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Post, Past, or Post-Past: The Commodification of Architecture

Hamid Shirvani

Architecture and the Postmodern

Architecture has always been regarded as an art that is separate from all the other arts. In every way that architecture is art, it is also something else. It is a science, a necessity, a luxury. Its manifestations are social, political, economic, and monumental. With regard to the dualisms of architecture, postmodernism seems to be tailored for architecture to ideologically pull itself apart. Artistically, and in many other ways as well, postmodernism is identified by forces of plurality, decentering, tolerance, allowing for the expression of simultaneously esoteric and vital ideas, even political correctness, if you will. Economically, postmodernism is about the third stage of capitalism, which is commodification reaching into heretofore-uncommodified areas. Postmodernism is, according to Jameson, "a more fully human world than the older one, but it is one in which "culture" has become a veritable 'second nature.' [It] is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process."¹ Although there is undoubtedly overlap, these "processes" are neither fully integrated nor are they at all independent, and this is where explanation, critical analysis, and creative speculation are useful.

Architecture is profoundly social. Indeed, as Hutcheon concisely states, "all architects know that by their art's very nature as the shaper of public space, the act of designing a building is an unavoidably social act."² Architecture is mass culture, in the sense that nearly every citizen—from the CEO to the homeless person—is exposed to it. In the third stage of capitalism, architecture's social centeredness and economic bloodlines are significant reasons for concern over architecture's ability to respond to the cultural and artistic changes inspired by postmodernism. What does it mean to say "Postmodern architecture" when the idea of postmodernism is not clear? This paper aims to reflect architecture's postmodern image, that is, what is "postmodern" about the structures erected in the era of postmodernism. The trick here is to examine the architecture conceived and erected in the postmodern period, in light of the general texts on postmodernism, in

order to locate and scrutinize the real and possible intersections.

From Whence it Came

Post-Modernism has some connection to Modernism. Whether it is simply the language or indeed there is a more intimate connection, a discussion of Modernism is prudent. The social movements of the 1960s shook the objectivist manifesto of the Modern era, revealing the inherent roots of social hypocrisy. Modernism's staunch ideology was rooted in concerns for a better social order, which was manifest by the traditional power-holding, white, male, wealthy, educated person expressing his angst about the plight of the marginal. As postmodern society allows the margins to speak and express themselves, there is an increasing rift between the power-wielder's expression of the marginal and the marginal expression of the margin's. This incongruity has put the thinker's nose into the pot of ideology and the contemporary critic has discovered a foul odor.

The ideological shrapnel of the postmodern implosion has caused an uprooting or, at the very least, a questioning, of the existing social order. Meanwhile the capitalist machine of production and consumption continues to roll, creating greater tension between art and economics; capital and society; labor and management; worker and industry; supply and demand; architect and client. The challenge put to the cultural constructs of postmodernism is to create a resolution of the tensions between art and economics. Hutcheon concisely explains that "postmodern architecture seems...to be paradigmatic of our seeming urgent need, in both artistic theory and practice, to investigate the relations of ideology and power to all of our present discursive structures."³ With the development of contemporary criticism, the power and oppression of discourse is brought to the surface. And as a result, it seems to be a goal of postmodernism to debunk the white male and put into place a variety of alternative discourses.

The Written Word

A text, according to classical liberal tradition, has a literal meaning. This meaning exists "no matter what the context or no matter what is the speaker's or hearer's mind."⁴ Meaning is a function of the text's individual parts (language, words and in other disciplines forms, colors, movements—the language of expression) and can be formally conceived. Thus, a text has a clear meaning based on prior interpretation without any relationship to the context. Fish elaborates on this formalist idea as one "that words have clear meanings and in order to believe that" one must also believe:

[that]...the minds see those meanings clearly . . . that clarity is a condition that persists through changes in context . . . that nothing in the self interferes with the perception of clarity . . . that meanings are a property of language. . . . that language is an abstract system that is prior to any occasion of use . . . that occasions of use are underwritten by that system.⁵

Identifying each word with the history of its use commits us to a certain set of values associated with that historical meaning. This commitment to particular meanings, in turn, commits us to an absolute set of values, that is, an ideology. The questioning of this absolute set of values is the foundation of most contemporary post-structuralist criticism.

