Form: Engendering Connections

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
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”
Body: Disconnecting the Mind

The evolution of the body in architecture in the western sense begins with the body as a metaphor for architecture, as evidenced in the practice and writings from the time of Vitruvius through the renaissance, during the enlightenment, and subsequent modernist period of architecture. The use of the body was extended to address and project the psychical attributes and internalized states of the body, for example desire, fear, and health. The most recent stage in this evolution attempts to reverse the traditional western projection of the body and states of the body on architecture in an attempt to project expressions and experiences back on the body. The Wexler Centre for the Arts in Columbus Ohio is a significant example of this Post-Modern Deconstructivist exploration of the body in architecture as it stands as one of the earliest examples of large scale public work dedicated to this exploration. In the following I will attempt to develop an understanding of this destabilization of the traditional body of architecture through the ideas and form (or lack of form) present incarnate in the Wexler Center.

The most immediate impacts of this architecture on the body occur at the urban scale. Eisenman’s use of both the Ohio State University and Columbus grids differentiates this site from the locations that surround it, each of which only acknowledge one grid system. The result is a building which addresses all of the surrounding sites; or as Eisenman articulates it: “The 15th Avenue entrance to the campus, the oval, , and the surrounding buildings are coalesced in an ensemble in which there is an architecturally structured differentiation between old and new, solid and void, far and near spaces.(Barefoot on White-hot Walls 118)

This integration of grids on the boundary of the Ohio State campus tears a hole in the boundary between city and institution. The newfound relationships that emerge from the use of the dual grid can be articulated editically by thinking of the intersections of the x and y
Above: Event Space defined by the grid
divisions of the grid as potential event sites. One can immediately see that in the case of the dual grid new possibilities for the body in space emerge at the location of intersections between both grid systems.

At a tectonic scale Eisenman again challenges the body of the subject in the Wexner Centre by means of two devices: scaffolding and fragmentation of the armoury. In the case of scaffolding, Eisenman bisects the facility by means of an exterior passageway. This passageway, which follows the city grid on a north-south axis, funnels the pedestrian through a colonnade of scaffolding, a trope significant in its allusion to an approach to construction, its impermanence, and its inability to truly ‘shelter’. This skeletal environment challenges the pedestrian as it is perceived simultaneously as attempting enclose and expose; creating a conflict that dislocates the body through its double-experience. This results in the projection of the scaffolding on the body as opposed to the projection of the body into a stable architecture. At a higher level this concept can then be expanded to the notion of the art center itself as a shelter of art (Recent Projects 63).

In the case of the armoury, Eisenman makes two gestures that serve to reinforce this destabilization of the body; first, through the use of the foundation of the armoury as a figure in the site work, and secondly through the use of abstracted fragments of the armoury in the envelope of the architecture, when the body is presented in front of these figures it attempts to project itself into a holistic vision of the armoury, the fragmented image responds, projecting itself upon the body and fragmenting the viewer.
Through the use of both the scaffolding and the fragments of the armoury Eisenman is successful in achieving what he describes in his essay “Visions Unfolding”, as a reorganization of the relationship between figure and ground. He does this both vertically and horizontally.

Eisenman’s final challenge to the body in Wexner Center for the Arts is located in the interior of the building. The dual grids described earlier at the urban scale are figured in the orientation and organization of structural and functional elements in the patterns of the floors, lights, bulkheads and tiles of the ceilings, and the reveals and articulations of the walls. One of the most striking events created by this dedication to the dual grid is the location of a column within a staircase. The column drives down from the architecture which it is intended to support but stops short of the staircase which it would disrupt. In this case the reader understands what the column intends to do as a figure of structure. The disconnection of the column from the ground plane challenges the viewer’s perception of this role, once again resulting in a destabilization of the body, a brief disconnection of the mind from the eye as the viewer attempts to sort this out.

