

Architecture Made Otherwise

Forces outside the architect's control affect architecture's concrete reality, regardless of what was intended in design. What's more, unforeseen influences also bring about an end to the building's free-standing individuality. No tears should dampen this realization, for the defeat of a work's apparent singularity often leads to a victory for the patterns of life it accommodates and represents. When single projects enter into the play of ambient forces they cooperate with others in their vicinity. My aim in this talk is to show that this cooperation opens an ethical dimension of the work, and by implication, architectural poetics. To begin, I'll focus on an under-appreciated dimension of architectural order, orientation, using a line from Emmanuel Levinas as my first premise: *an orientation which goes freely from the same to the other is a work.*



Orientation is a familiar term in architecture. Although an eastward turn is generally assumed, a more basic sense implies movement across the work's borders toward something it holds in common with others. The word "facing" also has this meaning: with its front facing the street, Paris's Odeon has an urban orientation. Temples,

Vitruvius insisted, should be positioned on their sites so that “those with offerings will look toward the temple and the rising heaven.”

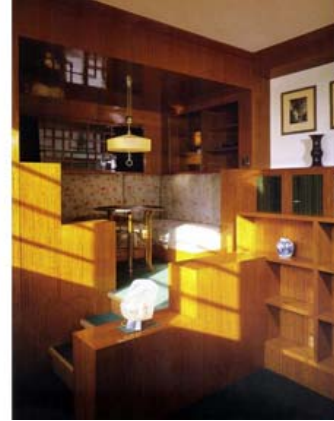


Etymologically, the word temple indicates the separation required for orientation's reach, designating a place that is set apart from or cut off, as if with a template, for purposes of contemplation. Practically speaking, facing means looking at or longing for some point or place that stands opposite the building. The *pan-de-verre* and *brise soleil* of Le Corbusier's Maison Curutchet in La Plata Argentina face the park on the other side of the boulevard.



That the matter does not end there is clear when one recalls the other meaning of the word “facing,” a veneer or cladding applied to a building that provides a protective or

figurative covering. The walls of the *salon* in Adolf Loos' Müller Villa in Prague are faced with cipolin marble, those in the *boudoir* with lemonwood.



Facing in the first case occurs on the building's site, according to the content of wider topography, in the second on the building's surfaces, according to the nature and requirements of the situations it accommodates and represents. Pre-architectural contents – the milieu and practical affairs – are implied in each. This means the movement implied in orientation occurs in two directions, at two distances, and within two kinds of depth: of the location in the first case, of the enclosures in the second. Neither is optional. Because buildings occupy sites they must “find their bearings” with respect their environment. Because they accommodate uses they must cover their volumes with suitable surfaces.

Assuming that the development of urban, public, or communicative space is impossible as long as architectural methods and techniques remain dedicated to the production of works intended to be internally defined and self-sufficient, I believe that the intellectual task that is most pressing in our time is description of the ways that

buildings have been oriented or inclined beyond themselves, which is to say *made otherwise*.



This essentially ethical stance could be called *counter-positioning*; its result, *counteracting*. The term counter-positioning is best known in studies of late-renaissance and baroque sculpture (*contrapposto*). Medical texts of the same periods and of antiquity elaborated an even more basic concept, equilibrium (*krasis*), among the parts of a body and more importantly between the body and its surrounding milieu, inasmuch as the vicinity combined both attractive and repulsive aspects.



Contrapposto figures and have a number of typical characteristics. First, they display aspects of the front and back simultaneously. An analogous characteristic is

opposition between the way the figure faces and reaches. There is a wonderful drawing by Michelangelo for the Battle of Cascina that shows a single figure extending itself in four or five directions: one leg pointing to the left, another straight downwards, the waist facing forward, the head twisted completely round to the rear, and an arm extending to the right—a figure truly *engaged* in situation, pulled in different directions.



A reconstruction of the whole scene shows the points of magnetic attraction: the foreground river bank, the background call to battle, and so on. Also apparent is a third characteristic of *contrapposto* composition: axial disequilibrium. In architecture this would be asymmetrical balance, kept in static equilibrium by cantilevers. The aim of “counter-positioning” is to give a sense of movement, for nothing brings a work to life as much as movement. But the key is that the movement of a body or any of its parts is always toward or away from some attractive or repulsive figure within its milieu: the figure comes to life by taking a stand for or against conditions outside itself. A figure’s profile—likewise an architectural elevation—indicates the choices it has made in the midst of its circumstances. Put differently, freedom finds its foothold in a context of antithetical surroundings, the sort that can be found in just about any urban situation.



