

1-1-1999

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Recommended Citation

Norheim, Torgeir (1999) "Does it Come in Orange?," *Oz*: Vol. 21. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2378-5853.1341>

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Does it Come in Orange? Meta-Operative Architecture

Torgeir Norheim

OBJECTIVE READING - WHAT IS THE NATURE OF ARCHITECTURE?

Architecture is primarily a synthesis of technology and art. Technology provides the tools and the knowledge to erect pillars, walls, beams, and roofs. Art provides the expression to sustain beauty, elegance, balance and harmony. Function is the purpose and its form inscribes space. Technology relates to function in that they are both very specific. Art relates to form in that they are both of a more ambiguous nature. Architecture is often observed from an objective point of view; however, the creation of architecture is a highly subjective activity.

In considering the individual, form and function are first perceived as objective elements. We never actually invent anything new, but merely discover, synthesize, and transform that which already exists. The limits of our reality are defined by the limits of our beliefs—as if governed by an internal system of order.

This system of order provides the individual with the ability to discover, define, synthesize, and transform. Order, particular to the individual, then becomes the spontaneous—subjective to objective—communication system which refines principles from pluralities and similarities of experience. To characterize these behavior patterns, the individual order¹ reintegrates selections from generalized principles

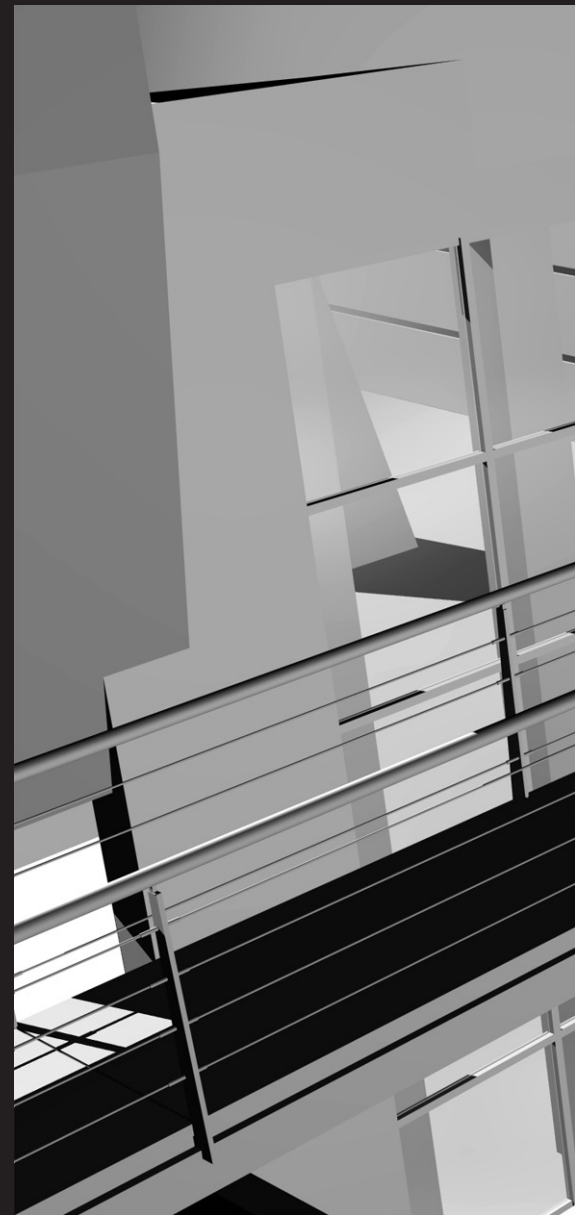
into instruments and tools. These instruments and tools increase the possibility for advantages in interpretation of reality. With each repeated opportunity of their application, the perception of order improves, or self multiplies with each increased level of complexity.

