Walking the Wexner: Experiencing Deconstruction

by

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JOHN J. WORKMAN (28 APRIL 2008)

Paper Abstract

As an example of deconstructivist architecture, Peter Eisenman's Wexner Center revolves around a particularly nuanced question of meaning. Specifically, the building's significance is not static but lies in an ever-changing discussion of what it is and how it acts. While the theoretical background supporting this interpretation must be understood and appreciated, I contest that a complete study of the complex should consider also how its inhabitants affect it and are affected by it. Blueprints and articles should be only first steps after which the living building and its effects are observed and assessed.

This paper combines traditional analyses of the Wexner (e.g. formal, symbolic, textual) with an "experiential analysis" derived from two visits in which I photographed the site and interviewed its daily users. The product of these analyses is a critique of the Wexner Center as it functions today rather than a description of how Eisenman assumed it would operate when he designed it. Reconfiguring the Wexner as an architectural ecosystem, I address a number of wider concerns, including how successful it is as a public building and whether Eisenman builds what he professes in his written work.

Part 1: Useful Apocrypha

A. First-Year Undergraduate

Riffling through her backpack in an effort to find mittens, an Ohio State freshman, having forsaken the familiar warmth of a Barnes & Noble, stands at the snow-covered intersection of North High Street and East Eleventh Avenue. The few blocks to her north constitute Columbus's South Campus Gateway, located in the larger University

Three dimensions of iron express multiple grids.
District which spreads from the Olentangy River. This masterplanned mix of record stores and restaurants was engineered to capitalize on a larger urban renewal project initiated by the Blue Jackets hockey franchise’s Arena District in 2000. To create the Gateway, developers razed dozens of sooty, three-story brick bars and apartments familiar to generations of Ohio State alumni. In their places they built four and five stories of contemporary housing atop retail space, facing the floors in similarly red brick with the occasional Dryvit façade added for good postmodern measure. The resulting area appears the same but cleaner, it seems, without really being much the same at all.

Claire has witnessed little of this spatial transformation, however, and recognizes nothing changed as she starts up High Street toward her destination. Through no fault of her own—she is a freshman from Cincinnati, after all—she has always characterized this neighborhood as a place of rivalries between Caribou Coffee and Starbucks, or Panera Bread and Chipotle. This is what brought her out today from her own residence hall, after all: a morning search for one last book at the university-sponsored store followed by a lunch date nearby. To cross a slush-slicked street here without wondering why the asphalt is so fresh is the habit of anyone younger than twenty, and out-of-towners in particular.

As she passes Fourteenth Avenue on her way to Fifteenth, Claire receives a phone call: no lunch today—she and her friend will reschedule for tomorrow, though classes begin the day after. Resituating herself for the walk home, she notes Mershon Auditorium ahead to the left. Anchoring the corner of High Street and West Fifteenth, Mershon statefully dismisses the beer and wine take-outs on Claire’s right. A solid block of stone wrapped with a base of polished marble, the building conveys a calm authority. It seems unfenestrated though it features three stories of windows, and undecorated though its sides are articulated in some detail. Against a winter stream of Buckeye caps, designer snow boots, and varsity-letter jackets, the Mershon fashions itself an old-school professor: classic, high-quality, and perhaps somewhat lovingly immobile.

The January wind intensifies as Claire turns west across Fifteenth Avenue. Greeting her, in total aesthetic contrast to everything before—the Gateway, the booze outlets, the Mershon—is Peter Eisenman’s Wexner Center. She knows of this building, the “crazy-looking one,” from friends, but even after a semester she’s never cut through it to reach the massive quad it helps contain. Like anyone confronting it for the first time, Claire ignores the Wexner’s odd shapes and considers instead the colors they cast. How odd, really, that these should be the only official reds and whites for blocks on Ohio State’s campus. And though snowflakes begin to cloak the Wexner’s white beams before her eyes, Claire’s vision is fixed on the red of its bricks—rusty, browned, and industrial. She notes how they mimic the Gateway, whereas older generations might recognize the architectural precedents in truth aped by the Wexner and, in turn, its derivatives.

As viewed from Claire’s perspective at High and Fifteenth—presumably its front, though accessing it from any side feels suspect—Eisenman’s Wexner Center rests at the top of an inclined approach a few hundred feet in length. With a width of about fifty feet, this gently sloped plaza is stamped by a grid pattern defined by the contiguous concrete squares it comprises. To Claire these marks feel transgressive: they are not parallel or orthogonal to Mershon, as she would expect, but sit at an angle of exactly twelve and one-quarter degrees. As the walkway approaches the Wexner, in fact, it intersects with
Mershon Auditorium’s corner, their encounter mediated by the strange brick towers and latticed ironwork which draw Claire closer to the Eisenman’s building.

Gravitating toward these beams—be they monkey bars, or hollow boxes, or suspended railroad tracks—Claire sees to her left, beyond the walkway’s border, the faint impression of another grid. This one is delimited by an arrangement of trees planted regularly in a small field of pinkish brick. Emphasizing the rigidity of their placement are bands of dark stone, runs of which interconnect the trees as in a graph. While this major axial system sits parallel to Mershon—and thus in conflict with the walkway—a second, minor group of stones echoes the pattern carved into the concrete approach. Where snow-painted branches establish one spatial scheme parallel to Mershon and Ohio State’s other buildings, this minor group, torqued against the major system, situates the Wexner on the urban grid of old Columbus, found off-campus east of High Street.

Although it was initially something distant, the somatic tension generated by these interpenetrating grids begins to wear on Claire as she reaches the ramp’s summit. Looking to her right, down a corridor of cubic iron forms, she realizes this architectural anxiety occurs not only on the ground plane, but vertically as well. Swelling up from the tiles in front of her is a second ferrous framework running the length of the hall. It ascends as it proceeds northward and initiates an upright give-and-take. From Claire’s vantage point near Mershon’s corner, moreover, this second, angled tunnel is rooted in the ground on which she stands. Rather than just observing three dimensions of cubes pulled into a planar sidewalk, she feels herself

*Lines representing the grids of Ohio State’s campus and Columbus intersect at twelve and one-quarter degrees.*
Peering northward through the Wexner’s latticework. To the left are the windows that light the complex’s art gallery.
One of the Wexner’s many understated entrances.

Traces of the Armory are echoed on footpaths.

Unchecked corrosion discolors an iron crossbar.

being dragged asunder, too. Perturbed by this scuffle, she jogs a few dozen feet down the corridor until finding an escape pathway to her left. After weaving in and out of still more vertical supports, she emerges onto a stone surface on which marks of the grid echo still.

With the open space of the quad now immediately to her west, Claire recomposes herself for the jaunt across the street, through the snow-laden grass, and back to her room. Between her and the concrete sidewalk are pale reminders of those peculiar red towers, their half-formed bases outlined on the ground by way of crescent-shaped brickwork. Reaching the expansive oval that dominates this part of campus, Claire ends her engagement with the Eisenman’s Wexner Center, skeptical she’ll visit it again.

B. Graduate Musician

Violin case in hand, Sam, strolling west across Seventeenth Avenue, spies a young woman pausing under the Wexner’s latticed tunnel. Immediately he throws an empathetic chuckle into the air. As an undergrad Sam battled the tunnel daily; now a graduate student, he finds himself more immune to its influence. Bouts of vertigo and related nauseas gave way to a certain curiosity concerning the structure, and Sam often studies the framework’s distinct rust spots on his way to the practice rooms in Weigel. Interspersed between bulbous light fixtures, these blemishes evidently went unnoticed by contractors when they refurbished the building some years ago. Though the Wexner seems as architecturally fresh as it did when Sam first arrived at Ohio State, these marks remind him that the complex has lived here much longer than he has.

Wishing the student luck, Sam continues across Seventeenth Avenue alongside the Wexner Center’s galleries. Restricted by tinted, inky glass, he can barely
perceive the shapes of the art housed inside. Some kind of conceptual piece involving thousands of bottle caps catches his eye before a large steel door interrupts his view.

This door, which splits down the middle, opens to allow curators external access to the building's galleries. Rather than placing it flush with the Wexner's northern façade, Eisenman set the sliding door at an angle by forcing its left side into the structure. The resulting concave depression, accessible by road, serves as the Wexner Center’s loading dock. From this point the heavy lifters can bring art into the building, alternately placing it on display or taking it through the Wexner’s cavernous tunnels on its way to storage. Their job must be irritating, Sam gathers: not only has Eisenman angled the access door, but the street meeting the loading dock is sloped horizontally as well. Without a level surface on which to park their trucks, the movers probably engage in a good deal of swearing along with their lugging. As an engineer, Sam finds this riotously funny.

