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# Fragments of Memory

Michael Woods

Understanding the effect that memory has on architecture is a complicated task. We need to be aware of our history, and architecture is the most obvious remnant of our collective past. Since buildings (remnants) carry meaning, the preservation of their fragments has tremendous possibilities for making comments about the past as well as today. When an old building cannot be preserved, sometimes only pieces remain to become part of a new building. These unique relationships between the new and the old are a significant aspect of design and provide powerful opportunities to affect our sense of memory and perception of architecture.

I will examine some of the principles of form used in designing with fragments, to show how meaning can be given to design through memory. Most of my discussion about design limits itself to new buildings, leaving out renovation and its unique aspects.

There are many different circumstances that architects encounter in designing with existing buildings and fragments. The space within an existing building can be transformed, an addition can be built, or, under special conditions when only fragments of a historic building remain, the piece may be incorporated into new construction. Fragments may be integrated, isolated, relocated, or even reconstructed with entirely new materials. These fragments each carry memory of their building as a whole, and of the story of how the fragment came to be on its own. Fragments that have historic or

aesthetic value are often regarded as sacred objects, part of a historic fabric. The challenge from the limiting circumstances of designing around fragments can result in more interesting projects as the following examples will show. Each of these projects uses fragments as part of a new building to refer to the past in the present.

## Memory

If memory is the "faculty of retaining and recalling knowledge," then architecture acts as a prop for individual or collective memories (representing past events and people). Memory is dependent on a context of some kind, and architecture helps us to provide a frame of reference. The mind edits and organizes memories, so our view of the past is distorted and highly selective. Just as none of us can remember all that has happened, everything in the environment cannot be preserved. Only fragments remain. We are accustomed to encountering fragments in museums or in archeological sites. A city, a neighborhood, a block is incomplete, only representing parts of specific periods. A preserved neighborhood is only a fragment of the city, and an individual building is only a fragment of a block. In some cases, only a fragment of an existing building remains to be included in the new structure. Since fragments are incomplete, a sense of loss for the whole (building) always lingers. They are effective memorials since their remains remind us of the past as well as the events that damaged the buildings.

Structures in Hiroshima and Berlin partially destroyed during World War II and left in this condition remind inhabitants and visitors of particular events. Their fragmented forms are forceful reminders and may raise disturbing memories. Along with conveying the sense of loss, a reused fragment refers to its recovery for a new purpose.

Who decides which building fragments and which memories are to remain and for what purpose? The disappointment with modern architecture and the preoccupation with the past has fueled preservation efforts, but sometimes artifacts are saved purely for the sake of preservation, without regard to their value. In different circumstances the client, or architect, or a government agency might decide what will be preserved. When fragments are significant enough, a government agency (such as a landmarks commission) usually decides that a fragment must remain, because of its aesthetic or historical value. A client or an architect may save a fragment for the same reasons. Fragments are not preserved for economics the way a whole building might be, so the choice is very deliberate. An architect may even save an unimportant fragment, because it adds something of value to a new building. (*Ed.*)

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

Discussion of Rafael Moneo's Museum of Roman Art has been deleted from the text. Reference "Type, Memory, and Meaningful Form" of Wendy Ornelas for elaboration of this project.

## Fragments on Display

Venturi and Rauch were hired to design a museum and garden on the site of Benjamin Franklin's House near Independence Hall in Philadelphia. The site was off Market Street, behind some row houses and connected to the street by a passage. Franklin's House was demolished in 1812, and not enough documentation existed for it to be authentically reconstructed. The architects proposed placing the museum underground, leaving the courtyard as an urban garden. They created a profile of Franklin's House in square steel tubing in the garden area. Concrete hoods with windows viewing the original house's foundations below covered all that was left of Franklin's House. The floor plan of the house is recalled by the paving of the garden, and quotations of Franklin's are engraved in the paving. A brick shed serves as the entry to the underground museum. As in many of his other projects, Venturi replicates historic forms in the garden's benches and arbors, exaggerating their proportions.

The museum and the garden are to serve the memory of Franklin's life and work with his house itself playing the minor role. It is part of a preserved neighborhood that has many historic sites from the American Revolution. We can imagine more about Franklin with the help of these props and the exhibits in the museum. Their location on the original site adds to the meaning. The foundations are enshrined as actual artifacts. Draw-