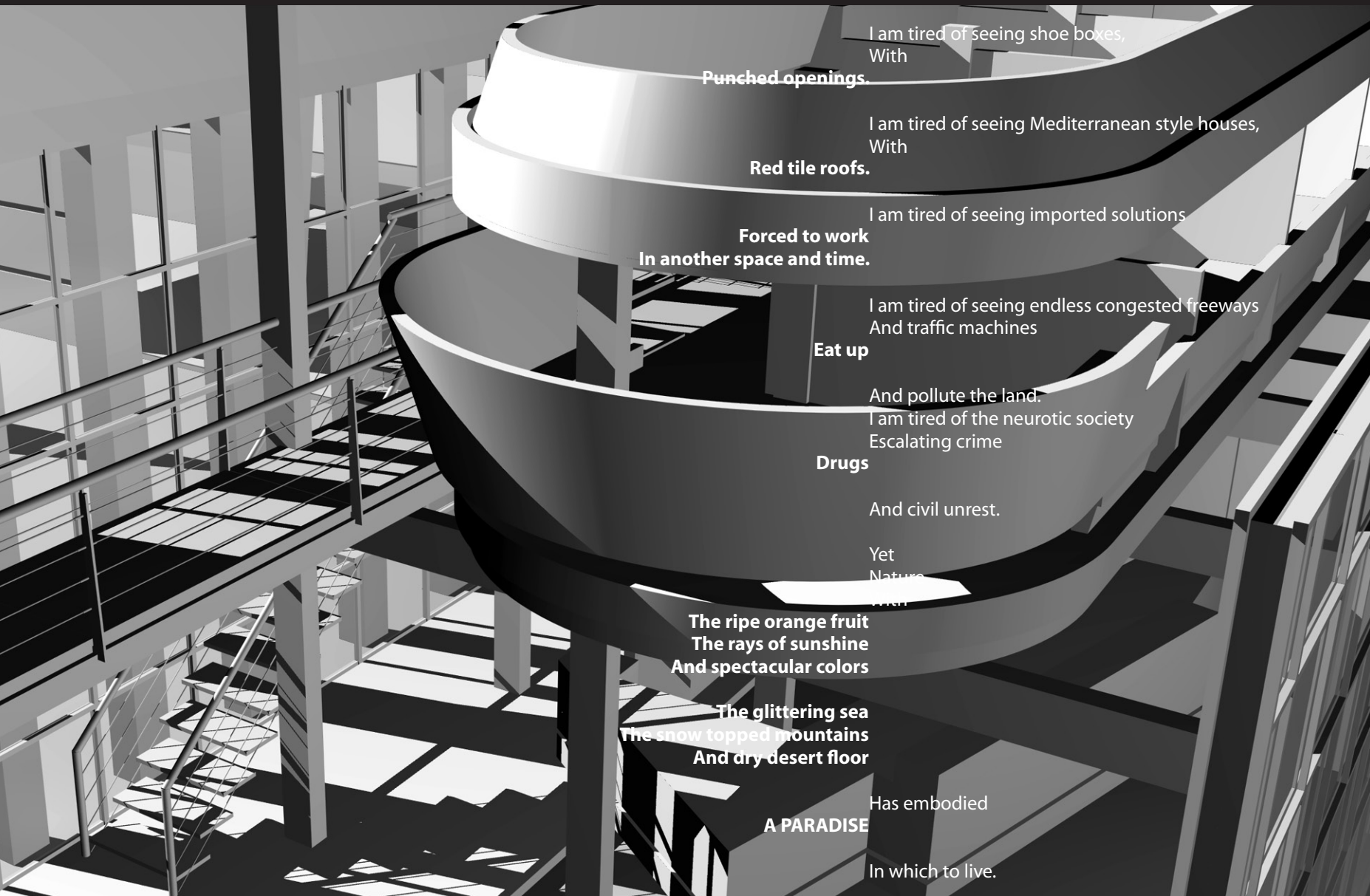
The aspirations, yearning, and search of the individual is to ultimately attain complete understanding of the universal order. This overall order is a manifestation of fundamental principles intertwined with the past, present, and foreseeable future. This order does not change, but reveals its self through change—or fluctuating stylistic conditions. As levels of thought define individual intellectual maturity over time, architectural styles can be perceived as a model that manifests maturity in the interrelationship of form, function, and order. The evolution of architecture is a continuous endeavor seeking higher complexity, unification, and meaning in the trinity of form, function, and order