Further along the street he turns southward to enter Weigel Hall. Once an autonomous structure housing, amongst other things, several dozen music rooms, Weigel and Mershon—located to its east—were linked by Eisenman’s gallery space to form the total complex now called the Wexner Center for the Arts. Though Weigel is plain enough to escape precise description—a banal concrete box built sometime between 1960 and 1980, it seems to Sam—the pink stone terraces which now surround it command his attention in a strange way. Something both local and universal inhabits these disparate, overgrown planter boxes, separated by narrow paths and resonating in height with the grid system surrounding them. In their provinciality Sam sees the shadows of earthworks not uncommon to Ohio, the so-called “Indian mounds” dotting
An Ohio State student walks eastward across Seventeenth Avenue, passing Eisenman’s skewed terraces.

the better part of the state and preserved now as official parks. Though not as silky or undulating as the Serpent Mound in Adams County, for example, Eisenman’s terraces dance with their own staggered footwork, the movements owing their provenance, in part, to the thousand-year-old histories of the Adena and Fort Ancient cultures. At the same time, a sensation authentically exotic, perhaps less Midwestern, haunts these forms. The bundles of grass planted within the squares feel rowdy and untamed; each time Sam spies the lichen discoloring the retaining walls, he adds it to unkempt landscaping to produce the image of a decaying monument or old graveyard. Once he is amongst the terraces they feel stele-like, and ancient, too, in their disrepair. No longer slaves to the grid, old retaining walls have buckled while faded graffiti runs rampant. For better or for worse—though Eisenman couldn’t have prophesized it—the space resembles a diseased version of his Berlin-based Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, unveiled in 2005.

The atmosphere improves, though barely, once Sam enters Weigel to search for practice space. Left untouched by Eisenman’s project, save for the addition of contemporary door handles and fresh placards, Weigel Hall conveys all the charm of a seventies-era library. Representing the building as a whole is its grand entry hall, all of two floors, which is overlooked by a lounge of knockoff modernist furniture. Placed upon a veritable forest of dank, Kelly-green carpeting, these half-dozen chairs allow occupants to count away the time by imagining the bacteria multiplying on their soles with each passing second. Since Sam and his violin are regular visitors, however, he’s managed to bypass this entrance by using a door hidden along Weigel’s side.

Instead of this entry hall—which he’s seen no one enter, anyhow, given that its doors are apparently marked “Not An Entrance”—a naked concrete stairwell greets Sam. He shakes the snow from his shoes by tapping them against the stairs, the echo tracing an ascending path he follows upstairs. Emerging from the stairwell, Sam meanders down labyrinthine hallways whose heights rise
Damage sustained to the Wexner’s terraces.

Partially successful attempts to remove graffiti.

Main entrance to Weigel marked “Not An Entrance.”

A three-foot-tall crack threatens retaining walls.

Applying the Wexner Center from the southwest, two Ohio State alumni rest bewildered on the sidewalk surrounding the snowy Oval. Having driven an hour and a half from Dayton, the couple needs desperately to enter their destination if only, at first, for a bathroom break. From what they can discern, however, their task won’t be easy.

Standing in their way are three-story-tall brick sculptures, representing, they’ve come to think, the old Armory that stood here when they were students some half-century ago. In front of them is a sign announcing the Wexner, yet no entrance presents itself. Even after a few minutes of slowly ducking in and out of half-rendered forms,
Jack and Rita can find nothing. Where they expect more red brick—between parts of the towers—are blacked-out windows; where they expect windows—along the sides to provide lighting and hint at the building’s program—is more brick; where they expect an entrance—well, hell, they don’t know where to expect one! Playfully they peek around unfinished arches and punctured concrete walls, making a game of their predicament.

After a while, Rita locates a way in: a pair of doors above which flies a not-so-permanent banner, again introducing the complex. Ducking beneath Eisenman’s aggressive latticework the two enter the building, descending a small set of stairs. Inside, a third placard greets them, this one affixed to the interior portion of an Armory ghost.

Though there’s a reception desk in front of them, it appears the attendant may have gone to the bathroom himself. Without any guidance, the couple turns to descend a larger staircase. Their path feels forced by the dissonant and broken shapes hanging above them.
Levitating beams intersect here and there, establishing a confused and conflicted atmosphere from which they'd like to escape. The only path away from the shadowplay of grided supports and windows is downward, via that larger staircase, constructed of cool gray marble with flimsy-looking metal accents. These materials prove particularly treacherous for Jack. The bands of stone are especially slick given the slush that other visitors have tracked inside, and he nearly slips several times, saved from a broken back by the weak support the slim steel railings afford him. After pausing to catch his breath on a landing, he and his wife continue into the heart of the building, shifting left as they go to follow the sheared path of the stairs.

Out of danger, the pair begins to speculate as to the restroom’s location. To their right is a ramp leading downward into the film and performance theater Eisenman built into the Wexner Center. Although this is clearly the couple’s first visit to the complex, their high-school-aged grandchildren have spoken of coming here to see art-house films. Turning away from the apparently well-stocked bookshop in front of them, Jack and Rita tiptoe across a finished oak floor toward a café called Cam’s. Situated in the cave beneath the Wexner’s suspended lobby, Cam’s offers a meeting place for students—only a few of whom have arrived on campus yet—as well access to restrooms.

While they take turns alternately disappearing down a short hallway or watching their belongings at a café table, each studies the small cavern in which he or she sits. They haven’t been to the gallery yet, but Jack and Rita have by now explored the bulk of the publicly accessible section of Eisenman’s Wexner Center. The experience to which they’ve been privy seems one of cleanliness and order, but not one that’s so stark or sterile as to appear uninviting. Certainly navigating even this small area has been an adventure, yet there’s something corporeally fascinating about placing oneself at various points of tension between form and void. The very personal experience of being warped, confused, and turned in circles by a building is not what the couple finds at home—nor would they like to, really. In a temporary setting, however, it becomes invigorating once they learn to move along the structure’s flows and flights. From what they’ve seen in the bookstore, moreover, the Wexner’s architect took adequate precautions to make the retail space more naturally inviting. Entering an area that seems modern but less spatially pretentious, museumgoers can buy books, gadgets, toys, and gizmos without the hassle of navigating broken ups and downs. Connected to Mershon by an escalator, the store’s only fault, at a glance, appears to be its shelves. However beautifully
bespoke, their custom dimensions have trouble displaying books vertically.

Hand-in-hand, Jack and Rita enter the Wexner’s gallery, whose entrance lies to the left of the bookstore. Ascending back to ground-level by way of a gradual incline, they spot through tinted glass a six-hundred-eighty-foot long lattice to their right. Coming up for air into the gallery is just that: immediately they feel welcomed by an openness of several stories and at least ten thousand feet of unobstructed, wooden floors. The boundaries that do exist here are temporary white walls on which the William Wegman exhibition they’ve come to view hangs. That isn’t to say the Wexner’s architecture has faded into the background completely; its presence is subdued, however, as Eisenman’s grid peeks in only via shadows cast through a large array of eastern-facing windows.

Part 2: History and Reception

As of 2008, the Wexner Center for the Arts at The Ohio State University has more than a quarter-decade of history to its name. Credited to the architect Peter Eisenman, who collaborated on the project with Columbus-based Richard Trott, the Wexner Center traces its beginnings to the spring of 1982. That year, the University Gallery of Fine Arts proposed such an institute to Ohio State President Edward Jennings as part of a standing arts initiative. A design competition was held the following year, in 1983, and construction of the building began shortly thereafter. The Wexner Center opened on the evening of 16 November 1989 to a gala whose attendees included Barbara Walters and Colleen Dewhurst. It held its first exhibition the following February, and remains lively to-date despite such potential setbacks as a massive renovation between 2002 and 2005.

Given its age, the average museumgoer might be surprised to learn that no architectural historian has yet assembled a broad biography of the Wexner Center. In fact, the only compilation that can rightly claim the Wexner as its subject is a 1989 monograph printed to coincide with
Goldberger explained in a 5 November 1989 piece that: "opened. in no uncertain terms, New York Times critic Paul [W]exner was already amassing accolades by the time it how precarious, awkward, or unresolved it seemed, the Center for the Arts had already earned itself a reputation, little of which has been done on the Wexner as an individual part of Eisenman’s larger career.

