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Scene Space: Writing on Nouvel

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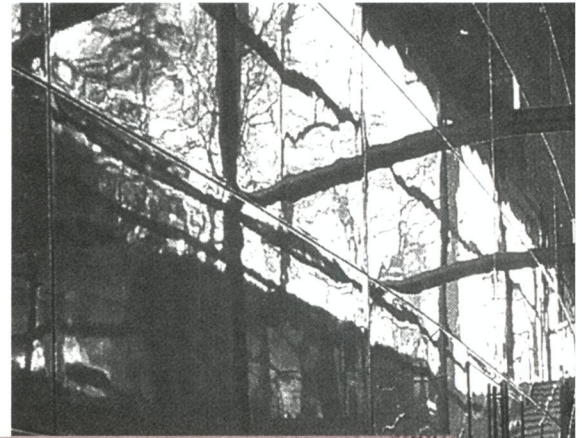
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Scene Space

Writing on Nouvel

Sarah Whiting



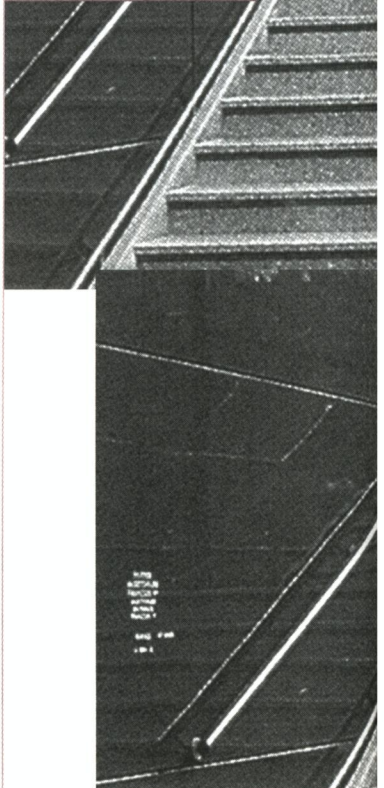
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All photos by Sarah Whiting except where noted.

I have to confess that I didn't really want to go see my assigned building. I was in Paris on vacation. Having left the paradoxically hectic life of Lexington, Kentucky, I was enjoying the liberty of metropolitan isolation ensured by the absence of answering machine or e-mail. My urbane tranquillity was interrupted by a fax assigning me Jean Nouvel's Congress Center in Tours – situated about a hundred miles southwest of Paris. There was no explanation as to why that particular building had been chosen over any other French building, or, for that matter, over any other Nouvel building (his Cartier Foundation was just down the street from me and was a much more recent *nouveauté*).

So it was with somewhat leaden espadrilles that my husband and I cut short our croissant/café hour and pushed off early the next morning for the Gare Montparnasse to catch the TGV for Tours. It was not a good sign that we had a struggle with the cashier at the train station when we tried to get the discount for couples offered by the French rail system. When presented with our passports, issued from different states, the cashier loudly proclaimed – as if we did not already know it – that our last names differed. When we could not produce our marriage license to corroborate our story, she announced with uns subtle satisfaction: "Hence, you





are not married!" After much cajoling, we convinced her to give us the discount card. Perhaps as a form of vengeance, she transformed my name into "Sarah Writing." As we sped off to Tours in the comfort of our hard-earned seats, I looked at the card over and over again, marveling at how a typographical error had made a title out of a pursuit and wondering whether my new appellation would have some magical effect on my written output.

As the train lulled me into a half doze, I considered the possibility that Nouvel too had acquired his name thanks to a disgruntled French railway employee's error. Nouvel, which of course means new – that which has not existed or has not been known until recently – is just too perfect a name for someone who, in describing his approach to architecture, invokes pinball, Formula One racing cars, airport lighting, cinema, and nightclubs rather than architectural history, tectonics, geometry, or program. His prophecy for the 21st century is that it will be the end of three-dimensional architecture: "Perspective will no longer be able to represent it. Space, volume, and formal intentions will no longer dominate architecture, which will be deeper, more mysterious, more differentiated, more difficult to confine. Architecture's attitudes will be less naive, less simplistic. Reasonings will be more complex, reasons more often hidden. Its new dimensions are interactive: time (speeds), lights (intensities), materials (touch), signs (images). Architecture will rise against the power of dominant forms; it will position itself as a form of liberation."¹

Although the description echoes contemporary interest in complex geometries and nonorthogonal form, it is more deeply rooted in May, '68: a utopian's vision of possibility, an architecture of liberation that will usher in a new world order, a Nouvel whirled order, a whirl of the transitory, the nocturnal, and the luminous. His frequent references to the efforts to instill direct democracy associated with the student revolts of the late 1960s suggest a populism, but it is a Baudrillard kind of populism – one that embraces our high-tech, high-speed environment – more than a Venturiesque populism of the commercial and of the sign.