Environment, society, culture, and community inherently contain the promise to inform our psychological development and greatly influence the thinking, attitudes, goals, and personality of individuals. Architecture, a primary operator in this setting, can be interpreted as a perception formulator; it can become an instru-

ment for expanding vitality in the communication of ideas and in the provision of emotional relationships. In addition to fulfilling utilitarian aspects, the purpose of architecture is to stimulate thought—positive and creative thought.

Architecture, however, is currently occupied with the same ideas that evolved in the beginning of this century. There is now a call to transcend this state of hibernation. Society at large is losing its sense of unity through segregation of the social stratas and a general mistrust in the system that has lead to this. Clearly, one of the causal factors for this misfortune is in the way in which society presents itself through the built environment—i.e., cities, towns, and communities. Does the built environment mirror the scientific and philosophical achievements of the age of information? Creativity, diversity, and flexibility are the ingredients that add spice to the routine of living and give immediacy to the aspirations of humankind. Contemporary conditions demand a re-evaluation of the values that define the age in which we are living. Architecture needs to embark on an energetic and vitalizing path to a future of unity marked by diversity and flexibility: a future of increasing individuality and identity, a future of sound ecological and climatic orientation celebrating the natural environment and human potential.





I am tired of seeing shoe boxes,
With

Punched openings.

I am tired of seeing Mediterranean style houses,
With

Red tile roofs.

I am tired of seeing imported solutions

**Forced to work
In another space and time.**

I am tired of seeing endless congested freeways
And traffic machines

Eat up

And pollute the land.

I am tired of the neurotic society
Escalating crime

Drugs

And civil unrest.