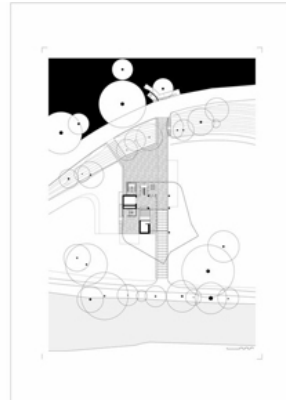
My suggestion is simple, that counter-acting such as this can exist in architecture. When it does, the building's posture is ethical. I'll try to make this plain by discussing a recent building designed by the Irish architects Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey.

Crossing the center of the Lewis Glucksman Gallery at University College Cork is a wide landing that both ends a flight of steps climbing from a river walk and begins a ramp that slopes upward to meet a path heading to the heart of the University.



The prominence of this central platform is striking because landings are normally thought of as marginal and discrete elements within buildings. Crossed in the course of vertical circulation they typically serve as turning or resting points on a stairway. Yet, when allowed to enter non-circulation spaces landings can also unveil dimensions of a

configuration that were unseen and unexpected. This one not only opens settings into one another and the town but also lets them withdraw into themselves.



Put differently, its ways of arresting and initiating changes in level involve sideways reach and lateral differentiation – counter-positioning – facing toward topics of desire.



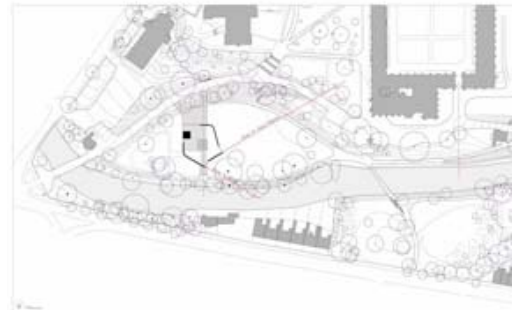
The building's northward and westward prospects disclose some of the complexities of its orientation. Northward, it faces a horizon of great density. Just beyond the lawn that limits the gallery's "river room" a walk runs along a branch of the River Lee. On the opposite bank stand the yards and back facades of a row of Georgian houses.

Passing by their front is one of Cork’s main east-west arteries, which aligns with a rail line that terminated at the edge of the medieval settlement.



Another parallel lies still further northward, the Mardyke, which acted as a “parade” heading away from town. Still further north on the surrounding hills rise Cork’s suburbs. None of these layers is unapparent from the building, for its main axis or line of approach forms an exact perpendicular to all of them.

While the building’s orientation toward the town is layered in depth, its prospect toward the university opens onto a series of levels that rise to the height of the original quadrangle. At right angles to the river room is the gallery’s café, facing westward.



Like a baroque *sala terrena*, it, too, opens onto the lawn that edges the building’s base. When the café’s glazed doors are slid sideways, the interior extends onto a wide deck, half shaded by the cantilevered galleries above. This “landing” leads to a green that is

much wider than its northern counterpart, filling the entire space left by the ancient meander of the river. Centuries of erosion have exposed the geological substrate of the mound on which the oldest parts of the university stand. Looking westward from the gallery, one sees a wall of limestone, capped by the walkway to the quadrangle. Each level has its counterpart in the gallery, as the side elevation and section show.



A small detail in the building's upper level is a remarkable example of the coupling of near and far. The line at the base of the old quadrangle coincides exactly with the split between the upper and lower sections of the two-part windows in Gallery 1. A "deep section" (showing the building's interiors together with their exterior backdrop) reveals this coincidence very clearly. That there are window-walls in an art gallery is itself an interesting fact. That the line of their division corresponds to a level in the distance is even more so. By engaging their building with the town, rejecting the introverted and isolated qualities of most modern galleries, O'Donnell and Tuomey have opened the world of art into life.



The two-part windows bring to mind Kahn's Exeter Library. Like the differentiated apertures in that building, this one's lower parts illuminate the interior locally, its upper parts widely. Unlike Kahn's example, however, this split operates on different planes. The lower window wall has been rotated outward to face some point in the distance (the quadrangle in one case, the houses opposite the river in the other). Above, the glazing remains co-planar with the white wall.