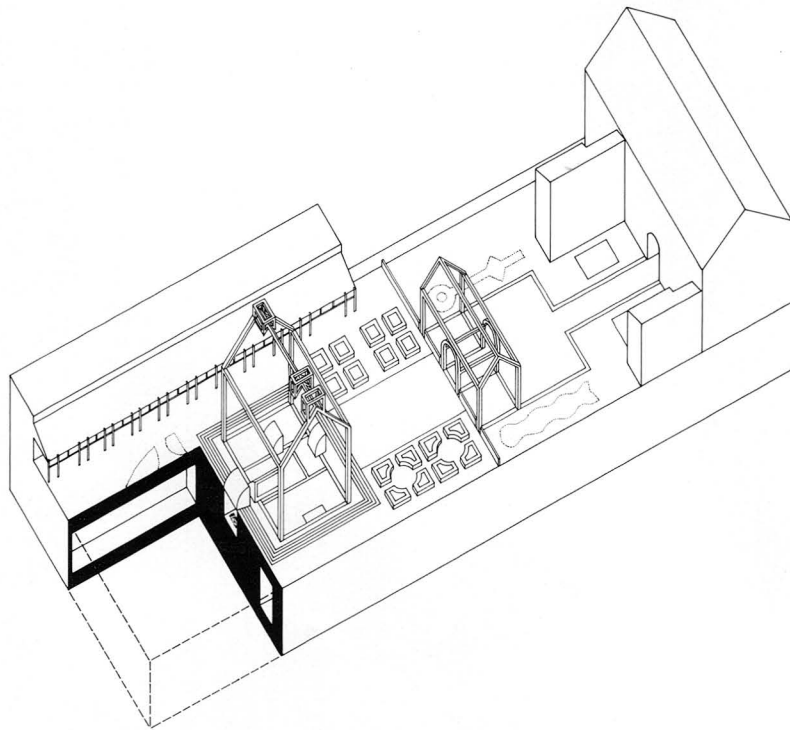
ings and models show that the architects have considered an enclosure that looks more like an archeological site, with a flat transparent covering. The concrete display cases are not as effective for viewing the remains, and the ruins cannot be observed from the museum below. The partial reconstruction of the house by the steel outline is a prop of Franklin's life. Since an authentic, complete reconstruction was not possible, this solution suggests the basic form of the house, still leaving much to the imagination of the visitor.

### Integration into Construction

Thom Mayne, Michael Rotundi and their firm Morphosis have turned a modern glass walled bank along Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles into a stylish restaurant. The client for the restaurant, Marilyn Lewis, is the owner of the Hamburger Hamlet chain of restaurants. The restaurant, called Kate Mantilini's, is named after the mistress of the client's uncle, a boxing promoter. The architects have retained the aluminum frame of the

bank's glass curtainwall and have built a new solid structure behind it to enclose the restaurant. The space between the two transforms into a porch for outside dining. The entrance is located at the southeast corner of the long rectangular main room. The sides of the room facing the street contain booths within the solid wall, widened to enclose them. The wall narrows as it rises and separates from the roof by skylights as it protrudes above. The back wall of the space has a kitchen facing an 80-foot long counter. Above the counter is a gently curving wall with a mural by John Wehrle, illustrating the Marvin Hagler-Tommy Hearns fight of 1985.

A intricate metal sculpture designed by the architects occupies the center of the restaurant. The sculpture is connected with a rooftop sundial and skylight and rests on the floor of the space, providing a focal point for the room. A stylus attached to the sculpture is set to appear as though it etches a section drawing of the building into a steel plate on its floor.



Franklin Court with the ruins and museum below

The bank's old facade is integrated with the new work so that it seems like another layer of a new building. The facade is embedded in the new construction, its memory nearly erased. Since the memory of the bank is not important to the new restaurant, memory is not used in the same direct way as in the Venturi project. Anyone remembering the bank can recognize it with a close inspection, but its memory is lost to the first-time observer, who takes for granted that it is simply another part of the new construction. Morphosis could easily have removed the facade, since it is not a necessary part of the enclosure. Cable railings are strung through aluminum

columns, and canopies above the outdoor tables are clipped around them.

The Cubist technique of collage has effective applications for architectural fragments. Instead of being used in merely a formal geometric sense, here collage gains vitality and strength from the integration of new and old. Multiple layers of materials are used. The architects deftly incorporate the bank facade as layer with a history of its own.

The Museum of Modern Art at the Villa Strozzi designed by Richard Meier is one part of a renovated farm outside of the city of Florence. The farm was designed in the



Kate Mantilini's facade

second half of the 19th Century and included a villa, orangery, and two stables around a courtyard. Meier's portion of the project was to create a gallery for exhibiting sculpture and painting from a stable. While the original intention was to renovate the interior, the city's Superintendent of Monuments determined that only two exterior walls were worth saving. These two adjacent walls are visible both from the approach and the courtyard. Additional space was to be provided within an extension of the new building outside the original volume. Glass and steel walls would form the new enclosure, and a new roof plane was to rise above the existing cornice extending beyond the old masonry walls. The memory of the old farm and its buildings remains in the preserved elements. The other buildings on the site have remained to provide a more complete picture of the original farm with a sense of deterioration created by the fragmentation.