Given that it is no longer possible to believe or at the very least it is highly problematic to assume that meaning exists independently of context, one goal of contemporary criticism is to determine how texts (language or other sign systems) "provide frameworks which determine how we read, and more generally, how we make sense of experience, construct our own identity, [and] produce meaning in the world."⁶ In postmodern literary theory, meaning is not embedded in texts, but rather is arrived at through interpretation. That is, each "word" or "element" of a text has been different in various social settings, thereby creating a different textual interpretation. This liberation of the text from having one meaning known only to an intellectual elite is the foundation for innovation, opportunity, creativity and is indeed the hope of postmodern aesthetics. It is this critique of textuality in postmodern literary theory that theorists of postmodernism in architecture and in other disciplines have been exploring.

The critiques evident in postmodern architecture have been mostly focusing on arbitrary manipulation of form (i.e. distortion, disposition, juxtaposition) in response to market and superficial intellectualization of the art of product marketing; pointing out that architecture is also subject to the same problems of reflexivity as writing. What literary theory also points out is that architecture's meaning relies on vocabulary, interpretation, and ultimately some sort of paradigm or ideology.

The quintessential postmodern dilemma is what that paradigm is. Is postmodernism a break with modernism, a reaction to it, a resistance to it? Is it true or is it just a facade of political correctness and tolerance? Economically, the world has changed: how has this change affected artistic discourse? Is postmodernism primarily the function or the result of capitalism? Politics in general? Culture? The fine arts? Science and technology? History? And what do the answers to these questions mean to the discipline of architecture? Is postmodern architecture eclecticism or pastiche, questing or conceding, pluralistic or historical, art or commodity?

Communications

Postmodernism is most frequently agreed to be some sort of fundamental paradigm shift or change, affecting all layers of society. No one escapes a discussion of postmodernism without words devoted to capitalism and commodification. Daniel Bell notes that the crucial point in the Third Technological Revolution is that the nature of communication has changed, it is bigger and more complex, more available. The infrastructure of communication has significantly altered the nature of the market creating a "whole new structural framework."⁷ This new market has at its center a new ideology, which dictates the maximizing of market activity, or communication. Thus, the essence of productivity in a postmodern economy is communication. In the age of late capitalism, where commodification has reached into new areas, it is not unreasonable to posit that everything is involved in this process of communication—everything has something to communicate in the market and to the consumer. This invests tremendous power in the notions of discourse and ideology and raises the questions of what architecture is communicating, and what happens to art and innovation because of this capital shift, and why?

With the onset of the postmodern era, architecture began moving in alignment with market demand. Concurrently, artistic innovation virtually disappeared. There is a connection between discourse or ideology and innovation. Ideologies are limiting structures, whereas innovation is potentially infinite. Michel Foucault believes that "discourse is always inseparable from power, because discourse is the governing and ordering medium of every institution. Discourse determines what it is possible to say."⁸

"For most of its history, architecture has been a profession dependent upon close ties to wealth and power, even in realizing its minor dreams."⁹ This fact, coupled with the artistic and aesthetic dreams of architecture, has split architectural discourse into two camps, neoconservatives and poststructuralists: that is, architecture created in response to market demand (commerce) and architecture which attempts to be innovative (art) respectively. The architectural terms for these theoretical positions are "Pomo" (neoconservative) and "Decon" (poststructuralist). Both positions seek to redefine the artifact¹⁰ by critiquing representation.

