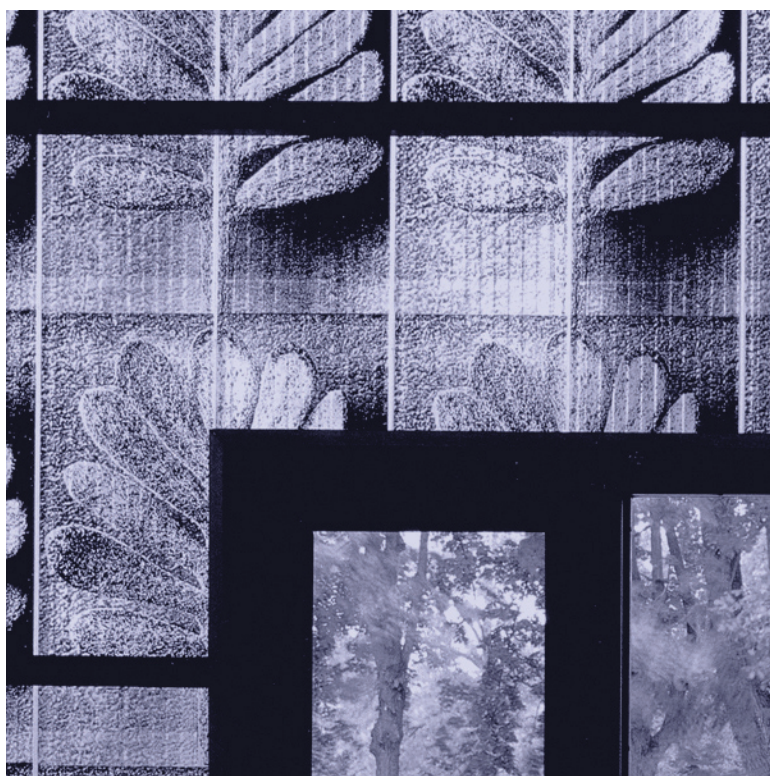
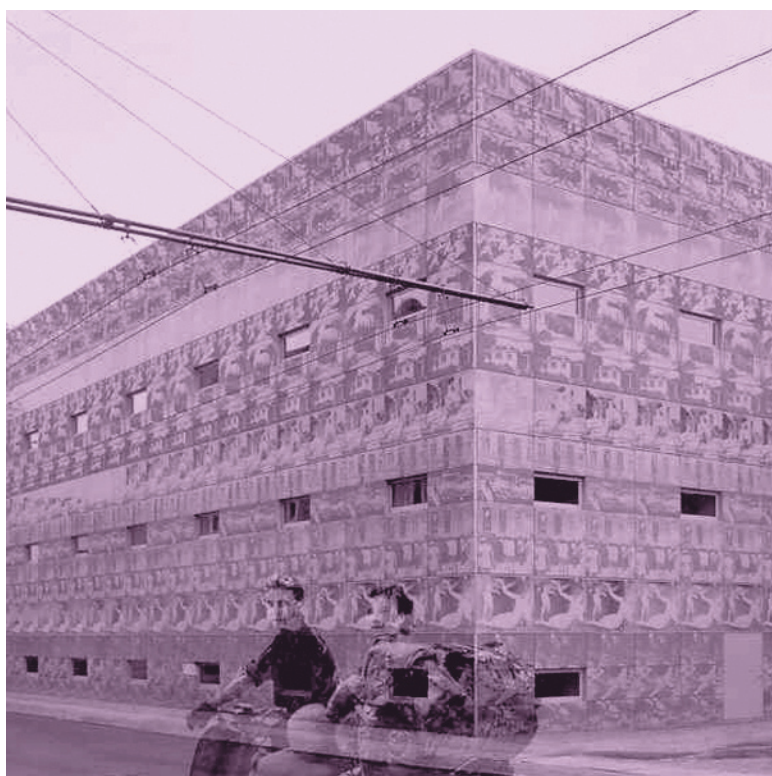


Surface and the Space of Appearance

“It is indeed as though everything that is alive - in addition to the fact that its surface is made for appearance, fit to be seen and meant to appear to others - has an urge to appear, to fit itself into the world of appearances by displaying and showing, not its “inner self” but itself as an individual”