In closing it is important to note that Eisenman’s intent in using the elements of the dual grid, the figure of scaffolding, the fragments and foundation of the armoury, and the juxtaposition of structure is, as Greg Lynn puts it, “To incite those who move through the building to make connections and see patterns that assemble in an emerging, covert plot (Tracing Eisenman 186).”
In the past two parts of this cumulative diagramming assignment I have focused on developing an understanding of the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio through the strategies appropriated in defining its form, and the subsequent effects and relationships that the result form has on the subject. In the following, I would like to revisit some of the diagrams and claims I generated in the past components and through a fresh layer of diagrams and verbiage attempt to uncover a new strata of information and assertions related to the underlying techniques and devices responsible for the effects produced by Peter Eisenman’s use of variable grids, figuration, and fragmentation within the Wexner Center.

The literal use of the rotated grid is used by Eisenman as an extensive method of giving the architecture its own voice. The identification of the dialectic grids stems from conditions that exist at the boundary of the site, Eisenman then grafts one grid on top of the other and seeks potential connections or ‘event sites’ at the urban, local, and interior scales. Scalar operations are performed as a means of mediating the scale of the urban grid towards a pedestrian or human scale, lastly, the results of these operations serves as a map that is used to locate program, pathways, structure, interior forms, excavations, and views along the newly afforded possibilities of ‘event sites’ in both the horizontal and vertical planes.

Above: Using the Grid Technique
The results of these operations are visible in almost every aspect of the construction, from the module in the curtainwall, the tiling of the pavers, planters and trees on site, the orientation of the lights bulkheads, beams, reveals, and ceiling tiles within the building.

To add to the depth of possibilities afforded by this excavation of the immediate condition of the grid Eisenman grafts figured scaffolding onto the site and integrates this figure into the primary circuit or pathway of the building. This figuration of scaffolding represents an intensive manipulation of the grid. The scaffolding is scaled to represent the module of the grid that is interpretable at a human scale. The scaffold is reduced to its raw type, to the essential condition that signifies the essence of its existence that being an impermanent accessory to architecture that allows its construction, but does not necessarily shelter. This architecture of non-shelter is aligned directly adjacent to an interior pathway within the building that does enclose and protect. The result of this organization is a productive series of blurred event sites which run the course of the building. The subject as pedestrian within the external arcade has no choice but to reflect on time, space, and location when moving through this narrow event space as they are exposed to the external elements of weather which are intensified by the narrow width of the pathway and its increasing or decreasing depth as it transitions between two planes. This results in a feedback loop within the subject as
the architecture of non-architecture (or architectural possibility) is projected back onto the subject, who entrapped in this externalized component of the network of the building, is forced to succumb to a system of control which dictates movement and orientation yet mercilessly does not does not assuage the need for enclosure.

The third design device executed by Eisenman is the fragmentation of the armoury. This technique of mutation of form can be interpreted as an intensive abstraction of the rotation of grids. In this case the dialectic is not a literal grid, but a play on nostalgia through the fragmentary dislocation of an element through time. To successfully achieve this effect Eisenman identified the edifice that formerly inhabited the site, the archetype is then subjected to a recursive operation that strips of its tactile fidelity, and much of its autonomous identity resulting in a formal gesture which distances the subject from the physical reality of its original construction while at the same time allowing the massing of the structure to impart convictions upon the subject of the political and cultural attitudes of its existence. To reinforce and intensify the distance in time which separates then and now, the massing of the armoury is literally dissected into a series of fragmented parts. One series of these fragments are connected with a dark curtain wall, which perhaps is itself indicative of the gaps that occur in the human body when retrieving memories. The second series are manifest purely in the x-y plane as a trace of the foundation of the former structure. Both series can be read as ‘hot’ in McLuhan terms because the subject is required to engage in the abstraction to project internally the missing pieces as a means of completing the vision of the armoury, a process which opens doors to understanding more about the time and space in which it operated.

In revisiting the design devices that Eisenman used in the design of the Wexner Center for the Arts is has been possible to determine that much of the abstraction of form derives itself from co-related processes. Initiated by a series of processes which appropriate and manipulate ‘rotate’ the coordinates of the urban and pedestrian, horizontal and vertical, and the past and the present Eisenman produces three very distinctive extensive and intensive operations of shifting, figuring, fragmenting that coalesce into an engaging ecology for the celebration of creative thought.
Up to this point we have dealt with the form, body, and techniques manifest within the Wexner Center for the Arts. We will now take these ideas and project them into the not so distant future (perhaps one Kondratieff cycle from now) into the network empire to attempt to understand how the spatial qualities in this project effect comfort, cultural production, and power + politics, through the use of superimposed grids.