Pomo

Neoconservative postmodernism is a stylistic opposition to modernism. It requests a return to humanism and offers this request as a critique of representation. Neoconservative postmodern architecture, or Pomo, can be explained as a critique of the vocabulary of mod-

ernism, but it is really more concerned with economic and aesthetic problems than with the linguistic structure of the text. The architects and planners of this persuasion continue to use and plan the same structures and procedures as the modernists. Thus, they decline to comment on the crux of the modernist agenda: the rationality of form following function and the objectivism of master planning. According to Foster, Pomo is "an eclectic historicism in which old and new modes and styles (used goods, as it were) are retooled and recycled."¹¹ Jameson refers to this process as "wrapping" and says that within this process "none of the parts are new and it is repetition rather than radical innovation. [It is] an archaic 'return of the repressed' within the postmodern",¹² employing the past's vocabulary and hence, its ideology. However, Charles Jencks, the flagman of the Pomo, offers a polar opinion:

Post-modernism is fundamentally the eclectic mixture of any tradition with that of the immediate past. It is both the continuation of Modernism and its transcendence. Its best works are characteristically double-coded and ironic, making a feature of the wide choice, conflict and discontinuity of traditions, because this heterogeneity most clearly captures our pluralism.¹³

To aid in a decision as to which side of this ideological fence to sit, an examination of the erected structures of some quintessential postmodern architects is prudent. The Walt Disney empire has recently made a statement in postmodern architecture with Michael Graves's "zany new Neoclassical corporate headquarters" and Robert A.M. Stern's "two ersatz-turn-of-the-century hotels" and the fact that Michael Eisner (Disney's decision-maker) still desires a hotel in the form of Mickey Mouse.¹⁴ Robert Gutman offers insight into the ideology which created these edifices:

Buildings that are esthetically pleasing are admired for the pleasure they give and also because buildings so endowed are more likely to attract tenants and yield higher rents. A corporate headquarters is now a 'giant architectural logo', making the company conspicuous in the urban landscape.¹⁵

Pomo is both advertisement and product. A collection of pieces and symbols that signify to the masses, an aesthetic of pastiche and simulacrum. In this light, it seems that Jencks must be thinking of some other kind of postmodern architecture.

Poststructuralist ideology critiques western culture and in so doing it seeks to decenter ideology by embracing the notion of "death of the subject", as both original creator and as centered subject of representation. By questioning the center, the rational process of producing the objective plans, and the meaning, those in the center stand to

lose and the margins gain the possibility of affirmation. The poststructuralist postmodernists are making a plea to drop all the pretenses of the past. They seek to collapse the subject in order to rebuild it in a new way, incorporating all the discourses difference that have recently come to our attention such as feminism, multiculturalism, gay and lesbianism, and others.

Decon

Deconstruction, or Decon, is perhaps the only approach under the umbrella of new scholarship that has been received by architects, to a large extent, as the "poststructuralist" approach to architecture. Deconstruction in literary criticism denies textual meaning. A text is dead until you begin to make an interpretation from it, that is, reality is an illusion and there is no truth inherent in the text. Separating literal from metaphysical meaning, Deconstruction creates distance between "signifier" and "signified," between the word and the thing itself. Deconstruction in architecture, as Derrida states,

is the invention of new relations, in which the traditional components of architecture are broken down and reconstructed along other axes. Without nostalgia, the most living act of memory. Nothing, here, of that nihilistic gesture which would fulfill a certain theme of metaphysics: no reversal of values aimed at an unaesthetic, uninhabitable, unusable, asymbolical and meaningless architecture, an architecture simply left vacant after the retreat of gods and men.¹⁶

Poststructuralist architects suggest the impossibility of "systematic knowledge, . . . claim[ing] to know only the impossibility of this knowledge" by "investigat[ing] the way in which [a] project is subverted by the workings of the text themselves," relating the structure of a text to textuality in architecture.¹⁷ Deconstruction "investigates . . . the way in which textual figures and relations . . . produce a double, aporetic logic."¹⁸

However, certain theories find Deconstruction in architecture not to be "anarchic chaos", "yet, without proposing a "new order", no longer obeying the external imperatives." That is, architecture is no longer concerned with organization of

space as function or in view of economic, aesthetic, epiphanic or technoutilitarian norms. These norms will be taken into consideration, but they will find themselves subordinated and reinscribed in one place in the text and in a space which they no longer command in the final instance.¹⁹

Deconstruction then is an attempt to "push architecture toward its limits," to create a place "with its own cultural, ludic, pedagogical,

scientific and philosophical finalities."²⁰

An inside job?

