Situationist *événements*, which fulfill the double task as moments of radical emancipation and emotional intensity. The introduction of intensified experience can at least momentarily change life. The simplest definition of what constitutes an event might be Jean-Luc Godard's: "...one can say, after an event, 'I have lived'."⁶

6: Jean Luc Godard, *Godard on Godard* (New York, Viking Press, 1972) p. 218.



Sky lounge hanging in front of the student mailboxes