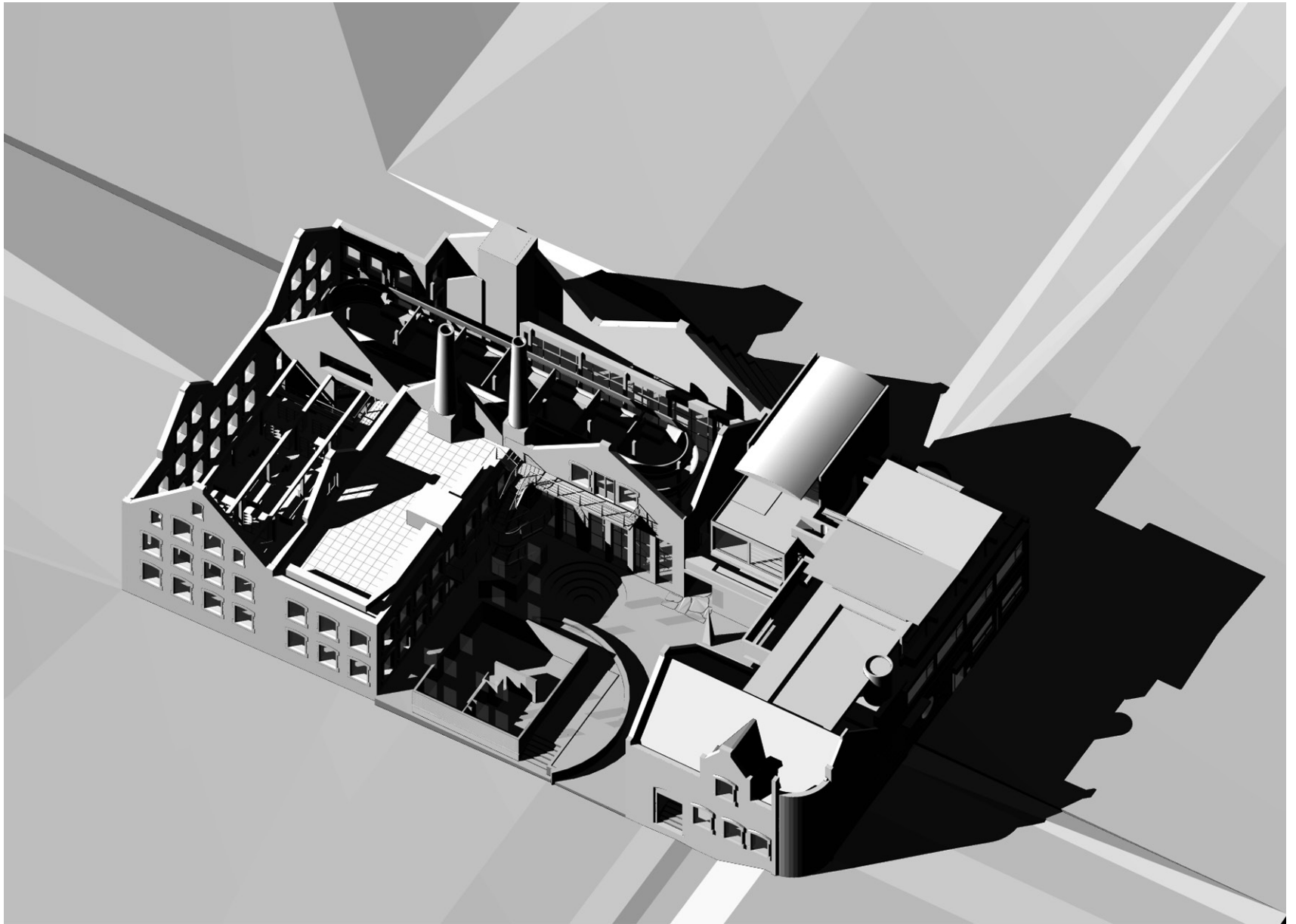
Yet
Nature
With

**The ripe orange fruit
The rays of sunshine
And spectacular colors**

**The glittering sea
The snow topped mountains
And dry desert floor**

Has embodied
A PARADISE

In which to live.



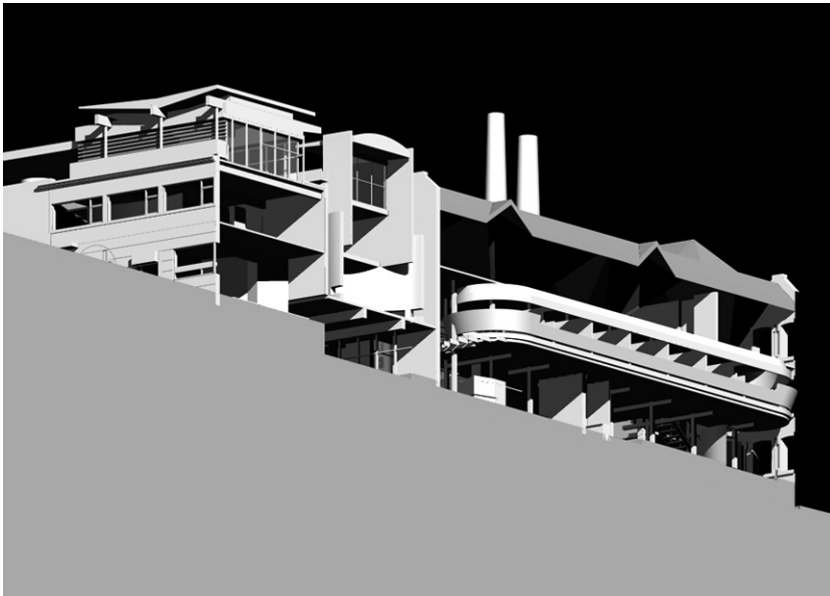
SUBJECTIVE READING—PHILOSOPHICAL RESPONSE

