When the jury for the Wexner Center for the Arts design competition at Ohio State University announced they had chosen the firm of Peter Eisenman and Richard Trott as the winners, I wonder if they had any idea what the impact of their decision would be. Eisenman wowed the Jury with his bold ideas for the art center, which were aimed at linking the past to the present (“Timeless Earth 1), through the use of unconventional means. The end result became both Peter Eisenman’s first large public commission and one of the first large scale constructions of Deconstructivist Architecture. The Wexner Center is located on the east side of the Ohio State Campus at 1871 North High Street and East 16th Avenue. The building is tucked in between the Mershon Auditorium and Weigel Hall both of which are home to programs that were to be consolidated into the Wexner Center. In the following I would like to investigate some of the ideas Eisenman explored through the architecture and form of this building in the context of the existing urban condition and through my own ideas regarding his approach.

One of the most striking qualities of the Wexner Center, one that is immediately apparent to any passer-by, is the prevalence of grids; they define and are exemplified by the site work, the visible architecture, the pavers and the curtain wall. Eisenman’s rational for this was to unite scale by grafting the planning grids of the State of Ohio, the City of Columbus, and that of Ohio State University together (Eisenman and Graafland, 63). The original master plan for Ohio State University was designed by Frederic Olmstead in 1909 (Wikipedia, 1) and as a part of his plan, he rotated the primary grid of the campus 12.5° off of the Columbus grid to allow the campus to engender its own identity. By the early 1980’s the campus had expanded and populated Olmstead’s grid to the point that it now met the City of Columbus grid, this location was where Eisenman chose to propose his design.
Below: A diagram depicting the axial, organizational, and scalar relationship of the grids, Wexner Center, and the pedestrian pathways.
Eisenman overlaid scaled versions of the grids on top of one another, using the resultant disjunctions to locate building and site elements. The city street grid became the generator for the pedestrian axis onto the campus (Eisenman and Noever, 116). The trajectory of this axis projects off of the site in both directions, it stretches along the north end of the quad to Ohio Stadium in one direction, and across the city to the east-west runway of the Port Columbia Airport. (Davidson and Eisenman, 112) Perpendicular to this Pathway, a second form generating pathway is run north-south across the site, Eisenman manifest this pathway as a ‘double’ pathway which includes one pedestrian pathway that is enclosed, and a second external pathway that is open to elements.

It is important to note that if one is to take a look at an aerial view of the campus Eisenman has disregarded the pedestrian pathways of the campus, his axial composition of grids, for all of their depth, are premised on grids that were designed to transport automobiles, not that of the pedestrian. Therefore, the progression from the city to the campus proper through the Wexner Centre is quite awkward and uncomfortable, this may be by design, or purely an omission on Eisenman’s part, but is one nonetheless that serves to disconnect the Wexner Center from the campus, rather than integrate it.

Eisenman coupled his grid abstractions with a series of figures that would play a key role in his aim of linking the past with the present. The most prominent of these figures exists as a reconstruction of a part of the armoury that occupied the site from 1898 until it was terminally damaged by fire on May 17th 1958. (Ohio State Interactive History Map) The figure of the armoury Eisenman has presented along the south pedestrian access (the most visually
accessible elevation of the building) has been reduced to a series of fragments of armoury-like forms that indicate the 'essence' of the armoury without reproducing any of the original intricate detail.

The foundation of the armoury has been “excavated” (Eisenman and Noevel, 116) as a trace element of the west side of the site. Within the armoury forms the negative space carved out of the solid brick masses that make up these figures is cast with a dark tinted curtain wall, within which is an aluminum mullion pattern evocative of the use of grid. The contrast created by the anodized aluminum of the mullions intensifies the impenetrable depth of the glass. The lack of historical fidelity in the reconstruction of the...
armoury, the fragmentation of the form, and the insertion of dark glass into the voids left between these fragments seems to speak of the disjointed manner in which we reflect the past, and in turn, it serves to remind us of a past we have lost and can never return to.

Eisenman turns to another figure to define the archetype of the north-south double pathway, one which is commonly referred to by Eisenman as scaffolding (Eisenman and Graafland, 63). The scaffolding exists as a multi-storey three dimensional grid constructed of painted steel that lines the exterior part of the double pathway. It can be seen to wrap over portions of the enclosed north south passageway as it ramps downward towards the north end of the site. This gesture, although simple in means, succeeds in knitting the existing buildings into Eisenman’s design.

Eisenman’s bold approach to defining the form of the Wexner Center, certainly caught the attention of the jury that mediated the design competition in the early 80’s and for good reason, his first large scale public project is loaded with messages, meaning, and value, certainly more than I have been able to discuss. Through the use of juxtaposed figures, grids, and fragmented forms the Wexner Center supersedes its function as a house of art to becoming a piece of artwork itself, challenging our perceptions and our thoughts.

Above: “Scaffolding”
Works Cited