The serious interpretive void surrounding the Wexner Center requires filling for at least two reasons. First, the deconstructivist style in which Eisenman works is now old enough to be addressed as an historical phenomenon. Rather than rely on unlinked events-in-time, the architectural scholar should be privy to at least one continuous (though not exclusive) narrative that considers an exemplar of this spatial mode.

More importantly, however, the time has come to consider deconstructivist architecture for what it is: built space. Deconstructivist projects, though perhaps inspired by literary theory, are not texts. Though they may be textualized, they are primarily environments—like all architecture—which affect people and which people may affect. Rather than simply trace the philosophical antecedents of deconstructivist buildings, as is the wont of innumerable critics, this essay acknowledges such underpinnings while concentrating on the Wexner Center as a specific site experienced by real users. With deconstruction’s increasing public prominence—note Daniel Libeskind’s hundred-ten-million-dollar addition to the Denver Art Museum in late 2006, for example—a fresh assessment of the style is critical to the relevance of current architectural theory.

By the time of its public birthday, Peter Eisenman’s Wexner Center for the Arts had already earned itself a reputation as something of an architectural masterwork. No matter how precarious, awkward, or unresolved it seemed, the Wexner was already amassing accolades by the time it opened. In no uncertain terms, New York Times critic Paul Goldberger explained in a 5 November 1989 piece that:

A medium-sized museum in a medium-sized city that has been underwritten by a rich retailer and designed by an architect who has never before built a museum would seem like a prescription for total irrelevance. And the fact that the museum will open without a single picture on its walls might seem to render it not only irrelevant but laughable. But not every donor is Leslie H. Wexner, and not every architect is Peter Eisenman. And so the opening later this month of the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts [as it was initially called] on the campus of Ohio State University [sic] here not only is not irrelevant, but it has become one of the most eagerly awaited architectural events of the last decade.

As noted, the Wexner’s initial impact was in a large way the product of two factors that just happened to multiply for the better. First, billionaire businessman and Ohio State alumnus Les Wexner, founder of Limited Brands, was responsible for donating twenty-five million dollars toward the total forty-three million required to build the complex. Though he considered himself an architectural “milquetoast” and admitted his personal fashions tended toward “the mainstream,” Wexner pledged full support for Eisenman. Accordingly, he contributed his funds with no design stipulations attached.

The resulting financial and creative freedom, in turn, bolstered the public debut of Eisenman, who was chosen for the project over such star architects as Michael Graves and Cesar Pelli. Liberated from many practical concerns, he partnered with project architect Richard Trott and landscape architect Laurie Olin to establish a fancifully complex yet highly integrated site plan. Working near Alumni Gate, Eisenman was effectively charged with renewing the university’s official entrance. So excited that the great theoretician, fifty-seven years old, had finally made something more substantial than a hole-riddled home, “the Progressive Architecture issue [on the Wexner] was headlined ‘Eisenman Builds,’ which [was] something like saying ‘Garbo Talks.’” While Eisenman was free to invent the kind of structure he saw fit, he was still, however, directed in its design by a number of existing buildings as well as programmatic requirements. Located off Columbus’s High Street, one of the city’s main north-south thoroughfares, the Wexner Center was to be an art museum in its own right as well as an interface between Weigel Hall and Mershon Auditorium, positioned to its west and east, respectively. Amongst the three buildings, all of which are properly the Wexner Center for the Arts, were planned a film and video theater, ample room for the performing arts, fine arts and graphics libraries, an Institute for the Advanced Studies in the Arts, a café, a bookstore, and areas for storage and administration. In his desire to engage the site’s history Eisenman also borrowed details from the old Ohio State Armory. The Armory, which stood in the same location from 1898 until 1959, informed his creation of the Wexner’s turrets, towers, and semi-circular inscriptions. The resulting complex, dubbed “a machine to produce art” by one of Eisenman’s associates, comprised a total 130,000 square feet, about ten percent of which was devoted to formal, planned gallery space.
Paul Goldberger, despite his inflated rhetoric, did not overstate the Wexner’s public prominence when his column of 5 November 1989 called it one of the more important—and polarizing—architectural events of the decade. Following its opening on 16 November, Columbus residents, Ohio State students and faculty, and the architectural community worldwide responded immediately and passionately to Eisenman’s building, which they alternately hated and loved. In a letter to the New York Times printed on 26 November 1989, not even two weeks after the building’s birth, Jack L. Nasar, associate professor of city and regional planning at Ohio State, condemned the Wexner for what he saw as its failure to address a number of practical concerns:

Paul Goldberger’s laudatory comments on the Eisenman/Trott design for the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts in Columbus left me puzzled—particularly his claim that it functions well. [...] University officials expect the complex to have among the highest energy costs per cubic foot on campus. They expect the roof to leak, because its designers, for the sake of grids and axes, insisted on splitting it into 20 parts. (Roofs tend to leak at the joints.) The dizzying entry stair will surely tumble some visitors to injury, and the plinths and “armory” nooks give muggers perfect places to hide while awaiting a victim. Functional? I think not.17

Many visitors shared Professor Nasar’s sentiments, especially those who were disoriented and then literally injured by the building, of whom there was a surprisingly large number. (Possibly apocryphal stories describe the university’s president and his “tumble” down the slick marble, in one case.) Yet those who favored the new building did so under the same judgment of practicality. Reflecting in 1999 on the Wexner’s initial influence, local newspaper writer Barbara Zuck recalled its ten years of utility: it created a first-of-its-kind “forum for creation, presentation, exploration, and examination of the contemporary arts in central Ohio;” it became the first major “architecture-as-art” piece in historically conservative Columbus; it provided “a partial cure for town-gown syndrome” in the way it welcomed visitors to experience the university; and it generated a number of “ongoing relationships with significant artists” of worldwide renown.18

Assisting the site’s both amateur and professional critics was the fact that the building was left empty for its unveiling. Having chosen to keep its galleries bare until early February 1990,19 the Wexner Center’s first director, Robert Stearns, effectively organized an exhibit on the complex itself. There was “no question this building [raised] questions,”20 he wrote in an introductory essay. Allowing the public to venture inside unoccupied by sights and sounds other than the Wexner’s gave them a chance to confront this primary question head-on, at a formative time for the museum’s community.21

A few years after the Wexner Center opened, architectural historians began publishing their own accounts of the complex. In an article that appeared in 1990, Ohio State architecture professor Kay Bea Jones outlined still more sentiments elicited by the building around the time of its unveiling. While she characterizes reactions from the public, including students, as openly mixed, Jones and the Wexner’s trustees call the building a masterpiece which challenges popular notions of what museums should be.

Jones’s basic argument is that the Wexner succeeds based primarily on what it is not. As a “building [that] asks more questions than it answers,”22 the Wexner Center does not make any one statement but begins an architectural dialog with its users. The idea of a door, for instance, is one topic investigated in this discussion. The complex features at least ten on its main level, yet none are marked or seem particularly important. How should visitors enter, then? Questions of concepts like “entrance” and “front” arise, Jones explains, and the dialog continues successively. Though this interaction often irritates visitors, Jones views it as a positive byproduct of the way in which Eisenman’s architecture “[provokes] critical thinking about those events we take as self-evident.”23

While Jones focuses on the experience of visitors to the Wexner Center, scholar Richard Scherr began in 1991 theorizing the relationship of the complex to its site as a vehicle to discover meaning. “Many theorists,” he begins, “explore the problem of content [or meaning] in architecture in terms of representation, or the utilization of symbolic [...] imagery to extend an object’s meaning.”24 Against representation, which pretends to be transparently decipherable, Scherr juxtaposes what he calls an indexical architecture. The meaning of a building as index, he believes, “is defined by its capacity to be contingent, that is, physically dependent on or conditioned by certain factors that inalterably guide the derivation of its form.” An indexical architecture, he claims, shows not only the factors governing its design but also exhibits the process of its construction, resulting in “an architecture that creates itself” out of such contextual factors.25