Meta-operative² Architecture is a philosophical response to contemporary conditions manifesting the search for order in a chaotic world. It is not an aesthetic strategy, but a communication tool which refines principles from pluralities and similarities of experience. Meta-operative Architecture affords a holistic/pluralistic perspective and seeks to form reconnections to, and reinterpretations of, the present human condition. Meta-operative Architecture is

a medium germinating ideas through the communication of philosophies that sustains a healthy, harmonious, positive, and creative growth environment characterized by the sharing of information from all human ventures. These concerns include addressing the many aspects of transformation under which society continuously goes and attempting to reflect the chaotic, unpredictable, and ultimately fragmented aspect of present reality. The vocabulary of expression in

such a state would swell to include all extremes and all in-betweens. Meta-operative Architecture is therefore conceived as a lateral, inter-disciplinary activity inspired by architecture, mathematics, philosophy, history, art, nature, etc. The poetics of Meta-operative Architecture are based on the communication and multi-dimensional properties of geometry, material, structure, color, object, space, and time. Meta-operative Architecture seeks re-connections.





INTERPRETATION IN STAVANGER, NORWAY

The attempt to find re-connections can be applied to an existing built environment in which the original function has ceased its usefulness. This situation exists in a former sardine factory in the city of Stavanger, Norway. The building complex, which still embodies a certain dignity, is situated in an aged industrial area that currently is in a confused state of redevelopment. The structures are of masonry and heavy timber and built in phases over a period of thirty years. The segmented construction allows an exciting and dynamic relationship of space with a floor-to-floor height of up to four meters, and a total floor area of more than three thousand square meters varying in height from two to four stories.

This group of buildings is now being evaluated for new use. The strategy employed: introduce complex questions that delineate a dynamic perspective in the relationship of past and present. How can contemporary activities be introduced in such a way that respects and articulates the intentions of the original design? Can these activities present themselves in a viable coexistence with the past? To obtain the answers, both past and present have to be re-evaluated.