So it seems Decon is the savior of postmodern architecture. Or is it? It would seem that the most radical of postmodern theories are indeed being actualized by this Decon architecture. However, one of the fundamental problems associated with the whole notion of Decon has been the framing of the definition around a handful of celebrities and a few of their signature physical products, rather than the practice (the process) of production and of architecture. Prime examples of Decon architecture are the works of Peter Eisenman, Daniel Libeskind, Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry and others. And with the exception of Bernard Tschumi's La Villette project, most of the works referred to as Deconstruction do not and cannot be placed within the Derridean frame of reference discussed above. Nor can they be identified with any poststructuralist thought.²¹

This small group of Decon architects have been treating "buildings" and "places" like "fetish commodities", generating amongst themselves an extreme competition over "style"—to be different, to generate the "new". This mostly pertains to the façade, sometimes the spatial form of the building, but there are no fundamental changes in program or social impact nor any regard for how people use these buildings and plans. In fact, these architects blur the distinction between a building and commodities like an Armani suit blurs the distinction between clothing and social status.

There is, in fact, considerable doubt that theoretically-defined Decon architecture exists on paper or in reality. To begin with, these buildings have had well-defined "programs," programs based on economic, social and other institutional frameworks already defined by the clients and others involved. The resulting architecture is indeed a "space as function or in view of economic, aesthetic, epiphanic or techno-utilitarian norms."²² Here, Deconstruction is merely a "difference" in aesthetics, an aesthetic which is a new "production" in the market economy instead of arriving from a philosophical question.

Similarly, Deconstructionist paper architecture has not escaped the power of postmodern economic ideology. Indeed, Muschamp equates paper architecture with junk bonds, not because of its extremely limited audience and thus opportunity for discourse, but because paper architecture has been operating under the spell of conventional architectural practice.²³ That is to say, the same ideology which creates the conventional architecture, of say, Disney World.

Relative Autonomy, Social Reality

Derrida specifically questions the work of both Peter Eisenman and Daniel Libeskind as Deconstructionist. Interestingly enough, most of these architects, including Eisenman, deny the association of Deconstruction with their work, while at the same time they have been willing to exhibit their work under "Deconstructivist architecture"²⁴ or publish their work under "Deconstruction."²⁵ And in particular, Eisenman states:

I never talk about Deconstruction. Other people use that word because they are not architects. It is very difficult to talk about architecture in terms of Deconstruction, because we are not talking about ruins or fragments. The term is too metaphorical and too literal for architecture. Deconstruction is dealing with architecture as a metaphor, and we are dealing with architecture as a reality. . . .²⁶

Reality? Jameson explicitly disagrees, calling postmodern architects' work "substitutes rather than the thing itself."²⁷ Their physical products are indicative of their real agenda,

it is as though that 'external reality' . . . is nothing but information on some inner computer program . . . [t]he real color comes when you look at the photographs . . . and many are the postmodern buildings that seem to have been designed for photography. . . .²⁸

Now we have come full circle—poststructuralist architects are just paper versions of the conventional practice and "real" architects seem to create for photographic paper.