In his discussion, Scherr carefully distinguishes between indexical works and other, seemingly related forms of building. Indexicality is not merely “contextualism,” he notes, “in which structures are designed to relate sensitively to their surroundings.”26 Indexical references
differ from contextual ones in that they establish abstract relationships which are often beyond representation. They rise above mere geographical reflexes, for example. Indexical architecture differs still from simple expressionism, like the emphasis on structure prominent in the work of early twentieth-century functionalists. An indexical reference to structure might express formally the engineering supporting a building.\textsuperscript{27} Thus, although the Wexner’s grid is just slightly more than contextual, Scherr notes several aspects of the museum that qualify as indexical. The earthen walls, he claims, reference the Indian mounds of Ohio. Similarly, the plan’s major axis emphasizes relationships to the city’s airport and to Ohio State’s football stadium. Finally, shadows cast by the museum reveal the “process of form derivation” that informed its design.\textsuperscript{28} Like any writings, such explorations of the Wexner Center are accountable in some part to the era in which they were composed. In the case of Eisenman’s building, however, this is of specific consequence. Hardly a static structure, the Wexner Center has witnessed numerous reconfigurations which have transformed its material existence and the experiences of its inhabitants. The largest of these was a renovation begun in 2002 at an estimated cost of twelve million dollars.\textsuperscript{29} After three years and an eventual sixteen million dollars,\textsuperscript{30} the Wexner—which remained opened—was rehabilitated by the engineering firm Arup and local architect Jerome Scott. After twenty-three years, the structure’s skylights had begun to leak as Nasar presaged. Moreover, the gallery’s four-hundred-foot glass wall was assault ing artwork with too much natural light.\textsuperscript{31} In addition to correcting these structural issues, contractors installed a new computer-controlled heating and ventilation system\textsuperscript{32} and refreshed the Wexner’s lobby, bookstore, and movie theater.\textsuperscript{33} Any “mistakes,” according to Eisenman, were the result of 1982 technology and his desire to push the building “beyond the ordinary,” and presumably beyond that technology’s capacity.\textsuperscript{34} And although the renovation mended a number of glaring problems, the Wexner stands today no different than when it opened in terms of the confrontations and range of passionate reactions it elicits.

**Part 3: Contemporary Criticism**

Tabling the question of classification’s utility, the architectural historian must acknowledge that some modes of building are more readily identifiable than others. When Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson wrote an International Style in 1932, for example, there was little doubt concerning their subject matter. Their book featured an array of photos depicting examples of the modern architecture they discussed; moreover, the authors established three positive criteria by which these buildings could be identified. International Style works favored volume over mass,\textsuperscript{35} exhibited a “regularity” showcasing their “underlying [structural] rhythms,”\textsuperscript{36} and employed no superfluous, applied decoration.\textsuperscript{37} Now, when a critic speaks of an “International Style” building, others understand more or less the type of architecture he or she is discussing regardless of how that particular classification is subsequently employed. No such clarity exists when “deconstructivist” buildings are the focus, however. And no matter whether a scholar wishes to assess Eisenman’s work on a purely stylistic level, he or she must wield some knowledge of the term, for Eisenman’s Wexner Center has been branded first and foremost in the architectural world as a deconstructivist building *par excellence*.\textsuperscript{38} Known to many already from the realm of critical theory, the term deconstruction made its officially sanctioned architectural debut in 1988. That year, Philip Johnson (of International Style fame) and Mark Wigley curated an exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art which featured buildings by Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind and Peter Eisenman, amongst others. In their respective prefaces to the booklet *Deconstructivist Architecture*, published in concert with the show, Johnson and Wigley distance the style from any lingering associations with literature. Wigley in particular explains:

> It is the ability to disturb our thinking about form that makes these projects deconstructive. It is not that they derive from the mode of contemporary philosophy known as “deconstruction.” They are not an application of deconstructive theory. Rather, they emerge from within the architectural tradition and happen to exhibit some deconstructive qualities.\textsuperscript{39}

Thus, while many analogies exist between deconstructivist architecture and the critical process of deconstruction, deconstructivist buildings are characterized by certain formal tendencies. “A deconstructive architect is [...] one who locates the inherent dilemmas within buildings,”\textsuperscript{40} writes Wigley, ultimately producing works that appear “uneasy,” “tortured,” “distorted,” and “disrupted” in their “writhing” and sheared forms.\textsuperscript{41} Architectural scholarship has reached a point of crisis today, however, as a great number of historians have forgotten the style’s initially formal basis. More importantly, though, these same critics have begun to theorize an architecture without buildings; their arguments are thereby unrooted, unstable, and in serious danger.
of being misapplied. As an example, Wigley himself supposedly analyzes deconstructivist architecture for 220 pages in his book *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida’s Haunt* without ever referencing a real-world structure. He begins his text by writing that “[the method] of deconstruction is understood to be unproblematically architectural,” thus contradicting his own stylistic definition of only five years prior. He rejects his previous belief that the architecture is radical not in theory, but in how actual buildings express its qualities.

Instead of abstracting the Wexner Center, I would like to explain more closely those “deconstructive qualities,” in Wigley’s words, emergent in Eisenman’s building using specific examples. Clarifying how the Wexner is, in a sense, only metaphorically deconstructivist allows it to be refashioned as real architecture: shaped space that interfaces with individuals. At the same time, however, these metaphorical examinations then also reveal part of the building's tangible power. Having described in detail the material relationship between the Wexner Center and its visitors, I will suggest that scholarship on deconstructivist architecture be reoriented. In addition to exploring philosophical precedents, I believe that understanding lies in analysis of the physical experiences generated by such works—the corporeally perceptible anxieties, tensions, and flows. My object is to underline the role of the inhabitant in contemporary architecture, a body who has for too long been subordinated to a corpus of theory.

Deconstruction as a critical, textual method can be traced in large part to the work of Jacques Derrida. In his 1966 lecture “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” the French philosopher launches a critique of the structural metaphor which was dominantly employed in the social sciences once “language invaded the universal problematic” of knowledge. By his own admission and by the self-conscious methodology of his study, however, Derrida seeks not to replace this metaphor, borrowed from the linguistic studies of Noam Chomsky, but rather to turn its analytic gaze inward. Thus, the paradigm of “deconstruction” Derrida illustrates maintains its belief in deep structure as the lens through which it evaluates structuralism itself.

Derrida begins by observing that structural metaphors, by their nature, are analogous to mathematical graph systems in which no one node dominates, as each is defined through a series of mutual differences. The “structurality of [these] structures,” however, is typically collapsed to a center, he says. As such, a system’s true multiplicity commonly reduces to a contingent singularity. This singularity is the system’s center—a point whose identity both changes and is changed by history. Though ongoing substitutions of this center occur, it is all the same constantly and mistakenly thought to represent the entire structure authentically. Attempts to examine a system’s true form are obscured unless one can cause what Derrida terms a “rupture,” a disruption precipitated by a repetition of centers through which the system’s structurality may reemerge.

According to Derrida, then, deconstruction is an inquiry that can proceed once one uncovers the structural heritage of some abstract system and takes from it those same resources as a means to critique it. It is never a predefined scheme, but a process of assessing things in their native languages. Though the term is in vogue today, to properly deconstruct something is not to merely disassemble it. Deconstruction, in the truest sense, involves giving a thing or idea the capacity for self-consciousness and self-criticism. A system deconstructed is unsettled and anxious regarding both its identity and agency.

In the context of Eisenman’s Wexner Center, deconstruction can be applied in at least two ways. The first involves basic associations between the building’s visual, structural, and programmatic elements and certain concepts conveyed by Derrida’s paradigm. Locating these analogous tendencies reveals the metaphorical heritage that Johnson and Wigley note of deconstructivist architecture. In Derrida’s lecture, for instance, he speaks of the numerous binaries “congenital to philosophy” and, in turn, all systems dominated by philosophical thought. Abstractly, one can visualize these dyads as opposite poles between which a system’s center, ever in motion, is suspended. Concretely, the critic can also find numerous examples of this notion in the Wexner’s built structure. Looking through the main gallery windows, visitors are privy to a play of shadow and light as Eisenman’s outdoor steel lattice alternately blocks and reveals the sun. Not only can one identify this simple duality of substance and void in many portions of the building—recall, in another case, the uncanny design of supports that start and stop willy-nilly in the main lobby—one can also appreciate how Eisenman’s leitmotif serves as one means through which the Wexner becomes critically self-aware. To the keen observer, a half-broken armory archway is never a firm architectural statement. Instead, this detail births numerous questions that float in flux: What is the relationship of the Wexner Center to those structures which once shared its site? Is Eisenman’s building a solitary creature, or does it exist at once with the ghost of the Armory and the elderly Mershon Auditorium and Weigel Hall? Furthermore, what role did the architect play in mediating the relationship between his young building and its ancestors?
Deconstruction and Eisenman’s Wexner Center are linked still in a second, more sophisticated way. Ignoring the label of “deconstructivist architecture” historically applied to the work, I ask—in the spirit of Derrida’s method—how the Wexner might be analyzed in the manner of deconstruction. What would it mean in particular for the architectural historian to carry out such an analysis of the Wexner?