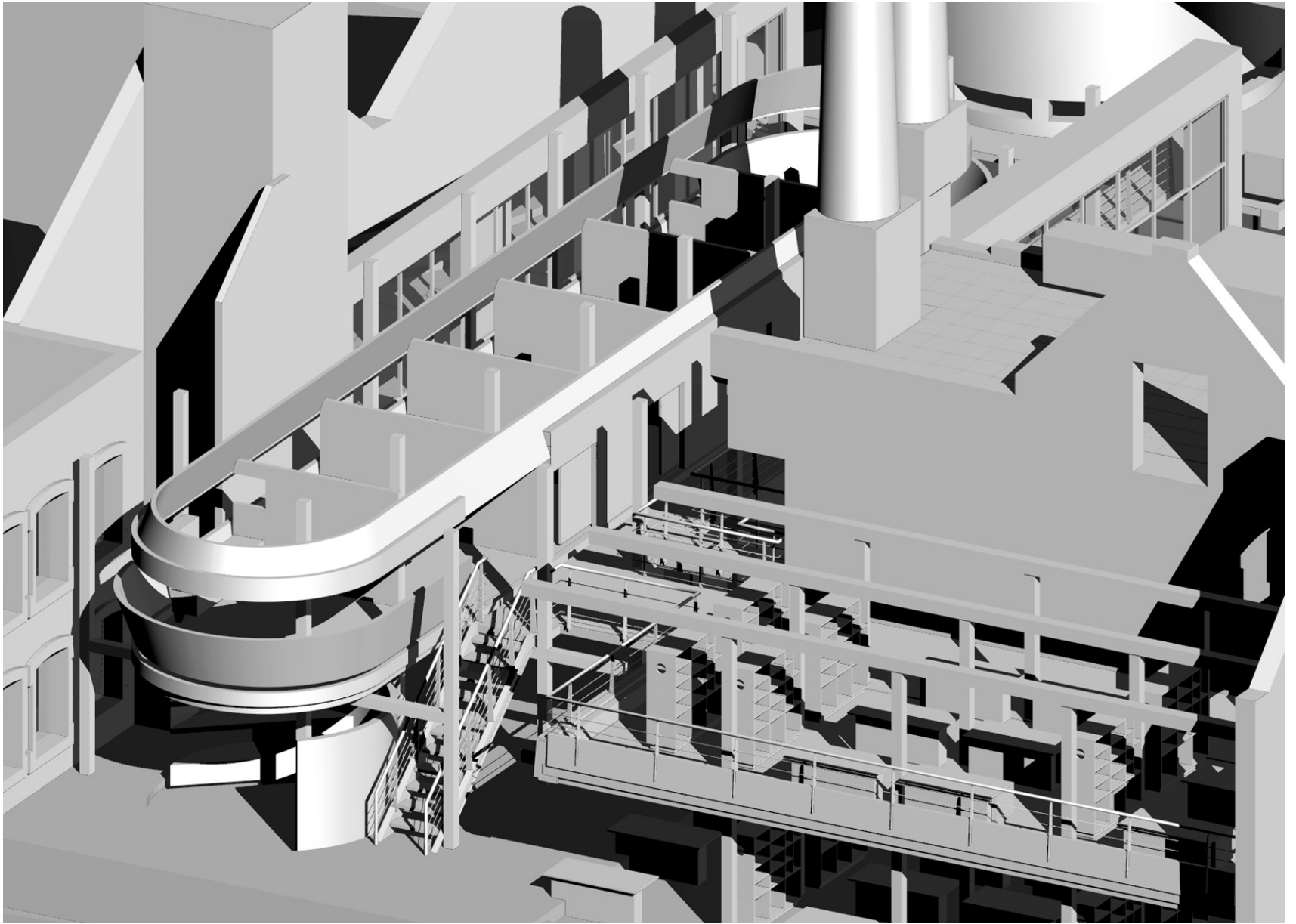
Traditionally the marketplace values square footage and prices space according to this system. However, the market competition in this arena is severe, and the cost of redevelopment would not be beneficial for the site. In order to meet this competition, the decision was made to sell volume rather than square footage. This seemingly trivial conclusion allowed a liberating interpretation of the existing site that also entertained the introduction of a dynamic mix of uses.

The new function for the group of buildings is to be that of an information factory, metaphorically fusing

past and present modes of thought. As such, it is understood that all entities of the environment are capable of providing information—i.e., space, circulation, structure, materiality, geometry, color. When these entities achieve a correlated, articulated, and integrated state, the more dynamic the product becomes.

The project seeks an integration of uses ranging from service and commercial, to housing. A space for living would also be a space for service, and a space of service would be space for commerce and vice versa. This notion of trans-programming, allows the incorporation of diversity and flexibility as a stimulant to the flow and processing of information. With the introduction of the complexity of trans-programming, it is equally important to maintain clarity in the relationships of the various systems and subsystems that are manipulated. The notion of clarity can be maintained and articulated by the adoption of a democratic value system—each part that contributes to the making of architecture is equally as important as the next.

As an information factory, the project is seen as an alliance between the traditionally occurring singular functions with other singular functions. In this representation, singular functions may be interchanged with buildings, systems, events, materials, strata, etc., to help illuminate aspects of multiplicity. This fusion embodies the promise to construct a very different concept of space illuminated by the equation $1+1=3$. When two or more activities overlap one another, there is an opportunity for design. The greater the number of parts to be considered, the greater the creative challenge. The heterogeneous relationships developing among the parts also seek to confuse the boundaries between artificial and natural environments.³