The space thus created is balcony-like, in the room and outside it. No longer are the landscape and town so far away and the work of art so close by, the first have entered the room's depth (as ambient light), and the second stands before spectators both in and outside the building.



Apart from housing the café, delivery and service areas, the primary function of the building's broad base would seem to be support of the entry forecourt. Yet, because it ends both the ramp that descends from the campus path and the steps that rise from the river walk, this space can also be seen as a landing that is proportioned not to the gallery but its vicinity, as if in this 'family of forms' the parent were also a city official or state representative. When seen at the larger scale, proportioned to the campus and town, the forecourt stands between the two major lines of approach, the stair and ramp, as well as a number of minor ones: the short-cut from the campus path down to the café lawn; a second approach from lower down the campus path; and a small stair at the opposite corner of the plan that descends to the service yard to the west.



Nothing in particular is made of the confluence of these routes; instead, the space seems happy to wait for events to occur, like a tray or table on which things are placed now and then, and later removed. The result of this restraint is receptiveness, which emphasizes the forecourt's integrative function as the crossing of several routes, and its role as a landing, the chief purpose of which is to *open toward* unforeseen conditions. As the architects have left it, the content of the space is not yet decided. Not only is movement paused but also meaning: while the forecourt reaches toward the various elements nearby, it stops short of each of them, resisting their charms and their claims. Allowed to stand *beyond* the forecourt, the surrounding situations show what existed *before* the landing stepped onto the site, actualizing history by coupling a topographical inheritance with an architectural possibility.



Deeply shaded by the galleries above, the entry hall's rich intensity sharply contrasts with the tacit spread of the forecourt. Despite its relative darkness, this setting is the most integrative of the building's crossings, collecting aspects of all that surrounds: the forecourt behind and the town ahead, the galleries above and the river below. Here also are a great staircase that leads upward, an elevator, and a showcase straight ahead, waiting for a work to be installed. Reflections of leaves and clouds suffuse all of these

places, as does the play of light the latter supplies, quickening the qualities of the foyer's materials and transparencies. Through glazing on nearly all sides, aspects of the surroundings emerge frontally and obliquely at varying distances and elevations. Hierarchy of significance doesn't seem to be important, instead, orientation to the characters that make up the topography's various opportunities. The premise being argued is that topographical depth contains a constellation of sub-lunar stars, points sufficiently fixed in contemporary culture to provide movement (and experience) with orientation. Unassembled but apparent they confer spatial knowledge. And the configuration stages a decision: where shall I go next? It is hard to image circumstances that would allow for a more well-informed choice.



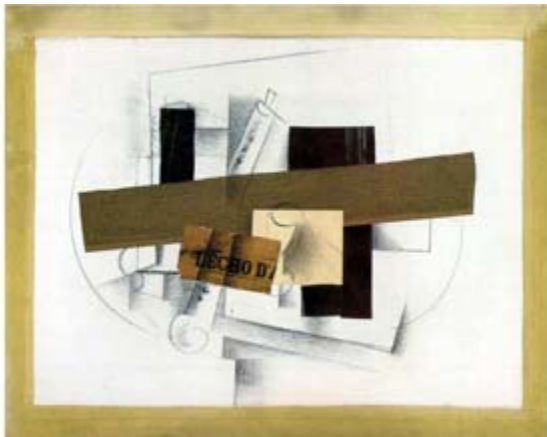
The subjection of a building to the varied dimensions of its ambient conditions amounts to a disavowal of sovereignty – not just the building's but the designer's too. While difficult for professional reasons, I see this as a necessary sacrifice, for only if we finally let go of the idea of self-sufficient object will we catch a glimpse of a new – and newly significant – collective, communicative, and ethical order. When design discovers the building's desire for what it can neither generate nor possess, it also discovers the commonality of its dependencies, that other buildings are similarly inclined, that they too

depend on pre-existing and un-designed conditions. Passions give rise to community, just as they transform sovereign objectivity into true singularity, not self-sufficiency.