Where are all those liberating, inspiring postmodern ideas? Gutman explains that architecture

has acquired a renewed and revised significance with the growth of the modern democratic welfare state and the advent of advanced capitalism with its emphasis on stimulating consumption . . . in the American case, the attention to architecture . . . is specifically the result of advanced capitalism which has generated a large affluent, well-educated group of middle-class men and women who are . . . fascinated by well-designed artifacts that offer sensory delight and function as status symbols.²⁹

Architecture is a commercialized product of capitalism, subject to interdependency and control of the market economy. In late capitalism, this dependency finds architecture's heartstrings playing to the tune of the American market economy. Decon architecture or

architecture as autonomous art and science, as a discipline in possession both of some historical experience in solving practical problems and of a progressive vision of how things unchained from existing social hierar-

chies might look and feel—this architecture is doomed precisely to the degree it refuses to recognize that its autonomy is nothing more than a specific effect of social relations.³⁰

A potent theoretical ingredient of this new postmodernism is the notion of the end, or of death. This takes many forms—“death of the subject” (Baudrillard), the end of history, the “loss of master narratives” (Owens), “amidst a mediocracy in which the humanities are marginal indeed” (Said), a break from modernism and the past, the end of art, etc.³¹ The danger of this duality or plurality is that postmodernism might be reduced to indifference, or dismissed as relativism.³² However, such perspectives are problematic because they risk making neat what is inherently messy. Nevertheless, these notions of death can also, hermeneutically, point to an important defining force of postmodernism: it is new, brand new, and different from everything that has come before it. The very nature of things has changed. And a “deadly” reading of postmodernism is boasting its separation from modernism and indeed its own birth. However, it is not that simple. In some disciplines or media representations, postmodernism is considered to be an improvement or fine tuning of modernism. Postmodern architecture exhibits this confusing duality—it has conceived and formally grasped death, but not the life which ensues.

In architecture, postmodernism has established itself as precisely what it is not, the next phase in the development of the history of design. It has positioned itself as a movement and/or a culture reactionary to modernism: a savior; a solution to abrupt and inhuman modern design. Postmodern architecture relies on the absolute meaning of the historical vocabulary and meaning of the white male power structure for its economic and social muscle today. This reactionary position is of course primarily an attack on the style and vocabulary of form, not a critique of the modernist social and/or utopian agenda. That is, a critique of the language of expression, the representation, not of the thing itself.

The Pomo approach is essentially a reconstitution of classical icons, motifs and ornaments and to a large extent and in many applications, this has been done primarily by manipulation of the facade.³³ Are the architects searching for new, innovative or responsive forms to celebrate our plurality? It seems unlikely. These architects engage themselves in the superficial play of making-up, facelifting and collaging. This constitutes “nothing more than a vast supermarket of metaphors.”³⁴ It is an architecture of the bourgeois that aims to signify a symbol and a message and screams out ‘product’. And “[o]nly by actually altering its relationship to its social bases, rather than by signifying a “critical” attitude toward other kinds of built form, would architecture become something other than an advertisement for

itself."³⁵

Yet postmodern architecture is architecture that matters in a different way, it discloses a new aesthetic in architecture. This aesthetic is born of ideology which has no artistic or innovative concerns. It is the oldest and most stable ideology known to the human race: money, the one with the most wins.³⁶ Now, this aesthetic may not be noble or sublime—it is in fact garish kitsch. But kitsch exists because people buy it, people believe in it. Its existence is measured in dollars and things that signify dollars—the more obvious the better. Postmodern architecture has fought the battle of survival in late capitalism and found its home in the heart of the postmodern economy.

[T]hough many would say this is a rather Pyrrhic victory, [it] is the preservation of the myth — along with the history, traditions, and aesthetic (or epistemological, or ontological) aura — of [architecture's] own proper substance and mission.³⁷

Architecture, which depends on money and power for its bread and butter like no other artistic realm, has been intoxicated by the influence of that money and power. It has not been able to move along with the other disciplines of the humanities because it has sold itself to late capitalism (or has been bought by it) and coveted its traditional power structure to the point of a total exclusion of the margins. Instead, it has moved its position to service a role of input production. What has come to be valued in architecture is not one person's vision, one person's creative brain manifest in stone, wood, plastic and concrete, rather the sought-after truth in postmodern architecture is the manifestation of the collective brain of K-Mart shoppers, simply because they spend money and affirm the architectural power structure. Creative ideologies allow for possibilities; late capitalism has room for commodities only. Ideology is flat and dimensionless and has diminished, or at least has directed innovative aspects of architecture, reducing them to a notion or concept, to a leaner process of what sells.