To answer this question, it might be better—first—to address a related but slightly different issue: how do critics, especially those working on deconstructivist buildings, already assess architecture? In a 1986 essay on the work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Peter Eisenman attends to just this topic. Focusing on the relationship between text and architecture, Eisenman argues that a building’s significance can be accessed through three types of analyses: formal, symbolic, and textual. Of the first two, he writes:

Formal analysis looks for formal order, such as sequences, closures, or proportions: the interval between columns, the relationship of wall lengths, the ratios of solids to voids or parts to whole. While formal analysis is concerned with the aesthetic aspect of architectural metaphysics, symbolic analysis is concerned with its traditional meaning. This meaning unfolds in the analysis of the metaphor, or something which is described in terms of something else: the façade as a face, the chimney as a backbone, etc.

Thus, formal signification involves enumeration or pattern-finding while symbolic meaning occurs via metaphor (e.g. two beams meeting orthogonally represent a crucifix).

Of the textual, then, Eisenman offers at first a warning. While recent fashion dictates that any object with meaning may be called a text, a true text, he explains, can be distinguished from a plain object “in that [a text] is a reading or analysis of another object.” (A text, however, may itself also be an object.) Rather than representing something about the object to which it refers, a text describes or simulates something about that object’s structure. Academics misuse the term, he contends, because many have failed to realize traditional analyses say nothing about the structures these texts reference. According to Eisenman, an authentic text offers a meaning based in structure and differentiation which can be analyzed independently. Signs, for example, are textual rather than symbolic since they act as “notational devices” when used architecturally. In his work on the Wexner, then, Eisenman’s textual analysis can be employed in one way by examining the sense of “absence” conveyed “as a constructive presence” by certain features. “Texts that split symbol from object in order to form signs dislocate architecture,” he states, and deconstructivist architecture is an exercise in the struggle to attain this dislocation, which lends the style its apparent unsettledness.

While each of Eisenman’s three types of inquiries are valid, I find a particular hazard in his notion of textual analysis. As he defines it, the idea is obviously valuable: it can hint at the significance in the relationship between form and void in real cases, for example. There exists the risk, however, that scholars will take Eisenman’s nomenclature to mean buildings ought to be regularly textualized. Indeed, it seems they have. Eisenman himself has succumbed to the lure of textuality. In later writings, the architect regularly discusses his métier using the same distant vocabulary he applies to literature and

Path showing the Armory initiates play of form and void.
At stake here is whether a critic recognizes textual analysis as one of many tools, or instead relieves all shaped space to the realm of literature through their textualization.

The idea of a building as text becomes risky when architectural historians strain to draw parallels between space and literature. Conducted using familiar interdisciplinary methods, a critique of this sort often abstracts architecture in its desire to establish connections with literary tropes, nearly always molding it into something other than itself. Lost in this approach, for instance, is the individual user’s corporeal experience with a building. Scholars must remember that users’ conceptions of architecture stem first from their experiences, in the physical world, with it and against it. They rarely outline a structure’s interactions and conceive of it based on this assessment except in retrospect.

Returning now to the topic of a deconstructive analysis of the Wexner Center, I have posited that such an analysis might be most productively executed as an experiential one. The notion of “reading” deconstructivist architecture as a text should be recognized for what it is: a critique initiated from outside the discipline. Properly employing the term, a rightly Derridian deconstruction might ask: how can scholars analyze buildings on their own turf? One answer involves speaking of the visceral, somatic reactions that architecture stirs in its inhabitants. As Eisenman opines in a 1992 interview:

> People forget who the architects are [when they visit a space]. Nobody cares when they go to a building…. It’s just how the place makes them feel. […] Grade-school kids love running around the Wexner Center. It’s not a statement to them, they just like the environment. […] Architecture has to find a way to excite people’s emotions and feelings about being somewhere. […] We need to open people to a kind of consciousness in this age of media.

Given the paramount importance of visitors’ corporeal reactions to Eisenman’s steel lattice, for instance, the historian of architecture should feel justified reimagining the Wexner Center as a space presenting bodily questions of both itself and its users.

Refashioning Eisenman’s building to emphasize an awareness of itself and other bodies is not merely an academic exercise; from this prototype, significant realizations about the space materialize. One such insight concerns the multiplicities the Wexner addresses. As noted, when visitors first encounter it, the Wexner feels like a conscious study in dualities. From the two grids on which it is organized emerge countless dyads. These binary pairs appear first in simple visual relationships: a visitor scuffs his or her foot on a walkway stone and notices its darkness, into which the white of metal bars disappears. Given time, then, dualities of experience begin to emerge. Not only does he or she see cubic forms being pulled downward; this visitor feels as if he or she is sinking simultaneously. This interplay of twos justifies one way in which the Wexner can be called metaphorically “deconstructivist.” The building lays out a basic state, offers its opposition, and then situates inhabitants in the magnetic push-and-pull relating them.

While this characterization of the Wexner is accurate, it is by no means complete. What it fails to account for, if pursued to its textual end, is the possibility of variable experience within the site, whether amongst many visitors or simply one visitor’s many visits. Returning to the complex’s dualities: Must one be chosen, or can a user visit the entire range their relationship delimits? Is this a simple architecture of either-or, in which case a textually deconstructivist reading would merely privilege a previously unprivileged position, or could it be a built snapshot of a resonant structure in motion?

A specialized vocabulary developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* can be used to explore this question. For these authors, binary reason is the logic of more linear, so-called “arborescent” structures. Arranged in a tree-like fashion, these structures are hierarchical and can be identified by how they honor the point over the line. These systems have no room for the dislocated which deconstructivist buildings require. They do little to expand upon the determinacy found in structuralist paradigms; they are, in fact, part of the same system. Arborescent structures pretend to place a “two” where a “one” once resided, yet they leave the logic of that one intact.

In contrast to these arborescent systems are what Deleuze and Guattari term multiplicities. While tree-like schemes point to a static deep structure, the multiplicity, conveyed by the rhizome, knows no such discipline. Multiplicities are “overcoded” and “shot through” with lines of flight. These lines have no units, but are instead vectors with magnitude only. The many plateaus they support lack beginnings and ends, but are simply middles in their entitites. What exists here is motion toward infinity; the planes these multiplicities inhabit hold not zero intervals, but all intervals possible.

Employing Deleuze and Guattari’s vocabulary, the historian may ask: though the Wexner is often experienced as a study in arborescence, might each encounter with the complex actually be just one subset of a greater multiplicity? In this case, the Wexner would not speak a
singular message, but would be a statement-producing assemblage capable of varied signification. Its language would consist of commands that capture in an instant one projection of the system’s movement. Using the authors’ example of the striated and the smooth—one type of multiplicity—this system would be self-referential and in continuous transformation, appearing constant simply through its constant activity. Indeed, this notion of the self-referential, self-aware Wexner is confirmed by the writings of Kay Bea Jones and Richard Scherr on early receptions of the building.

Given the apparent interrelatedness of the arborescent and the multiple, what is at stake in calling the Wexner Center one or the other? While an arborescent simplicity would allow a single, master narrative of the building, the complexity of the multiple frustrates attempts to impose one form of assessment. And it is this multiplicity that is in some sense the key to the Wexner’s identity. In discussing how Columbus’s grid influenced the building’s site, critic Herbert Muschamp argues that, in “eliminating self-expression” as his goal, Eisenman incidentally chose the grid to author his work. As a building predicated upon an arbitrary preference, then, the historian of architecture could easily interpret the Wexner’s meaning as contingent upon nothing, opening the possibility for any meaning—a non-answer to the question of identity. Instead, because of its nature as a multiplicity, the Wexner can offer individual users diverse experiences while still grounding itself in the reinterpretable significance of its specific location.