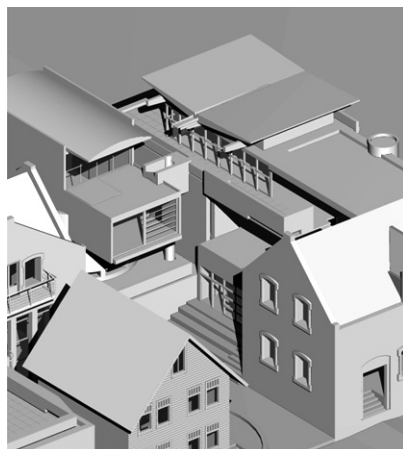
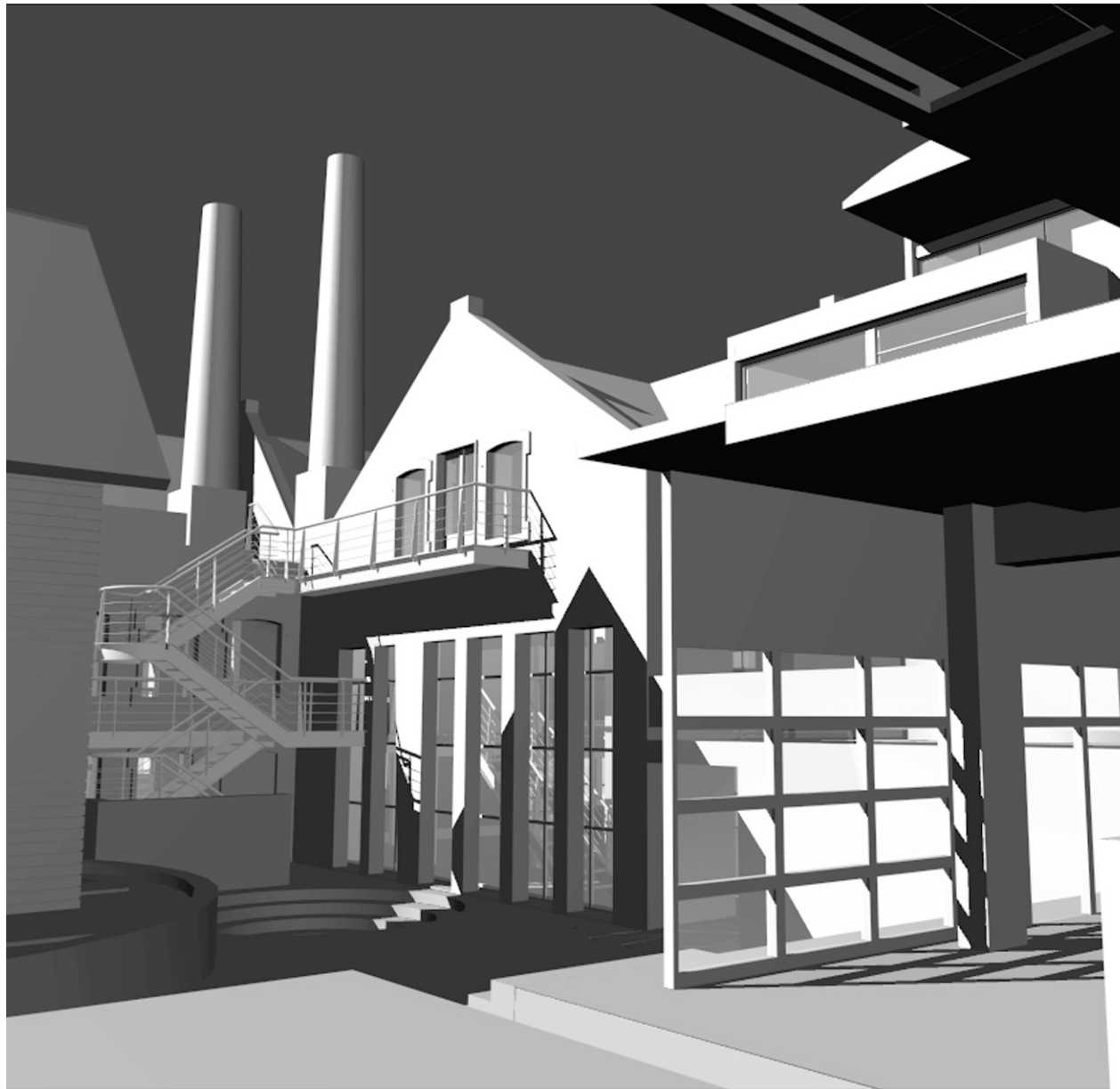
Materials of construction are selected to complement and stimulate the fusion of old and new as well as the introduced programming. Where two materials meet there is an opportunity for design. Pondering the array of questions that may occur in such a situation is, to put it mildly, frustrating. What is the nature of the material? Is it natural versus human-made? What is the purpose of the material, structure, enclosure or finish? What are the physical properties, suitabilities, and the dimensions?