Both communication and the space in which it occurs accept the limitations of those who enter into dialogue. Here I do not mean to restate the old truism about the reciprocity of public and private space; rather, that the recognition of privation increases awareness of the inevitability of sharing. Communicative space arises when limited conditions give in to what they lack, want, desire, or are pulled toward: morning light in one case, a theater-like performance in another, or a distant prospect. Always a matter of degree, the individuality of a building, like that of a person, is measured by its participation in shared conditions. One can also say that the disintegration of urban and ethical order is the precondition for the building's object-like independence. More positively, the dependency assumed in both sharing and privation suggests that the building is co-determined by conditions not of its own making. This means the definition of a location involves a corresponding act of dislocation, a centering of the building outside itself. Orientation is nothing other than acknowledgment of this *ecstasis* or *allocentricity*. Its site, the "dislocated" space between individuals, cannot be the result of their fusion because they themselves (as selves) presuppose its disintegration.

Uniqueness, then, is a second order concept, not necessarily secondary in importance, but derivative. Dislocated from all forms of internal definition, and un-fashioned, shared topography is the antecedent condition, or, according to a term introduced by the painter Georges Braque, a space of *indivision*.



In his 1913 painting called *The Clarinet* the instrument designated by the title is apparent in outline form at the center of the canvas, but that's about all one can see of its familiar appearance. Its other properties – somber color, slender volume, smooth texture, and silver circles – have been detached from the instrument and allowed to qualify other objects in the setting. To appreciate this sharing you must suspend the categorical view of things. The color, volume, texture, and geometries we assume to be proper to a clarinet have discovered their affinities with aspects of the table on which the whole pile-up rests, the wall that partly serves as its backdrop, and the fragment of newspaper that seems most prominent. Like the clarinet, these other objects have loaned out some of their familiar attributes. Consider the glass at the picture's center. The shadow the forms the right edge of its stem is also the lower edge of the large dark rectangle that takes the shape but lacks the surface of a newspaper. Similarly, the wide band of wood-patterned wallpaper that divides the top and bottom halves of the clarinet could be seen as the

surface of the instrument, or of the table, the floor below, or the wall it was made to cover. In this weave of aspects or pile-up of attributes shared qualities constitute a locus of commonality in which objects are not so much reduced through the removal of properties but enriched by the discovery of new ones – as if a snake clarified better than anything else a former friend’s behavior, or a nightingale a soprano’s voice.



The human body, though, would seem to offer the greatest resistance to such dispersion, association, or ‘enfielding,’ of attributes, for its qualities are more familiar than those of any other figure, presumably inalienable. Cubist portraits show otherwise. As one views Gris’ *Woman with Basket* of 1927 the figure never disappears, but relaxes its hold on itself, at least its outer edges. The composition adheres to a vertical axis, running from the “x” that joins her forehead and hair to the oval frame down to the tip of her left forefinger, where the basket base meets her skirt. Assembled along the length in between are the thumb of the same hand, the central vertical of the basket’s weave, the triangular leaves below and above a doubly rounded peach, the neckline of the blouse, the skin vs. shadow line that bisects both the lower and upper lips, and the inner edge of her right eyebrow – in short, all the salient aspects of the body, along an axis of abundance or

fecundity. But for all its magnetic centrality, the line is unable to keep all of the parts in their proper places, for the room, at least the watery blue, seems to exercise considerable pull: the left arm, abbreviated as profile, has been drawn into the shadows of the mirror, likewise the flat flesh of her right into the geometry of the table, and the blond of her hair into the oak of the floor. Even the peach, resting above her navel, struggles to keep itself single.



Picasso, too, subjected the human body to the world's magnetic pull. His split-face portraits are insistently frontal. Pyramidal composition also gives them great solidity. Yet, once the vertical axis begins its descent, the body's lower parts, set free from their assumed moorings, drift into alliances with the many and varied aspects of the vicinity. Does this portrait show one face or two? Insofar as the bridge of the nose continues the joint between the walls, and the color of its shadow reflects the surface advancing from behind, the profile on the right separates itself from the symmetrical composition and moves into prominence. Its advance is backed-up by the hair. Yet, the two-sided mouth, shared skin color, and equally highlighted cheeks argue for symmetry. Advance and retreat are reversed once the line descends and partitions the body's lower bits. The yin and yang of the blouse allows the breast on the left its expected three-

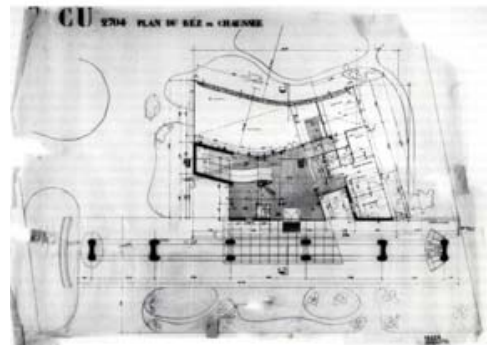
dimensionality but not the one on the right. The belt, bracelet, and book “serpentinize” the axis, centering the counter-acting movements of the knees, as they conform to the flat and protruding aspects of the upholstery, frame, and chair rail.