Most formidable works of architecture make themselves available in this way, yet the Wexner Center in particular succeeds for a number of reasons. Most notable amongst these is the complex’s openness to personal exploration based on its hierarchical-resistant program. While many public buildings—especially other museums—direct users along predetermined routes of experience, the Wexner in its fractionation delimits a space conducive to independent adventure. Whether visitors are prepared to accept such a challenge remains an issue. Those who are, however, waste no time attempting to “figure out” Eisenman’s structure. As Kay Bea Jones notes, a stimulating intellectual workout engages this group before they ever step foot in the Wexner’s art gallery. Having been troubled to find the museum’s entrance, their critical faculties are activated immediately: they evaluate their own prototypes of “door,” in this case, however unconsciously. Though some inhabitants find this confrontation frustrating, those open to spatial exploration recognize what is to them an invitation. In the parlance of Michel de Certeau, who writes on retaining personal agency in institutionalized environments, these visitors themselves “spatialize,” and thus generate a lived reality at least as influential as the museum from which it derives. This personal spatialization, moreover, occurs on an immense scale given the variety of free movements with which these walkers disperse. Rooted in Eisenman’s unstable forms, such freedom seems to others, though, mere spatial rudeness.

In its reception, Peter Eisenman’s Wexner Center for the Arts triumphs as an example of what the architect can achieve when he or she fashions a two-way space, as Henri Lefebvre might say. In such a space, visitors confront the work of architecture so corporeally that they cannot help but react to it—first somatically, then intellectually. In fact, Eisenman’s building may be one of the most obvious tangible illustrations of Lefebvre’s goal: exploring a “science of space” as a discrete discipline.

As it was conceived, however, the Wexner Center was likely designed around no such goal. In fact, Eisenman the scholar disagrees patently with Eisenman the architect. In a 1988 article he claims that “architecture […] has never had the capacity to contain or display a linear or internal time.” Though this statement may mean a visitor’s time is the clock of architecture, Eisenman’s exclusionary rhetoric also supposes that this time has no relationship to the building itself. To refute such a claim, a visitor of the Wexner Center need only look at the thick spots of rust coating its lattice, or the crumbling stone of its terraces. It is true that the architectural clock does not dominate visitors unopposed, but to limit its significance to the relative downplays the importance of the site’s own narrative.

The architectural historian might regard Eisenman’s subsequent supposition that he can “introduce into architecture” (my emphasis) a certain “textual time” as a futile attempt to claim authorship of what he cannot. As a complex that has witnessed numerous reconfigurations, exhibitions, and even a significant remodeling, the Wexner Center suppresses common notions of the genius architect’s intent. The author, however, has not disappeared. On exhibit at the Wexner today is the experience of a collaborative architecture, one fashioned by each party to have been on-site as an evolution over time. As Eisenman once said in a candid interview, “people take over things” and they change.

Appendix: On-Site Interviews

A. Undergraduate Employee of the Cam’s on Campus Café

—Part of my project is that I’d like to take a different look at the building. I don’t know if you know too much about the history of the building and stuff like that, but I was
interested in how you got here, first of all. What’s been your experience?

Well, I work here because I go to school at Ohio State, so I work for the catering company that owns the café. So, I guess I don’t really know that much about the building.

—Yeah, how do you feel about it, though?

I like it … I think it’s really cool. I just like all the different angles, and the artwork, how it’s kind of in-between the spaces outside. Yeah, I like it.

—Do you notice customers having any sort of reaction? Do people come in here and talk about the building, or do they mostly come in to look at the art and ignore the building?

I see a lot of people taking pictures—I don’t know if it’s for a class or what—but a lot of photography students, or maybe architecture, come in and take pictures from all different angles, but no one really talks to me about it.

—OK, so are you an undergrad?

Yes.

—What year are you?

Um, senior-ish. But I have a lot of classes to go….. [laughs]

—OK, OK, neat. So you’ve been on-campus for a little while, then. The building—how do you feel it relates to the rest of campus? You said you liked the way it looks, I guess, on the inside. How do you feel about the relationship between the building and….

I think … um … it’s not really like any other building on campus, obviously, and I had never even come in here for the first year I lived here. I just saw the building from the outside—I really didn’t even know what was in here. And then once I started working here, I kind of … I started going through the galleries and stuff….

—Was it hard to get in the first time—to find the door? I know when I came….

Kind of—yeah.

—… it seemed like there were ten different doors and none of them really….
I get a positive vibe from it. I’ve always liked it—from day one. I think it’s been here fifteen years, maybe twenty? Or 1990, it launched. And it’s a great piece of architecture.

—Part of that positive energy—do you feel like … where does that come from?

I think it being clean. And I mean that in a sterile way—like in a hospital way. But, um, unlike a hospital, it’s not sterile to me. Even though the walls are white … you know, something about it is … active. It feels like it’s pushing, you know? Different directions—fowards, backwards….

—Yeah, you’ve got some of that weird shearing and stuff like that….

I know when you’re sitting at this table here [near the stairs], everybody at the reception desk upstairs will know your conversation. [laughs] I think they know ours [behind the café desk], also. They won’t tell us that, though. They want to hear what they can hear—so that’s fun. And whisper walls—that’s great acoustics.

—Do you feel like most of the people who come in here have a similar reaction? Do you notice people, like visitors, talking about the building when they come to grab food?

I guess, um, my fiancée’s parents just said, “This place is a trip.” And my parents, when I took them here, they said, “Ah! This is beautiful.” Similar reactions, I guess. But visitors, I’m not getting much out of them. I think most people wouldn’t talk about architecture, you know, on a regular basis.

—But do you feel just as far as being a building on campus people would have a positive feeling for it?

Well … so everything I said was my personal feelings, and, personally, what I think about other students’ thoughts is that they’re negative, or that they’re just bored with life and they’d be unimpressed.

—Is it just that the architecture wouldn’t be a part of what they’re interested in anyway?

That’s my feeling, but it’s not what I know. But I know I like it. But … in a lot of conversations I have with people, it doesn’t really come up.

—They’re just here to get food and check out the art?

Yeah, and study.

—Is this space pretty active during … what, classes started today? Tomorrow?

Tomorrow, actually. Yeah, it is. So that’s good. I don’t know if it’s because it’s close to High Street and that’s where most of the sandwich shops are … I don’t know if they’re here for our food, or if they’re here for the Internet hookup….

—Right, you guys have [wireless Internet access] in here?

Yeah. But—well, you know—I’ll overhear, say, one gal call her friend and say, “Well, it’s OK you’ve never been here before. It’s that weird building. Just go down the stairs and meet me.” [laughs] She’s like, “No, it’s actually a really cool place—just meet me here.” So, I think people are intimidated by art, so they act strange, but once they’re around all their friends and they realize they’re here … well, then it’s fine. So I think there’s an initial preconception … or maybe there isn’t, maybe that’s just me.

—How long have you worked here, if you don’t mind me asking?

Since it [the café] opened, so it’ll be a year in February. So we’ve seen the cycle….

—And you’ve seen some exhibitions come and go….

Yeah. Summer had an interesting Ohio residency, which is surprising for the Wexner because they’re more into bigger art, for example, this one [William Wegman]. And this one has been a really good show….

—How was the turnout for this? Was it pretty good?

Yeah, definitely.

—It just closed … what, the thirtieth, the end of the year?

It was great. It was really good. More than dogs! [laughs] My interest is art. I like painting as much as I like food. So, I mean, I guess that’s why I like architecture.

—So did you gravitate toward this position?

Yeah.

—Painting, is that something you pursue on your own, or….
I haven’t done a solo show since 2001. But it is an interest, yeah.

—What kind of stuff do you do?

2D, you know, traditional painting, with emphasis on post-pop art. Everything after pop art just appeals to us, or ... I don’t know, appeals to me still, to this day. Stuff like taking advertising imagery and making it personal. But there’s a lot of other trends going on right now which are definitely taking over ... but painting will always make a comeback.

—[laughs] Well ... I guess ... do you have any other thoughts related to being here?

Just suggestions: I wish you could talk to the security guards—they’re really friendly. You know, I don’t know how much time you have. People in the bookstore— they’ve been here a long time. And if the security would take you on a tour of the elevators, just from the loading dock to here [the café] ... the bottom of this building is just amazing.

—Like a whole subterranean network of....

Yeah! Carpenters—there’s a whole woodshop in here, with full power tools and stuff....

—Is that to help do the setup for exhibitions and stuff? Put in temporary walls....

Sure, yeah. That’d be neat ... if you can get in there, you’ll think this place is pretty fun.

—Kind of adds a whole new side to it, yeah?

Yeah. It’s a good building overall.

—Well, thank you. I really appreciate your time.

Absolutely. Good luck.

C. Graduate Student and Wexner Center Employee

—Could you talk a little bit about the building for me?