NOTES

1. Frederick Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham, 1991), ix, x.
2. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism, History, Theory, Fiction*, (New York, 1988), 23.
3. Hutcheon, *cit.*, p. 36.
4. Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, (Durham, 1989), 4.
5. Fish, *cit.*, 6.
6. Thomas McLaughlin, "Introduction" in Frank Lentricchia and

Thomas McLaughlin, eds. *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago, 1990), 1.

7. Daniel Bell, "The Challenge of Technological Innovation" in *Architects for a New Century*, Findings and Analysis of the AIA Vision 2000 Conference, (Washington, DC, 1988), 5.

8. Quoted by Raman Selden, *Contemporary Literary Theory* (Lexington, 1989), 76.

9. Vincent P. Pecora, "Towers of Babel" in Diane Ghirardo, *Out of Site, A Social Criticism of Architecture*, (Seattle, 1991), 46.

10. Hal Foster, *Recodings* (Seattle, 1985).

11. Foster, *cit.*, 121.

12. Jameson, *cit.*, 104, 99.

13. Quoted by David Harvey, "Looking Backwards on Postmodernism" in *Architectural Design* (1990), 10.

14. Kurt Anderson, "Look, Mickey, No Kitsch!" in *Time* (July 29, 1991), 66.

15. Robert Gutman, *Architectural Practice*, (Princeton, 1988), 18.

16. Jacques Derrida, "Point de Folie—Maintenant L'Architecture" in *AA Files* 12 (1986), 69.

17. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction, Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, (Ithaca, 1982), 22.

18. Culler, *cit.*, 109.

19. Derrida, "Point de Folie—Maintenant L'Architecture," 69.

20. Derrida, "Point de Folie—Maintenant L'Architecture," 69.

21. For an examination of Gehry's architecture and deconstruction refer to Hamid Shirvani, "Gehry and Deconstruction: A Matter of Difference in Text" in *Avant Garde* 1 (1988), 63-77.

22. Derrida, "Point de Folie—Maintenant L'Architecture," 69.

23. Herbert Muschamp, "On Paper Architecture" in *Artforum*, (October 1991), 13-16.

24. *Deconstructivist Architecture*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York: June 23-August 30, 1988.

25. Deconstruction, Deconstruction II, and Deconstruction III are examples from the three issues of *Architecture Design* (London: Academy Press, 1988, 1989, 1990).

26. Quoted by Jacques Derrida "A Letter to Peter Eisenman" in *Assemblage* 12 (1990), 12.

27. Jameson, *cit.*, 98.

28. Jameson, *cit.*, 99.

29. Gutman, *cit.*, 86, 89.

30. Pecora, "Tower of Babel," 47-8.

31. Quoted in Hal Foster, "Postmodernism: A Preface" in Hal Foster, ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic*, (Seattle, 1983), xi.

32. Hal Foster, *cit.*, xi.

33. Hamid Shirvani, "Architecture versus Franchised Design" in *Urban Design and Preservation Quarterly* 11:2/3 (1988): 2-8.