The existing walls act as more of a foil for the new construction than as an integral part of it. The vocabulary is not derived from the old building but rather contrasts sharply with it. A grid of new steel columns deliberately conflicts with the pattern of windows, placing the columns directly in front of the openings. Solid walls separate the main space from a corridor and the stable walls behind it. At the top of the existing wall, a horizontal slot window is set between the wall and the roof. A flat roof floats above on the steel columns and holds the edges of the form of the original building. The glass wall at the entry erodes from the edge of the original volume and a narrow ramp connector links the additional volume. The design takes advantage of the stable walls by playing off the new construction to achieve the greatest contrast. This enhances the object qualities of the walls. A reconstruction of the original structure or a new building with an imitative vocabulary would have ruined the artifact quality of the walls and obscured their identity.

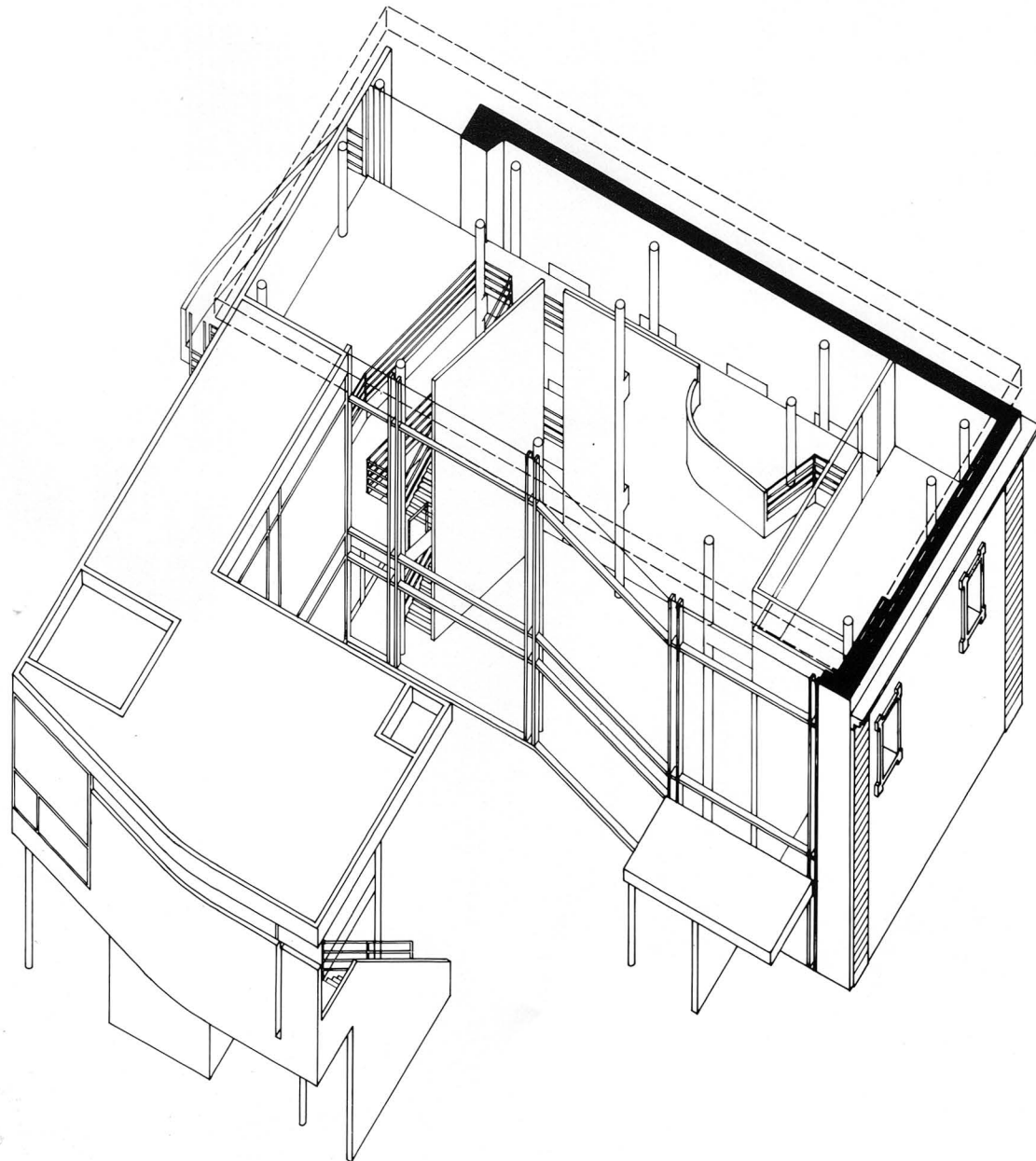
## Reconstruction

Eisenman/Trott Architects won a limited competition (1983), and were selected to be the architects for the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts at Ohio State University. On a site adjacent to the school's oval lawn, the Center houses a visual arts facilities, which has a particular emphasis on experimental media forms, involving new technologies such as lasers, computers and video. The architects choose to develop a design that responds to an

underlying history of the place and one that expresses the emphasis on emerging technologies. This site at the edge of the campus gave the architects the opportunity to show the 12½ degree shift of grids between the campus and the town and to mark the edge of the oval lawn at the center of the campus. The design integrates these geometries and expresses the connection that the center makes with the town. A new path into the campus is created with a grove of buckeye trees along the 15th Avenue axis. The glass-enclosed

main circulation through the building cuts between the existing Mershon Auditorium and Weigel Hall, incorporating them into the new building.