Here I'd like to interrupt my account and make a comparison. 500 years before Picasso, Ambrogio Lorenzetti included in the frescoes of Siena's Palazzo Pubblico a similarly contrasting figure. Showing the consequences of life under tyranny, his aim was both moral and political. A saw not a book amplified the contrast between the “si and non,” indicating a rather gruesome personal consequence of ethical discord – dismemberment. By contrast, cubist images were called synthetic because their weakened objects structured coherent ensembles. In Picasso's Dream portrait of 1932 the figure's lower half is flattened into pattern, while its upper part is split by the geometry of the wall covering. Here, too, centrality and solidity have not prevented the figure from adopting the profiles of the place as particularities of its own.



In his paper on ineffable space, Le Corbusier wrote as follows on the relationship between the wider landscape and the local setting: "the walls of the room, its dimensions, the public square with the various weights of its facades, the expanses or the slopes of the landscape even to the bare horizons of the plain or the sharp outlines of the mountains – the whole environment brings its weight to bear on the place. . . and *imposes* on it its deep spaces or projections, its hard or soft densities, its violences or its softnesses. A phenomenon of *concordance* takes places, as exact as mathematics. . . [and thus] a boundless depth opens up, effaces the walls, drives away contingent presences, [and] accomplishes the miracle of ineffable space." In *Precisions* the same point was made more briefly: "a project is not made only of itself: its surroundings exist. The surroundings envelope me in their totality, as in a room. Harmony takes its origins from afar." No phrase summarizes my argument so well as this last one.



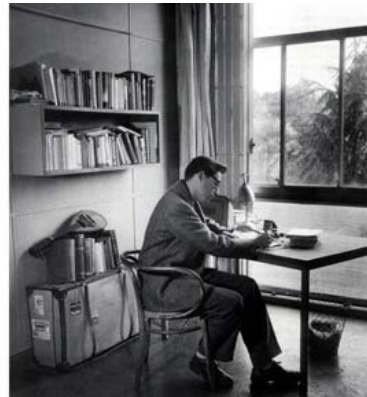
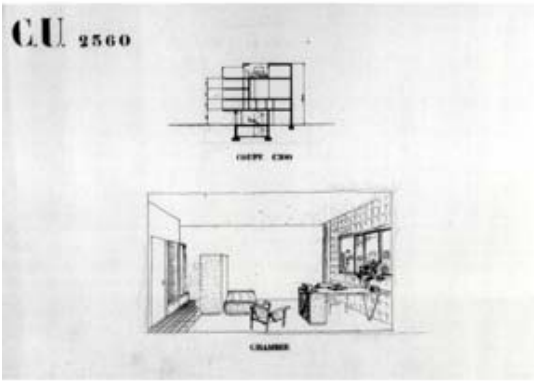
The entry into the Swiss Pavilion in Paris demonstrates as well as any the synthetic, appositive, and communicative character of the settings that can be called ethical. As with the entry hall of the Glucksman Gallery, this one allows meaningful choice because it makes alternative opportunities readily apparent. The different possibilities are clear in plan: the loggia or porch framing the approach, the elevator and stair to the left, backed by lateral views to the landscape beyond, the administrative and concierge rooms to the right, with the spread of refectory and meeting spaces straight ahead. I've listed these settings separately, but upon entry they are there all at once, at least aspects of them, adhering as much to the wider vicinity as to one another.



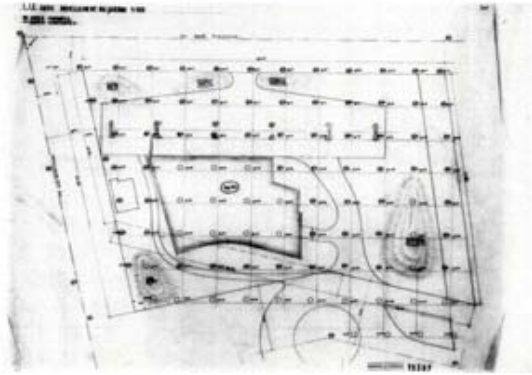
That an extremely wide frame of reference was intended is apparent in the photo murals, for they illustrate the micro and macroscopic characteristics of the Alps, offered to the freshmen as a cure for home sickness. Le Corbusier's wider interest is also apparent in the building's facades.