The building is very controversial, obviously, in terms of some of the theories, and it was a fairly controversial process too in terms of choosing the architect and building it. And I think probably the biggest problem, of course, is that the building—probably about fourteen years after it was opened—needed to be extensively renovated. The skylights were leaking, there were some issues with the glazing in terms of not blocking UV rays properly, some variations in the temperatures that weren’t acceptable— so there really was a whole host of problems. It was about a twenty-million-dollar renovation, and I think the building reopened in 2005. But I think just in terms of being a great place to come and see art, or even just down in the shop—just to sort of browse—it’s a great building. The programming itself has, I think, added a lot to the city, and it’s sort of a selling point. If you read any of the press for the city ... or even when they refer to Columbus in general ... well, there was an article in the New York Times about three weeks ago about Columbus specifically, and, of course, they always mention the Wexner Center. Besides the fact that programming brings people into the Center, I think that people enjoy coming. I think it’s different. It’s not the type of building people would expect ... and it still has a lot of problems in terms of even finding the front door....

—[laughs] Yeah, trying to get in....

[laughs] Right? I mean, there isn’t really a front door. And that’s part of the theory, part of the thing that Peter Eisenman and Richard Trott were sort of exploring. But, I mean, I think in general if you come in and just watch how people sort of flow through the building, it’s a great place. The old ... well I guess actually he’s the president of the university again ... I just forgot his name—unbelievable! [laughs] Well, he’s back now, and I remember when I was a student here he said that he used to enjoy coming in here [to the Wexner] because he said that he felt this building was sort of spiritual. And it kind of is. It’s ... well, I think, just in terms of the way it’s lighted from the outside, it’s a really neat experience to wander through ... to wander up the ramp, and the way the glazing sort of casts the light, and even the structure of the building there....

—All of those forms really push and pull and sort of suck you in....

Yeah, and I think—well, really it’s only got one façade when you think about it. One or maybe two. But that whole sort of glazing, that glass that lights the galleries, it’s really sort of amazing to walk down High Street or drive down and look over ... I think it’s stunning, it’s not like anything else on campus. I really enjoy coming here. I mean, I work here, so it’s not entirely a choice, but.... [laughs]

—Yeah, could you describe a little bit what your job is here?

Yeah, and I think—well, really it’s only got one façade when you think about it. One or maybe two. But that whole sort of glazing, that glass that lights the galleries, it’s really sort of amazing to walk down High Street or drive down and look over ... I think it’s stunning, it’s not like anything else on campus. I really enjoy coming here. I mean, I work here, so it’s not entirely a choice, but.... [laughs]
Yeah, my undergraduate degree was actually in architecture, I went to the Knowlton School. I’m getting a graduate degree right now in the department of design, and I work in the design department, and I help reproduce pretty much anything that promotes the Center, or explains our programming. Whether it’s print or interactive, we do and design it. So I’m a little bit away from the architecture right now … but yeah, I’ve always, always enjoyed coming here.

—And this was here when you were a student, an undergrad?

Yeah, this was actually built in 1990 or—yeah—1989, and I was an undergraduate, and it was kind of a big deal. Because I think in terms of really interesting architecture, there’s some good architecture in Columbus, but this is one for the history books.

—Yeah, because I know there are a couple other buildings on campus … there’s a Philip Johnson building on campus, but that’s sort of … it’s really nonchalant.

Yeah. And there’s a the law school building by the same guy who did the city court building, and there are a few others—notable architects who did some work here. But, you know, the architecture building is I think another really interesting building. I think the university’s a completely appropriate place to try and sort of push the envelope a little bit in terms of the arts and architecture, and I think the Center has done that.

—How did people react when they did the convention center up the street?

Actually, that’s really interesting because the convention center’s probably not one of his more noteworthy buildings even though it’s on the cover of his [Eisenman’s] monograph. But what’s interesting is that I worked right across the street from that as a bartender for a while when it was under construction, and uniformly people hated it. They just—they didn’t like it. I mean, I think it’s a pretty interesting building but … well, people would come in there [to the bar] to this glass wall that looked directly out on the building [the convention center] and the reactions to it were pretty negative. When it opened and people got a chance to move through it and so forth—I really don’t know. But I don’t think it’s nearly as successful as this.

—Well, I think it’s more of a compromise, you know, you need open space and stuff like that for exhibitions, so there’s a lot less of this ability to sort of play around with the architecture. And I remember talking to a woman who worked here [the Wexner] a couple of years ago—I think she was at the information desk—and she said that people were just up-in-arms over something as small as the door handles. He used the same door handles, those sort of orthogonal handles, from the Wexner here … he took them and put them over on the convention center. [laughs]

Yeah. [laughs] But I think this building … I think if you look at it from a lot of different viewpoints … obviously the construction of it is a big factor. Buildings need to work. And the fact that it didn’t work very well, well that says something. But at the same time when you’re doing something that’s so—when you’re trying to push the architectural details, and the materials, and the structure, and so forth in a way that’s uncommon or maybe hasn’t been done at all, you probably are going to run into problems. You know, the same thing’s happened to Frank Gehry. …

—Yeah, that whole—that big lawsuit now [concerning his building at MIT].

Yeah, and I’ve even heard at the Guggenheim [Bilbao] that they have problems with that. Think Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater and all the problems there. When you push the envelope, the nature of experiment is … you know, it’s going to cause … you’re more likely to have problems that creep up when you try to push things. So it’s almost … well, I wouldn’t say it’s unavoidable, but it’s much more likely to happen.

—Do you feel like most people who come here think it’s sort of a neat place?

Yeah, I think they do, because I’ve never. …

—Are there any students who just say, “Oh that weird building, I totally hate it!”

No, I don’t think you really hear too much about that, and I’ve never heard people sort of wander through who are like, “Oh this is just awful.” I mean, there’s a couple of kind of postmodern kicks in the shin—I mean, there’s a stairwell that doesn’t go anywhere, isn’t that clever—and we have had people complain about that. There’s actually a professor of design who had some friends who were with him one night, and they almost slipped down the steps because that material—the material they used out in the lobby and in here [the bookstore]—this granite, when it gets wet it’s just super slick. And these same bands [of
stone] are out in the approach to the Center, and it’s just… well, that probably wasn’t such a good idea. But, you know, on the other hand it’s like if you don’t take those risks—they’re sort of inherent in the whole process, that risk-taking. So, it’s not perfect, but I think people—and they do come here from all around—I’ve never really heard them complain about the building too much, except for the quote-unquote intelligentsia who are sort of irritated with the postmodern touches. [laughs] But, you know, so what? Like everything’s not a hundred percent successful, well—that’s life. Probably people in the arts are going to embrace some of the risk-taking more because they find it interesting, but—well, they have offices upstairs with windows that sort of stop at waist-level, for example, and of course that makes it pretty hard to just look out and see things—I don’t know what that would be like because I work across the street. But at the same time I would think that they would be a little bit more open to it than, say, if you had accounting in that building. They’d say, “Oh, hell, why’d you do this?” And why would you do it, I don’t know! [laughs] What you might—well, how long are you going to be here?

—I’m in town for a little while longer. I’m from Dayton, so….

At the top of the stairs you can get a little film/video mailer and see if there are any films that are playing soon. Because when they show films, they usually get a good crowd, and they have them pretty frequently. That would probably be—it would be interesting to make comparisons between the students, the patrons….

—And high school kids who come in from off campus.

Right, right. I had a cousin who was an engineer, and he was kind of hostile toward the building at first, back in the day. He called it “an abortion of an arts center,” you know. [laughs] So there you have it. But that would be interesting—that would be one source of people who I’m sure would be happy to talk to you. Or, when school starts, a lot of folks are going to cut right through the center [of the Wexner site], and you could just snap people and I would imagine—I would sort of imagine that most students aren’t aware, first of all, of what this place really is, or that it’s a noteworthy building, which is I think too bad. I mean, the actual organization of the building… how it meshes… between the buildings—a lot of the circulation spaces between the music building and here are combined. And this is all great, works well, but when you get in to the actual service areas of the building it’s a fucking disaster.

—Yeah, it’s just completely crazy. And it’s just because… well, I don’t know how much of that was the fault of the architects and how much they inherited from other buildings that they had to cobble together, but, yeah… I get back there maybe once every six months and I don’t know where I am. You know, I want to catch the floor up and it’s like, “Well, how do I get to the next floor?” and I’m staggering around down there for a stairwell. But I love working here. A lot of times I’ll come across the street here just to get a cup of coffee or whatever because I like it so much. And it has a great bookshop….