I didn't know any of this when I was on the train heading for Tours. I deliberately went down without having done any background research (a denuded state for an academic), so that I could look at and perhaps begin to critique the object with unindoctrinated eyes, at least with respect to Nouvel. But even in this relatively unencumbered state I was nonetheless burdened by my position as critic, a practice with a history of its own. What does it really mean to critique a building?

It's not like writing about a film or a play, where a bad critique might actually make it go away. What audience am I to aim for? Am I to look at the building as an academic, an editor, a student, or an architect? And if a picture is worth a thousand words, just how many words is a building worth?

I wasn't very familiar with Nouvel's work, aside from such well-publicized projects as the Institut du Monde Arabe, the Cartier Foundation, and the commercial center for the Euralille project. All I knew about Nouvel himself were the occasional *Paris Match*-like stories that he seemed to generate with particular frequency during the late 1980s and early 1990s Parisian club scene. In December 1990 *Blitz* magazine described him as "astonishingly provocative and arrogant, in the manner that only a great architect, who is also both male and Parisian, can adopt. Nouvel resembles a sexy, villainous brute – a sort of Gerard Depardieu of architecture – and yet he produces buildings of incomparable finesse." Articles such as this never fail to note Nouvel's signature black T-shirt, black jeans, black jacket, and black hat.

To be honest, I didn't even know which building I was supposed to be looking for in Tours. I remembered reading something about Tours a while back, something about a museum extension competition, but I didn't remember Nouvel's name being mentioned. The fax had read, "Just go to Tours and look for something glassy and high-tech," so that's what we set out to do. When we arrived in Tours, I headed straight for the station's newspaper kiosk, hoping to find Nouvel's building either by postcard or with the help of one of those perspective maps that have cartoon sketches of a given city's major buildings.

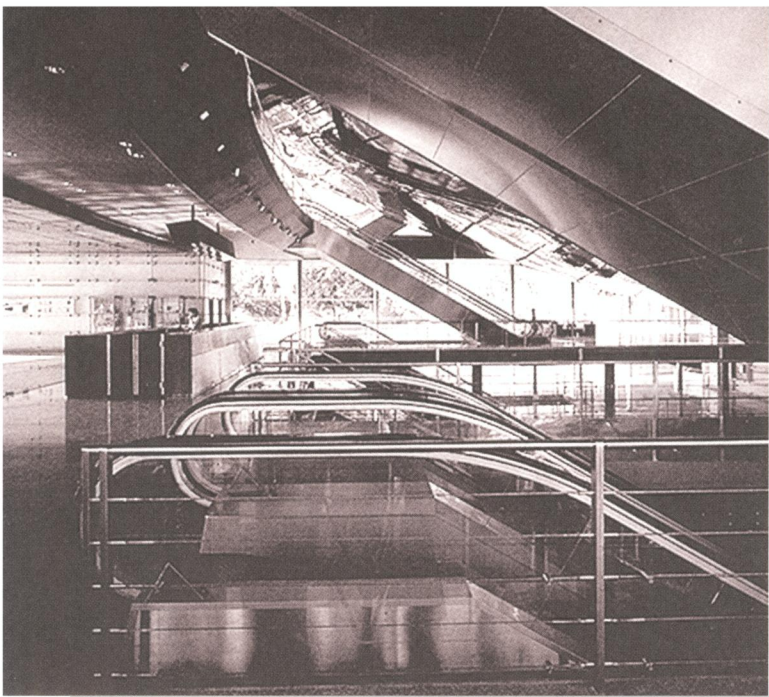
Before I even reached the kiosk, the beast made its presence known. Right across from the train station loomed what appeared to be a silver, black, and glass TGV spin-off that had somehow slipped loose from Victor Laloux's 19th-century train shed and metamorphosed into a Kafkaesque, urban-scaled Gregor Samsa: a creature crouching expectantly with what looked like the visor from an extraordinarily large baseball cap posed insolently upon its buggy brow. It gazed right at us, engaged in a permanent face-off with the train station. The gracefully thin steel mullions that support the sheets

AJN Architectures Jean Nouvel, Congress Center, Tours, France, 1994.