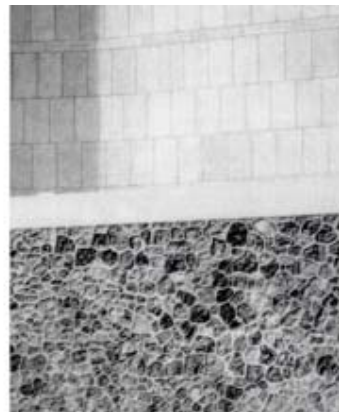
Throughout the long and extremely contentious history of the project he insisted on building a window wall on the block's south side. It was one of series of attempts at achieving fully lighted floors. This try was more refined because composite. An early project showed glass block surrounding mid-level panes. Eventually, wire-glass translucent panels replaced the glass block, and the mid-level window ran side to side, asymmetrically bordered by an operable vertical.



Le Corbusier's preference for the horizontal window is well known, as is habit of aligning the window's sill with the distant horizon, making the far near. But this building also shows concern for the middle distance, the building's immediate vicinity. Not only did he produce a design for the landscape around the building (amusingly hilly), but also, and famously, a curved wall at the back of the public spaces, a wall made out of "local" stone.



He described the masonry as a counter-point to other parts of the project, providing the whole with equilibrium, in *contrapposto*. The rusticity of the site appears in early photographs. But the architect's preferred views show contrast between opposites: smooth and rough, artificial and natural, contemporary and ancient.



Throughout his career and in many of his works Le Corbusier put opposite forms, materials, and conditions into juxtaposition. The exhibition of ancient art in his studio apartment provides many examples of this coupling, as does the studio itself. Perhaps the junction between large panes of translucent glass and rough stone masonry in the corner behind the moscophoros is the most lyrical instance of conjunction.



The architect's own desk makes the theme almost autobiographical: creativity poised between milky glass and rough stone. If doubtful, this interpretation becomes more plausible when his pictorial work is considered, for both his very first canvas and his last set of lithographs were dedicated (at least in part) to the confrontation between light and dark, day and night, hot and cold, dry and wet, or sky and soil.

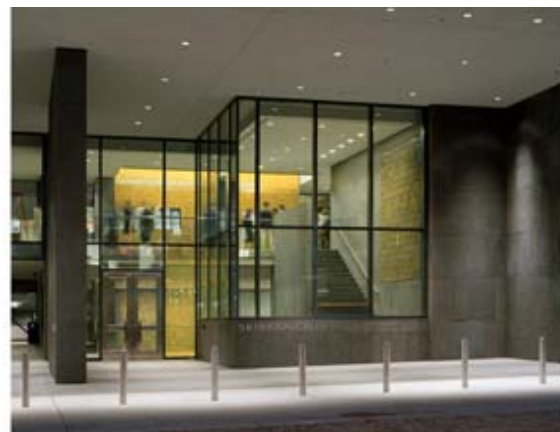


One passage from the *Poème* should be sufficient to indicate his sense of the great coincidentia oppositorum: “between poles reigns the tension of fluids, the scores of opposites are settled, an end to the hatred of irreconcilables is proposed, union ripens the

fruit of confrontation.”