The circulation spine draws students through the center to the classrooms. The massing of the center intends to bring out the site geometry through a grid of raised landscaped masses which appear to be parts of a sloped pre-existing site left after the grid had been cut away by an imaginary archeological excavation. The cir-



Villa Strozzi

culuation spine is covered by a steel framework that resembles a scaffold assembled for this imaginary excavation.

The most unusual element of the project is the partial reconstruction of an armory that had once occupied the portion of the site at the edge of the oval lawn. The armory built in 1898 was demolished in 1959 after being extensively damaged by fire. The architects relocated the tower and the walls that were reconstructed. They cite the reconstruction of the college's University Hall as a precedent for this strategy. The tower becomes the hinge of the composition and aligns with the intersections of the grid at the edge of the oval. The original location of the armory's tower could not have marked the intersection of the axes, so the tower is reconstructed in a new place for its primary role as a geometric marker. The brick on the tower is detailed in a much simpler way than the original, creating an abstraction rather than a replication. This reconstruction means to recall the history of the site in a more direct way than the abstraction of geometry.

The memory of the armory returns with its past and its destruction. Eisenman's solution questions our attitudes about authenticity and representation. While Eisenman selects elements from the place's past, he does so in a very unsentimental way. He creates his own fictitious history related to the fragmented remains and the new building. A literal reconstruction of the entire armory serves no useful purpose, nor does it explore the sort of ideas Eisenman is questioning. The reconstruction of the tower reveals that the form of the armory has a stronger presence than authentic historical artifacts.

Originally, the architects had intended to excavate the remaining portions of the armory's foundations and use them as seating along the edge of a sculpture garden. Unfortunately, the contractor had removed the real ruins by mistake, so ironically "new ruins" are constructed in their place. The perils of reconstruction



Wexner Center armory tower

and its interpretation exist even if we accept the rules to a new game. The authenticity of the tower will become less clear as the patina of time ages its surfaces and obscures the reference of its reconstruction.

### Implications

Today, greater pressure to preserve fragments of the past and increasingly complex selection processes have resulted in more fragments saved. Likewise there is a great difficulty to maintain both the integrity of the fragment and the new design. It is not difficult to imagine other circumstances than shown here. Fragments can be put on display as Venturi does within new enclosures. Often, this is the most that can be done with fragments too small or too valuable to incorporate into new construction. When they are substantial enough, they can be integrated into a new building, as

Meier's and Morphosis' proposals. This idea extends to include even unexceptional fragments, such as the bank facade at Kate Mantilini's, that adds something of value to a new building. Fragments can even be reconstructed in entirely new locations as Eisenman did. Regardless of the situation, a dialogue develops between the old and the new, between the circumstance of the fragment and the ideal of the new design. The circumstance of the fragment can validate and give meaning to the new design, particularly when the ideals of the new design are strong enough to stand on their own.

The challenges that fragments impose on the design of a new building and its composition are even greater since most architects are not versed in working with these situations. The choices of what is preserved are made many times by others preceding the formal decisions, so architects may be limited to determine on-

ly the spatial relationships between the old, the new, and the architectural vocabulary of the new building. Meier's strong contrast in vocabulary is effective in bringing out the difference between old and new while remaining sympathetic to the historic fragments. The contrasting geometric relationships provide clear separation of the old and the new. Venturi's and Eisenman's choice of partial reconstruction to reinforce the memory of buildings destroyed long ago creates compositions based partially on past geometries. Morphosis uses the modern art technique of collage to integrate an aluminum frame into a new building. These principles of form provide effective means for designing with fragments.

Since it is impossible and unnecessary to preserve all architectural artifacts in a natural condition, we resort to preserving fragments. The dilemma of the fragment is that the loss of the whole is always evident. If urban fragments are chosen randomly or have a trivial significance, then the past appears chaotic. The best elemental pieces are connected with historic events and people that resonate in our collective memories. We appreciate fragments that are less significant when we discover their integration into the layers of a new design. Fragments add value to new construction by making the changes in places visible. The accumulation of buildings, whole and fragments, from different periods gives a depth to the world that makes the connection between architecture and memory.