Rayner Banham criticized late modern architecture for its inability to live up to the expectations set by the work of the early modernists. His critique largely blames the emergence of the issue of human comfort for confusing the way that architects approach space. (Banham 58). As a contrast to this position, Eisenman’s post-modern approach to the Wexner Center may have given Banham something to delight about, as Eisenman states in reference to the unconditioned pseudo-architecture of the scaffolding, “.... A large part of the building is not a building itself, but 'non-building'. (Recent Projects 63)" By exposing part of the central circulation axis of the building to the elements Eisenman extends the agenda of the building into the outdoor milieu which surrounds the Wexner. By extending the sphere of affect into the outdoor space the spatial significance of the Art Center begins to resonate within the surrounding communities through the tear in the fabric of the city afforded by the rotated grids. By rejecting comfort, in the weather, sounds, smells, and sights of the surrounding milieu are invited to participate with the subject as he/she moves through the space allowing for the range of the building to extend beyond the boundaries of the façade and into the community itself, thus, through the inclusion of external space within the program of ‘art space’ the Wexner radiates its message through the fabric of the city of Columbus and Ohio State University, as Eisenman states in Recent Projects (p63) “it is literally a Center for Art".
Considering the external component of project as a part of the architecture is significant in the context of the network society, because it allows for the Wexner to act, as Manual Castells describes, as “A resistive force acting on behalf of the preservation of the individual.” This resistive force is projected onto the viewer as they are encouraged to participate in what Guy Debord and the Situationists termed the derive (McDonough 248) As an intuitive ‘center’ for the production of culture and the unity of the atmospheres of both the campus and the city the site of the Wexner becomes an ideal location for the individual in the network society to disconnect from the hypermedia of the network and rediscover the city. In this sense the Wexner serves as both a starting point (through the multiple connections the site work affords, as well as a destination though its nostalgic use of the fragmented armoury, the figured scaffolding which lines the north south axis (a transitional space of political profundity as we will see later), and through the wracking of the grids throughout the interior of the building. These elements ask the view to search for more, look for more, to ask more questions. Towards the end of dislocating the subject from the culture of the network and tuning him into the culture of the milieu, of art, critiquing and challenging the network itself.

Kayzs Varnalis argues in “The Rise of the Network Culture”, that in the network culture even pre-capitalist forms of life have been absorbed (p2). The Wexner Center, I would argue, stands out as one institution which is capable of resisting such absorption due largely in part to its appropriation of public space, its role as a center of cultural production, and lastly through its unique expression of individual politics. While it is true that in this time period art may be capitalized; if the architecture of Wexner remains as it is today, the social value of the kinetic political energy of the building will allow it act as a counterforce against the smooth assimilation of the network. As a means of identifying how the architecture achieves this we return once again to the rotated grids. First, in the horizontal plane, the rotated grids themselves form a network, but it is a literal, physical one, which is disconnected from the hyper-mediated and continuously monitored space of the digital network, these super imposed grids and the alternative connections they
engender consequentially transform the spaces of, and around the Wexner into a smooth Reimannian manifold space, (Deluze 485) from which, or into, the subject of the derive can be dislocated from the network empire spatially and temporally. Secondly, embedded in the physical architecture it (through the transitional space of the scaffolding and interior of the building) is a democratic expression of political affinity which is manifest as the smooth transition between two planes (plateaus). Jeffrey Kipnis alluded to this type of democratic force in art in a ‘Design Matters’ Lecture in downtown Calgary on Sept 13, 2010 through Andy Warhol's Mao paintings. The political effect of this planar connection through the turbulent scaffolding speaks to the ability of the individual to choose their own journey within this milieu, engendering immersion in a new heterogeneity external to the network. This ‘new’ exterior condition is able to present the condition of the network in a different perspective allowing for the subject to observe or understand certain behaviours in a different way. Much like the Rhizome that Deleuze and Guatarri discuss in ‘A Thousand Plateaus’ different and separate connections between the Wexner Center and the network begin to emerge; through this the architectural experience, the physical ‘space’ of the Wexner Center for the Arts operates as a counterforce to the network.