—Yeah, you guys actually have some pretty rare stuff. When I was here a year or two ago I was able to get the monograph for the Berlin Memorial and I couldn’t find it anywhere else. It was one of those deals where they had printed it one-off and it sold for sixty bucks or something, out-of-print, Amazon didn’t have it—but you guys had it.

We have a website where you can order some of that stuff, and I guess a lot of people who are ordering stuff actually probably aren’t patrons, because they’re coming from different states or even different countries, so you know, they do a great job here. And even the old MoMA store, they didn’t have as many rare titles….

—Yeah, actually I spent a semester in New York last year and I worked with—well, you know Bob Stern’s firm—I spent a semester working there. That was… a real trip. I mean, obviously totally different from this….

I bet that was a good experience.

—Definitely. I mean, I’m interested more in the academic, theoretical end of things, and Eisenman fits in very well there, but—well, Stern’s obviously not stupid, he’s a very smart guy, but….

He’s a little more pragmatic.

—Yeah, exactly, a little more pragmatic… a little more willing and able to, I guess, relinquish some of his principles for a little more money and building power. [laughs]

No, no, exactly. Well, you know what was really interesting was that after this building was done I was at a lecture with Peter Eisenman, and he had said that there were some businessmen who approached him about building
a building in New York. So of course the discussion starts, and he asks, “Well, what’s the program?” And they said, “Well the program is we want to be in a magazine.” [laughs]

—[laughs]

So they just want it to show up in a magazine—a status piece for them. I mean, I’m sure they have a real building behind that, too, but that was one of the first things they said, and I guess he [Eisenman] was sort of puzzled. You know, there used to be a lot of Ohio State students—well not a lot, but a good number—who would go to New York to work for him, this was back in 1992, and they’d get paid something like six bucks an hour….

—Jesus. Just to be there at the master’s feet, huh?

[laughs] Yeah, right. And the other thing was he could write—he pulls a lot of weight in terms of getting you into graduate school, obviously. So these guys could work there for six months and then they’d probably get, you know, a form letter so they could practically write their own names in and just go on to Yale or wherever. Yeah, there are always almost a couple guys from OSU there … well … because he still comes back periodically and teaches, although I don’t think he’s been here in a while. Not this year, but—well, it would’ve been 2006 when he was doing a graduate studio here last, or maybe it was just a lecture series, but he was here about once a week. But it was pretty interesting back in the day when I was an undergraduate, when he used to lead the graduate studios regularly, because I think when you’re younger it’s sort of like you idolize these guys as gurus, and then you become a bit older and … well, there’s a lot of bullying that goes on and I think you start to recognize that. I remember there was this one guy named [redacted] I had gone to school with [at Ohio State], and Peter Eisenman had given them some really sort of spacey assignment. He was very vague about what he wanted these guys to do. So he came in and said, “I’m going to start counting, and you guys react to my counting.” [laughs] And so they’re like, “React to what?” and he says, “My counting, right now.” So he starts counting, and these graduate students are sitting there kind of looking at each other asking what’s going on. So he’s counting, and they all just start making designs or whatever, and then he would have the guys hold up designs. And I remember this guy, [redacted], and Eisenman goes, “Show me what you’ve got.” So he [the student] takes his notebook and raises it up so Eisenman can see it, and Eisenman just stands up and goes, “Ugh … you lose, [redacted]!” [laughs]

—[laughs]

Just like that! And really with this kind of hate-filled, hateful voice, like he’s just so disgusted that he has to spend time at a public university. So that was back in—well, that was probably around 1990 when the building was getting ready to open. Anyway, I’ve got to be getting along….

—Good stories, good stories!

Well, I wish—well, Kay Bea Jones had a really good….

—Yeah, I read some of her articles on the Wexner Center. I haven’t talked to her, but….

Yeah, she probably has no interest in talking about the Wexner Center anymore. [laughs] She’d probably be like, “Oh, that was so ten years ago!” and you could say, “Well, no, that was about twenty years ago, Kay.” So you read some of her articles?

—Yeah, I read one about the reactions around the time that it opened.

Yeah, and you know there was a sort of kick-off party for the opening of the building, and I think even Barbara Walters was here. And there were some other guest critics….

—Starchitects! [laughs]

Exactly! [laughs] Well, actually, I don’t know if they had any other major architects who were here, but they did have some critics who came, and it was on television and all that. I don’t really remember a whole lot of overtly negative sentiments in the public reaction. Well, you know who it was—a lot of architects were saying things like, “Oh, it’s so ridiculous,” because the materials would get slippery, and you’ve got these huge posts that do nothing, and blah, blah, blah. And it’s like, “C’mon, now.”

—[laughs] Yeah, that’s the Bob Stern critique, where you hold up your—you bring in your building to the critique and he says first thing, “OK, tell me where the exit stairwells are and where you’re going to place the fire extinguishers!”

Yeah, yeah, yeah! [laughs] And you’re thinking, “Well we’ve got time for that later on.” No, yeah, a lot of the negative activity—the negative reactions—I remembered was some older architects—and we had a guy who was, he was like a heating and cooling engineer, I don’t know if he was an actual architect, he may have been, but I know he taught sort of a graduate-level class in heating
and cooling—he was really critical of it. He was kind of a stogy old guy, and there were maybe a couple of other architects … there was one architecture professor who used to refer to what was going on in the 1990s as “urban cartooning,” where you just take something, you scale it up to dramatic proportions, and you don’t work out the sort of—you don’t work out the details with the scale—whatever it is, you blow it up and that’s what you get. He was pretty critical, but he was kind of not one of the hip … well, all the professors who wanted to be hip and cool and were also relatively young, they wanted to kind of embrace that whole movement. But it was the same with the students, too, in the graduate school. Like I said, they see these guys as gurus, and then I think when you get older and you’ve sort of established yourself, when you’re successful, it’s like … those younger guys really rumple their feathers. It’s.…

—Yeah, it’s just academic competition in another setting, and it’s human nature.

Right. When you’re coming up you also want to be associated with someone who’s also on his way up, but then after a while you just don’t care anymore. And it was the guys who didn’t care anymore who were like, “Oh, they put that stupid little post—someone could just walk right into that damn column!” And people did that, and they almost fell and—it was just hilarious.

—Yeah?

Yeah. One of the guys who—he was a big critic, he’s a professor of design, and he was the one who had a lot of problems with the fact that it was slippery, or that you could walk into a column. Well, anyway, I should get going.

—No, that’s fine, that’s perfect. Thanks for your time, I really enjoyed talking with you.

Yeah, take care. Like I said, pick up some of that print stuff at the top of the stairs.

—OK, great. Thanks a lot. I appreciate it.

No problem.

Notes

1. I’d like to thank Professor Annabel Wharton of Duke University for her gracious mentorship and encouragement. Professor Kristine Stiles, also of Duke, deserves similar acknowledgment. I also wish to thank my family and Melissa Fernley for their support.

2. These sketches are based on interviews which can be found in the appendix.


8. Goldberger.


21. Certain practical considerations (finances, etc.) may have also dictated that the Wexner Center open without an initial exhibit. For a specific discussion, see: Goldberger.

22. Kay Bea Jones, “The Wexner Fragments for the
Visual Arts,” Journal of Architectural Education 43, no. 3 (Spring 1990), 34.


26. Scherr, 179.

27. Scherr, 175.


32. Bill Mayr, “Fixing Wexner.”


34. Mayr, “Interview: Peter Eisenman.”


36. Hitchcock and Johnson, 70.

37. Hitchcock and Johnson, 81.


45. Virtually no idea is attributable to a sole individual, but a discussion of Derrida’s landmark lecture suffices to explain the method of deconstruction here. Recall the technique of radical etymology, one of Derrida’s key approaches, for example, was something the scholar likely learned by studying Martin Heidegger.


47. Derrida, 280.

48. Derrida, 278.

49. Derrida, 279.

50. Derrida, 280.


52. Derrida, 282-283.


61. Deleuze and Guattari, 16.

62. Deleuze and Guattari, 293.


64. Deleuze and Guattari, 12.

65. Deleuze and Guattari, 62.

66. Deleuze and Guattari, 55.

67. Deleuze and Guattari, 21.

68. Deleuze and Guattari, 297.

69. Deleuze and Guattari, 475.

70. Deleuze and Guattari, 36.

71. Deleuze and Guattari, 81.

72. Deleuze and Guattari, 500.


74. Jones, 36.


76. Space—especially produced space—is living
and involved. Lefebvre calls the common notion that architecture is passive "an illusion." See: Lefebvre, 27.

77. Lefebvre, 7-9.


Bibliography