WHITING / CONGRESS CENTER



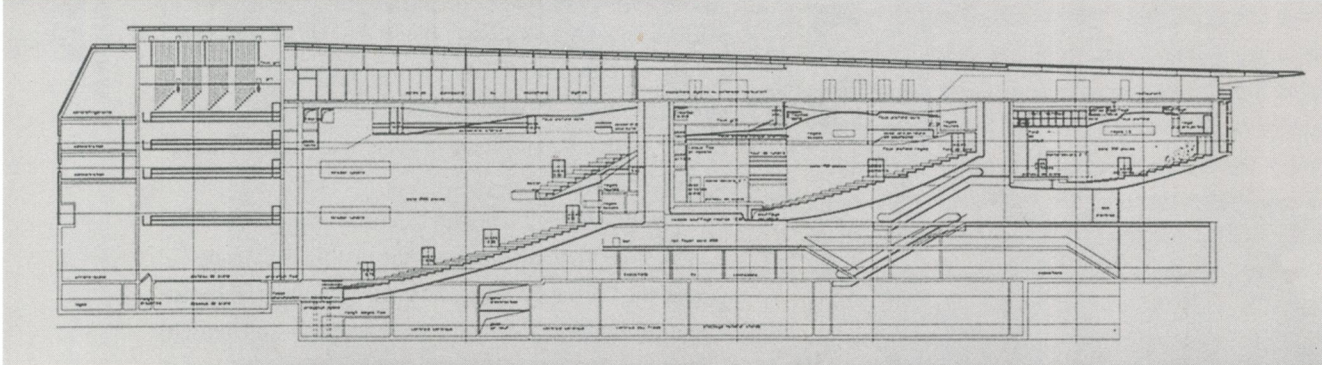


of glass in Laloux's arched vault glazing struggle hard to remain technologically significant when faced with this sleek beast's smooth, almost plastic glazing – its taut, horizontal mullions clip onto pronounced, thick steel columns to keep the building's bulge from busting forth. In this building the glass gains precedence over the mullions; the smooth surface over the structure. "Vinci," it beamed in red neon, scripting the creature's mouth; "viens ici," or "come here," it seemed to command.

The face-off between Laloux's train station and Nouvel's conference center assuaged any fears I had