34. David Harvey, "Looking Backwards on Postmodernism" in *Architectural Design* 60: 9-10 (1990), 12.

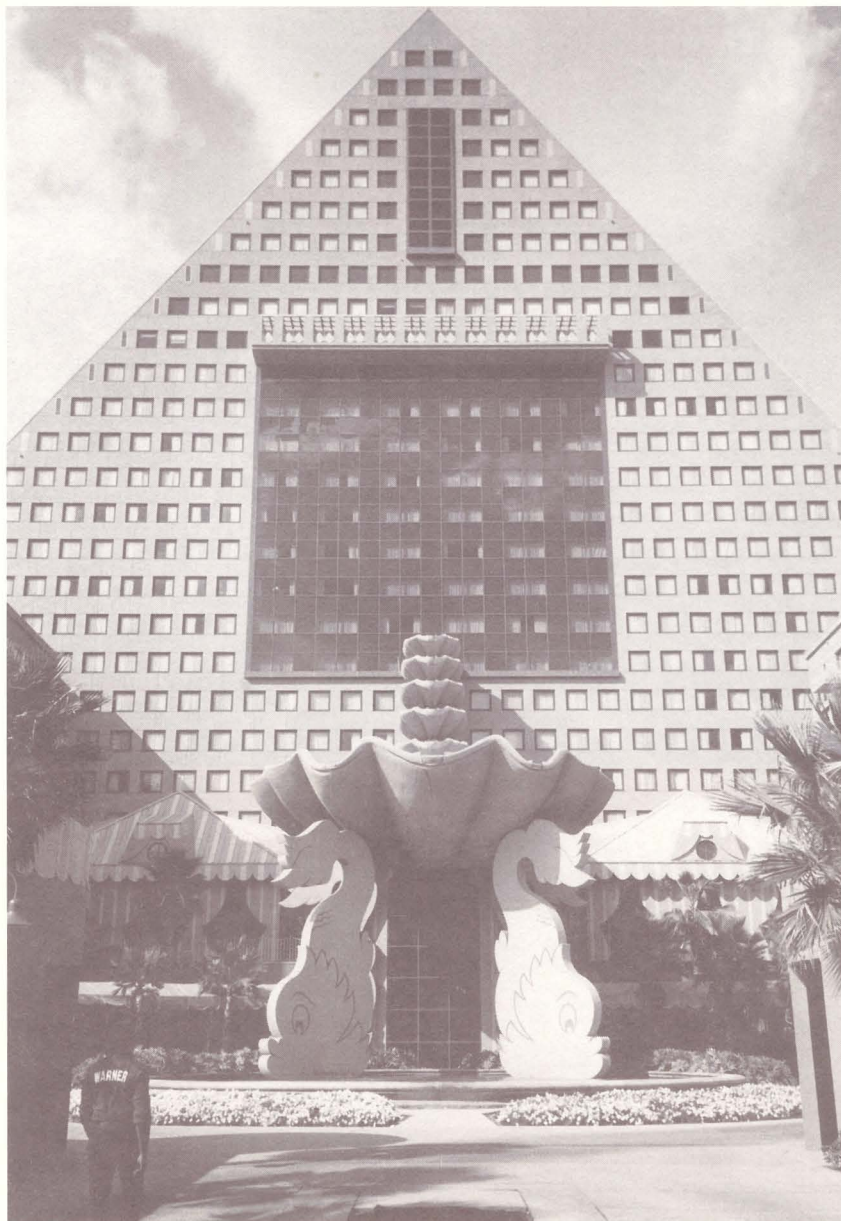
35. Pecora, "Towers of Babel," 46, 7.

36. Hamid Shirvani, "Context and Divergence" in Marcello Fabbri and Daniela Pastore, eds. *Architettura per il Terzo Millennio* (Milan, 1991).

37. Pecora, "Towers of Babel," 47.



Figure 1: Disney resort designed by Robert A. M. Stern, a recent example of Pomo architecture. It is a recreation of past "homey" images constructed by applying advanced building technology: plastic columns, imitation wood siding, etc., as a representation of Disneyesque high-profile commodity.



Figures 2 & 3: Michael Graves' Disney Resort, another example of Pomo architecture, is perhaps a supreme representation of fantasy and the commodification of architecture.





Figure 4: A 37-unit apartment building designed by Peter Eisenman in Berlin, an example of Decon architecture with juxtaposition, distortion and formal games, as another high-profile approach to the commodification of architecture.



Figures 5a & 5b: A house in Venice, California designed by Frank Gehry, a "high-culture," pop-Decon commodity (above). A house near Tiny Town, Colorado, designed by the resident without the assistance of a design professional, an example of "low-culture," pop-Decon commodity (below).