What is the psychological impact? Does it come in orange? Is it easy to maintain? What is its durability? Is it fire rated? How much does it cost? Not only do these questions raise issues related to materiality itself, but they also seek to establish relationships with information that pertains to the periphery of materiality itself.

In order to establish the appropriate communication between the various connections, the materials have to undertake evaluations describ-

ing the nature of relationships that may be encountered, such as new/old, warm/cold, soft/hard, delicate/brutal, round/angular, etc. Having now entered a psychological dimension, it is understood that the act of creating architecture is very much informed by knowledge in lateral inter-disciplinary relationships. The source for dealing with these inter-relationships is imagination and the product seeks diversity and flexibility, allowing the flow and processing of information.

In the information factory, the materiality of the existing is not only understood as a connection and a constraint, but also as a constant, as is the notion of trans-programming. Architecture as a perception formulator, a connection and a constraint, operates as a mediator with the previous and is understood as a variable. As a variable, the perception formulator becomes the object of interpretation that allows connection to all other levels of thought.



EVALUATION

It becomes clear that some rules of design need to be established. The Meta-operative action calls for a fluid and improvisational decision making process. Realizing that the act of making one decision allows evaluation of the next, and so on, suggests that it is impossible to make a wrong decision but that any particular decision merely has the constraints of the former. This allows a certain freedom in the overall process of design; the overwhelming complex-

ity of the whole does not have to be considered simultaneously. To think of these decisions as connections and of the design process as a multiplicity of connections, then to introduce the element of change, it is understood that the connections will never connect in the same way. Understanding when a connection is proper and when it is not, is attributed to the individual perception of order.

The former sardine factory is then

poised for a transformation that celebrates multiplicity on every level bearing a connection to the realm of architecture—material, structure, function, etc. The creative process manifests the pluralities that transcend the information-age culture as inter-disciplinary behavior. However, from the point of view that we never actually invent anything new, but merely discover, synthesize, and transform that which already exists, the entire process becomes a question of re-interpretation and re-connection of an already existing series of unrelated facts. How are we to be assured that the product of re-interpretation and re-connection is anywhere near the appropriate solution? Theory, or a philosophical correlation of form, function, and order, provides the platform for a belief system from which all other concerns are ordered. This belief system, if broad enough, allows connections deep into the well of human knowledge acclaimed from the time beginning, the origin. With just a hint of this wisdom it is clear that as much as things change (form and function), they also stay the same (order). Certain elements of the architectural dimension that have roots in this order are repetition—patterns should repeat continuously, harmony—parts should fit together, variety—it should be non-monotonous and non-predictable, proportions—it should relate to human scale. The strategy, then, is to re-connect to the origin in order to re-interpret for contemporary life.

Notes

1. Norheim, "Form, Function and Order," graduate thesis, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 1980.
2. Metaoperative was conceptualized by artist Randy Naylor to describe the interdisciplinary approach in his work.
3. Manifesto of Architectural Design Studio Seven created in conjunction with the project—Exit HinnaVågen—Kansas State University Department of Architecture, Fall 1998.