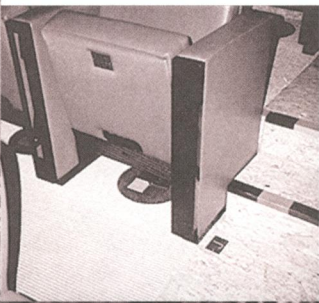
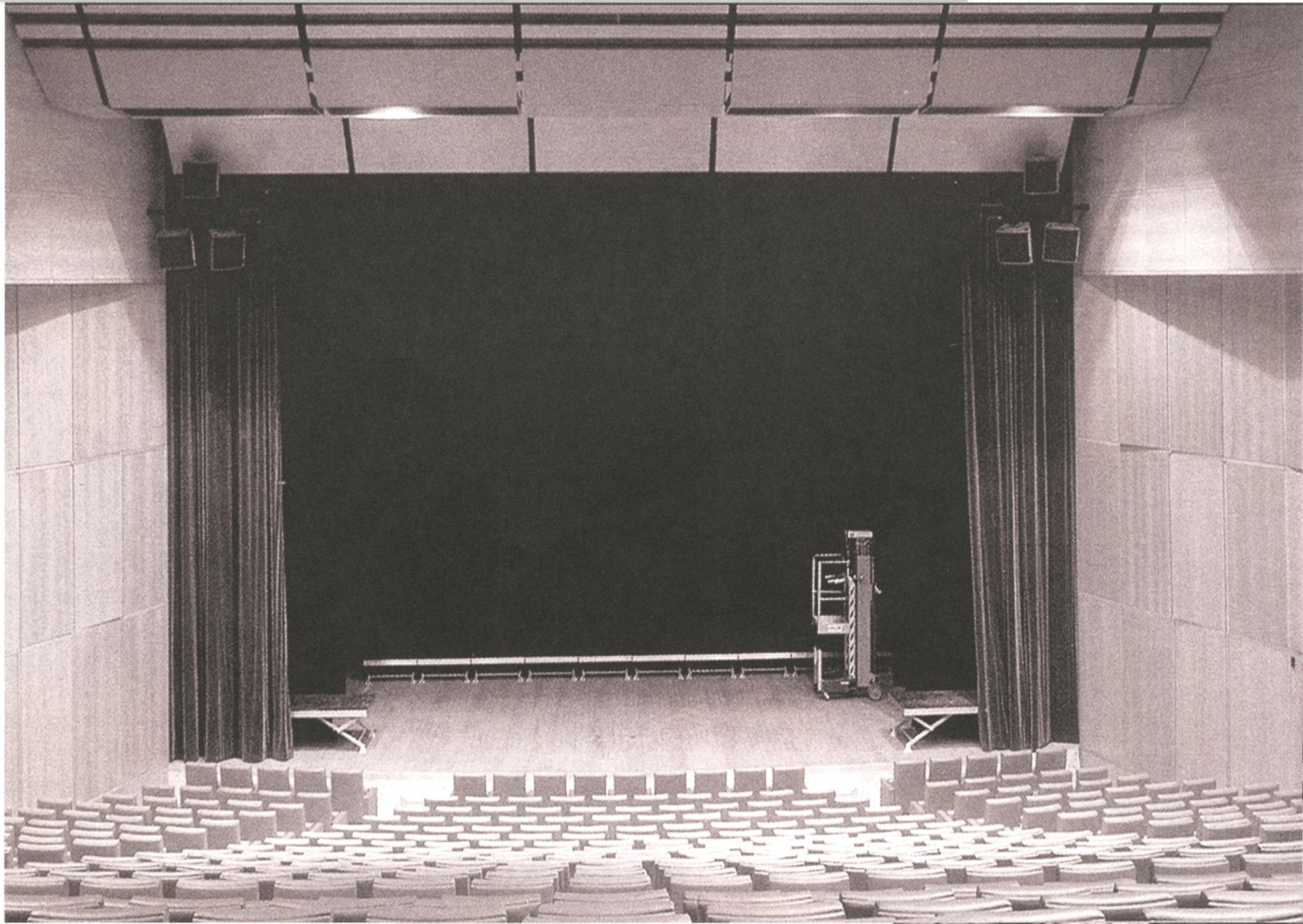
about having nothing to write. Typically conference centers are built at the edges or in empty zones of the city; consider, for example, the Chicago convention center, built along the lakefront, or Office for Metropolitan Architecture's Congrexpo in Lille, built over defunct rail lines. This building, however, stands right in the city center; its scale suggests that it is comparable to the other significant programs of Tours: the cathedral in the background, the courthouse, the police station, the museum. Yet although a conference center invites a public in for special events, it is a private entity. When no events are being held, it is programmatically opaque; even when events are being held, the attendees often include no one from Tours. The TGV permits national and international visitors to zip in, confer, and zip out, perhaps emerging during the intermission to take a quick tour of the nearby châteaux of the Loire.

This private quality causes the building to adopt its defiant stance. Like a somewhat annoying flying insect, it has landed on one of the city's most public places and it doesn't want to leave, even though it knows that it



Courtesy AJN Architectures Jean Nouvel.

Longitudinal section.



Above: View across the Place de General Leclerc to Congress Center.

Right: Victor Laloux's 19th-century train station as seen from inside center.



doesn't really "belong" there. A postcard (purchased at the train station kiosk) groups it with the City Hall and some medieval burgher houses, suggesting a timeline of municipal evolution from private to public and back to private again.

"Viens ici," the red neon continued to beseech . . .

We circled the building like entomologists careful not to disturb our find, fearing that it would simply fly away. We crossed the zone of mediation, the Place de General Leclerc, designed by landscape architect Yves Brunier in collaboration with Nouvel, that separates train station from conference center. The formal rigidity of the trees, planted in a gridded triangle, is offset by the bright pinks, reds, and whites of their flowers. A fountain, resembling a molten shell, perhaps shed in the great insect's metamorphosis, provides skylighting to the conference parking below.