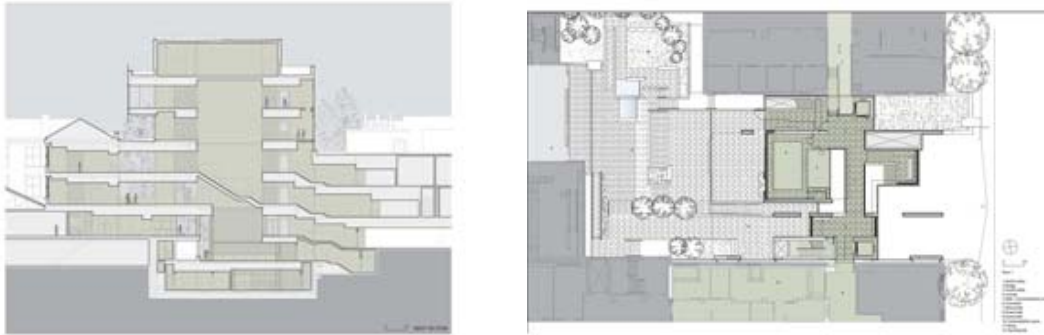


Sky and soil seem to have been foremost on the minds of Williams and Tsien when they designed the façade of Skirkanich Hall, finished a few months ago in Philadelphia at the University of Pennsylvania. That would, indeed, seem to be the case when one takes a distant view of the building, or considers its prominent upper floors only. Yet, entry suggests otherwise, for the variously qualified settings that diverge from the shadows of its recessed hall suggest that their concern is also to mediate these opposite conditions according to the requirements and opportunities of the building’s program, housing teaching and research in bio-engineering.



An essay in polite contextualism this building is not. Obvious signs of deference cannot be found: the prevailing cornice line has been ignored, so, too, the street wall. Likewise for the

typical ratio between solids and voids, instead of patterned balance there is uninterrupted planarity – glass or brick, emblems of sky or soil.



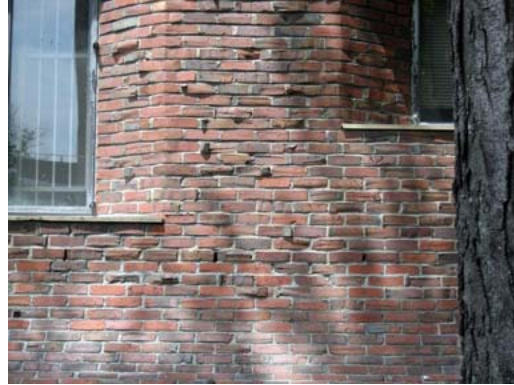
Like the complexities encountered by the descending axis of Picasso's split-face portraits, the levels and depths of settings behind this two part façade are amazingly varied. When inserted into its site, the building had to develop linkages with the neighboring premises, because of all of them are parts of the engineering school. This was not simple. Each has different floor heights, structural systems, and materials. The longitudinal section shows the remarkable negotiation between Skirkanich Hall and its neighbors: enlarged landings, split stairways, galleries, balconies, and clearstory glazing effecting interconnections and lateral continuity. And what occurs in section is doubled by the ground plan, for there too a weakened object or broken perimeter encourages alliances with properties at the margins.



The courtyard is at once a crossing of routes, a coordination of levels, a vantage for multiple prospects, and watery receptacle – of images of the wind and clouds above, of sound, and of reflection (in the many senses of the word). But here, too, at the building's most cooperative and communicative center there is still opposition. And there are emblems of remote territories. Richard Neutra once wrote that good buildings take account of several rings of distance surrounding them. He meant, but didn't explain relationships with conditions that are on the site, within the block, and the neighborhood – at hand, within reach, and distant. When the green brick first appeared on the walls of Skirkanich custodians of the status quo were quick to point out its apparent incongruity among its red-faced neighbors.



But the architects knew (or I assume they did) that the color characterizes the building at the campus's center. What's more, their brick's surface treatment, pock marks cleverly made in the manufacturing process recall similar surfaces on the great buildings of the campus: the stone on Furness' library and the cracked brick on Saarinen's Hill House.



But that's not all, the wide planarity of brick on Skirkanich repeats the proportions of Kahn's Richard's Laboratory. What's more, the expanses of glass remind one of Philadelphia's greatest modern work, the PSFS building.



Care for relationships with distant images, conditions, and territories does not mean indifference to local or internal requirements. The split-face façade provides labs within the building with required display surfaces as well as natural illumination. In the central court, surfaces that are bright and dark, open and closed, wet and dry make an urban

interior into something of an epitome of the wider landscape.



Thus, the polarities we've seen – campus and town in the Glucksman Gallery, modern and ancient materials in Le Corbusier's studio and Swiss Pavilion, flesh and shadow in the paintings of Braque, Gris, and Picasso, and sky and soil in Skirkanich – do not so much posit opposition as conjoin emblems of the differences to be discovered in the wider horizon, in controposto.



It is that conjunction that I want to call ethical, I mean the sort of communication that depends on difference, even celebrates it as the basis for new and productive relationships. Much recent architecture – say Nouvel's Branley Museum finished last year – demonstrates a desire to overcome the self-assured solitude of architecture for its own sake in favor of a world made otherwise – engaged, engaging, and I think, ethical.



David Leatherbarrow