Labour, Work & Architecture

In his article Labour, Work and Architecture, Kenneth Frampton uses Hannah Arendt’s definitions of public & private, labour & work, and the political in his damning judgment of the state of contemporary culture. Alluding to the disappearance of the public realm (and hence a true ground for architecture), he writes, “Where in the nineteenth century the public institution was exploited as an occasion on which to reify the permanent values of the society, the disintegration of such values in the twentieth century has had the effect of atomizing the public building into a network of abstract institutions.” He then decries the effect of our utilitarian world on architecture: “Art ... - and this of course includes the non-functional aspect of architecture – is rendered worldless in such a society, insofar as it is reduced to introspective abstraction or vulgarized in the idiosyncratic vagaries of the kitsch. In the first instance it cannot be easily shared and in the second it is reduced to an illusory commodity.” Frampton cites Robert Venturi’s assertion that “Americans don’t need piazzas, since they should be at home watching television.” In conclusion, Frampton states: “Whether architecture, as opposed to building, will ever be able to return to the representation of collective value is a moot point. At all events its representative role would have to be contingent on the establishment of a public realm in its political sense.”

Shimmering Regularity

It can be argued that the architecture of Mies van der Rohe sought to capture the original motive of the wall as textile. The inflexible regularity of the rigid elements which define his façades (mullions, spandrels, columns) creates an effect of shimmering brilliance. Mies treated the wall as an element which is hung, dangling freely with the barest of visible connection to intermediary structure. He took structural elements (such as the I-beams on the façade of the Seagram building) and uses them in completely non-structural ways; they become part of the Semperian mask, celebrating the motive of the building’s construction. Elements usually associated with the tectonic support of roof and floors were sent forward to participate in the dressing of the building. The Banking Pavilion at the Toronto Dominion Bank is a wonderful example; the curtain wall is rendered as a plane hanging in space, free of all loads save its own self-weight. The detailing of the exterior columns reveals Mies’ intent to create such a free surface. The connection between the columns, which bear the structural responsibility of supporting the roof, and the heavy concrete piers on which they stand is concealed, below the level of the plaza. The outer flange of the column is extended to the very top of the roof, beyond the height of the roof girders inside. Lan Ying Ip has written on this assembly, “Without apparent load above and support below, the wall appears to be a plane in space.”

The Dematerialization of Material

Perhaps of more interest than Frampton’s writings on Arendt are his texts on current Swiss production. In Minimal Moralia, he lauds the romantic materiality of Peter Zumthor, while denouncing Herzog and de Meuron’s attempts at dematerialization, especially their “more dandified impulse to draw or write on the surface of their work as though the structural material itself, however dramatically wrought in respect to its origin, cannot be given a sufficiently emotive charge.” This is, of course, in direct opposition to Semper’s division of the load-bearing wall and its surface. Carrie Asman writes in the 2002 catalogue of the CCA’s exhibition of H & de M’s working process, to celebrate their work, especially their willingness to draw ornament out of its confinement as the binary opposite of minimalism. Turning towards Semper’s conception of the wall she writes, “What others architects would have dared to redefine the wall as a mere spatial enclosure, shifting the emphasis from its weight-bearing function to something so trivial as a screen, partition, or ornamental covering, thus relocating the origin of architecture and art within an unstable construction?” She defends the appearance of screen-printed leaves on the façades of the Ricola Storage building in Mulhouse, France “not because the leaves represent a form that architects have taken from nature but because they erase the arbitrary divisions between nature and art, between the Mauer as weight-bearing, opaque structure, and the Mauer as semi-transparent ge-wand.”

Surface and the Space of Appearance

Surfaces, especially in relation to architecture, are not merely superficial concerns, nor should they be treated as diaphragms, beholden to function and form. They serve a far higher role, that of the vehicle, the mask, through which architecture, and therefore people, make their appearance upon the stage of our human world. The question then is how to design surfaces in direct response to this human need for appearance; and how to create them as representational masks, carrying the memory of the collective public realm. Both Hannah Arendt and Gottfried Semper offer insights towards this question, from eras which still bear relevance to our own. The work of number of highly rigorous contemporary practices is also of great interest, as they strive to tackle this question. Modern building technology, coupled with the infinite possibilities of today’s computerized design vehicles offers an incredible array of choices to the architect. However, our society, though extremely superficial in so many regards, seems to reduce perception to the fleeting glance, to the instantaneous image; more often or not these are found in televisions and video-games, and not in their proper place in a truly public realm. The challenge is now to realize a project through which these questions of surface and appearance can be explored; and in which the appearance of a building can be exploited to the highest possible degree as a free element (per Semper) and as a true embodiment of human intention (per Arendt).