Although the building appears aggressive face-on, it almost disappears when seen from the park along its side. The glass facades reflect and multiply the trees while the roof seems to have been peeled up from the surface of the park's ground plane. The other long facade, along the street, is similarly contextual, playing off the cornice lines across the street and continuing the horizontal striations of the neighboring limestone facades.

As we walked around the building, it no longer seemed so insectlike. Formally, the convention center is essentially symmetrical, but not regular. From the side, the logic of its form begins to read: three auditoria suspended above the lobby space, their bellies held in place by the hard shell of the roof and the taut skin of the facade. It is at once formless and unified: an ambiguous urban icon. In describing the building, Nouvel speaks of the paradox between its external simplicity and its internal complexity, its complicities and transparencies, its symmetries and diverse responses to the street and to the park. Curiously Nouvel's better known, more recent projects – such as the Cartier Foundation building in Paris – do not repeat this strategy of a complex interior within a simple, albeit nonorthogonal form, but return to rectilinear form and strategies of screened facades. The same year Nouvel executed the conference center, the Office for Metropolitan Architecture designed the ferry terminal at Zeebrugge. Both of these 1989 projects share a nonrecognizable, albeit noncomplex formal nature. What was it about that year that spawned two such curious forms? Why was this investigation into the unrecognizable not continued by either firm?

The muteness of the formal object begins to resonate once dusk falls over the city: the pull of the red neon sign jumps scale as the entire building begins to glow; its black and silver disappear into the night and instead what one sees is a spectrum of neon, fluorescent, and incandescent color. Visually resonating long after its neighboring public buildings have gone to bed, the convention center animates the city center, promising economic vitality for a city that hopes through tourism and conferencing to establish itself as the "crossroads of Europe." Indeed, the building is about arrival and departure more than it is about staying – it's an appropriate program for an architect fascinated by technologies of speed.

Given Nouvel's interests in speed, vision, and the 21st century, it is not surprising that one can draw an easy parallel between this building and Stanley Kubrick's sci-fi film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In her February 1969 *Artforum* article, "Bodies in Space," Annette Michelson describes *2001* as being about movement. Michelson's analysis of the movie is startlingly appropriate for Nouvel's building; she describes the narrative as a "voyage of discovery, a progress towards disembodiment . . . the structural potentialities of haptic disorientation as an agent of cognition. . . . Viewing," Michelson concludes, "becomes, as always but as never before, the discovery." One could read Nouvel's convention center as a collapsed version of Kubrick's color-saturated skies of jupiter, through which the astronaut Bowman must travel to go beyond the third dimension, to reach infinity. One must pass through the threshold of the building's skin to understand that here too viewing becomes a process of discovery.

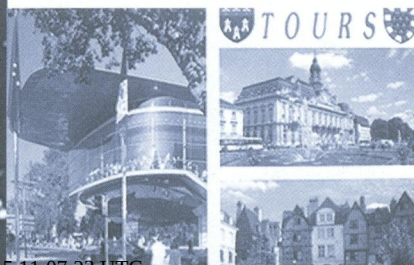
When we entered the building on the heels of two workmen, we were met with startled looks at the reception desk. The convention center, we were quickly informed, was closed. We explained what we were doing and were lucky enough to encounter a public relations coordinator who happened to have lived a very happy year in Manhattan. Probably hoping that *ANY*'s coverage would encourage Americans to confer in Tours, she gave us a generous two-hour tour of the building, showing us everything from the seating details in the auditoria to the loading dock. While one would presume that entering the building would help to elucidate this mysterious object, the interior is actually a realm where perception is perpetually teased through plays of reflection, luminosity, transparency, and a deliberate blurring of the typical distinctions that distinguish walls, floors, and

ceilings. Views from inside the building are at once as contextual and as disorienting as the exterior: the facades toward the park are made as light as possible, using the minimum structure necessary to support extra large panes of glass that permit a direct correspondence with the natural environment. On the street facade, the structure is much more present, echoing the street's chaotic noises and movements. The circulation spaces between the three halls double as "public" zones within this private structure: the building extends two floors underground in order to accommodate the three halls. Vertical circulation between levels runs alongside the sectional cuts, offering the possibility for multiple complex readings of the interstitial spaces. Rather than simplify these vertical circulation spaces to create an atrium that could, for example, render all levels readable from one place, Nouvel deliberately uses the "atrium" to achieve the vertiginously complex and the auditoria to provide the simple. A combination of neon, fluorescent, white, and colored lights can be manipulated to reconfigure interstitial, circulatory spaces for different uses – café, exhibition space, banquet hall, etc. Such reconfigurations confuse any notion of difference or autonomous space. Again I return to Michelson's reading of *2001*: "The sudden contraction into these limits, projects us from galactic polymorphism into an extreme formality. . . . Everything about the place is defined, clearly 'drawn.'"

Upon passing our third crew of workmen, our guide explained that the building closes for two months every year in order to replace anything that has been scratched, bent, discolored, or in any other way damaged over the previous 10 months. The maintenance of the building is astounding and guarantees that it will remain a shiny, seemingly brand new object year after year – like the setting of the final scene of *2001*. Here however, business rather than some metaphysical higher order maintains timelessness.

Our tour of the building was exhaustive, providing a reading that no public, certainly no general public, could ever hope to get. Given by the operators of the space rather than the architect or a user, this tour provided an unusually encyclopedic and ultimately very commercial experience of the building, made up of efficient circulation flows, varieties of use, and the most desired customers – Midori's fans rather than Axel Rose's. Seemingly comprehensive, the tour was absolutely filtered through a sieve of private interests. The type and scope of these interests raise questions and spark insights, not the least of which are those regarding issues of access and expertise. Access to architecture is almost invariably conditioned either by the client or the architect. Unacknowledged or unsurpassed, such filters create hermetic relationships, inaccessible and uninteresting to anyone other than the writer and the written-about. What is the public's role in determining a building's reception or criticism? How, in short, do we make not only the Vinci, but also architectural criticism accessible to more than a few people?

Our tour culminated with the gift of a keychain and T-shirt that ultimately reveal much about the way that the building is presented to the public. The keychain combines



the congress center's name, Vinci, with an etching of Leonardo da Vinci and a relief of the building. The T-shirt – black, of course – combines the name Vinci with the saying “la griffe!” which means literally “the claw” and in slang, “really hip” or “stylish.” Both key-chain and program suggest that the building combines art and technology in its very being. The building itself is personified: it becomes the artist/genius echoing Nouvel's signature garment, and underscoring that the architect and therefore the conference center is hip, the T-shirt completes the circle that connects da Vinci, the conference center, and Nouvel himself. The conflation of the three suppresses all differences, echoing instead the ambiguities and elisions that occur throughout the building.

Perhaps I do the same thing that the keychain does when I describe and posit an interpretation of a building that most people may never visit. A building is caught up in a web of relations, and the critic proposes one means of navigating that web. A critique invariably inflects, even redesigns the building through the points raised. To go full circle, I return to Michelson's critique of 2001, in which she analyzes the role of the critic: “In a letter . . . probably of 1894, Pierre Louys calls upon Debussy, about to embark upon the career of music critic which produced the brilliant and insolent persona of ‘Monsieur Croche, Anti-Dilettante,’ to ‘do something’ to cure the malady of contemporary criticism. Complaining that ‘one cannot strike a single chord these days without eliciting a flurry of metaphysical speculation,’ he says that *Lohengrin*, after all is a work ‘about movement.’ ‘It is about a man who arrives and departs,’ and nothing else.” My narration about arriving at the conference center, a program which itself is focused upon arrivals and departures, brings me back to my departure point.

In connecting an audience to a building and a building to a public, the critic is both conduit and transformer. As dangerous as it is exhilarating, this double role is complicated by the subjective facets of a given project: the differing ambitions of architect, building, public, and critic. The interdependence of these ambitions renders them both powerful and vulnerable; each adopts strategies accordingly. In Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, the smarmy Peter Keating, upon learning that his girlfriend's uncle is the famous architecture critic

Ellsworth Toohey, exclaims, “You should see big shots in our office lapping up every comma he puts out in print! So you think maybe he could help me? Well he could make me, and he will, and I'm going to meet him someday, when I'm ready for him . . . but not here, not through you.”² Indeed, the critic's commas and clauses are little *griffes*, claws that hook an audience even as these same *griffes*, more often than not, also belie the critic's own predilections, relations, and vulnerabilities.

1. *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (December 1994): 51.

2. Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (New York: Signet, 1971), 60–61.

