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OPPOSITIONS

In this issue:

Editorial

Anthony Vidler
The Third Typology

Oppositions

Werner Seligmann
Runcorn: Historical Precedent and
the Rational Design Process

History

Martin Pawley
"We shall not bulldoze Westminster
Abbey": Archigram and the Retreat
from Technology

Joseph Rykwert
Classic and Neo-Classic

Theory

Bernard Tschumi
Architecture and Transgression

Documents

i 10

Commentary, Bibliography,
and Translations
by Suzanne Frank

Reviews, Letters and Forum

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Bernard Tschumi

The white crusade of modern architecture, which dreamed of a healthy society running free through verdant parks, basking under an eternal sun, and serviced to its last desire by the transparent machines of its buildings, was rooted in the therapeutic ideology of the nineteenth century. The first models of a functional architecture were developed in the design of hospitals—"healing machines" as the late eighteenth century called them—and the premises of reform urbanism were based on the pathology of slum conditions initially diagnosed by doctors.

The white interiors of asylums and hospitals, first conceived as environments for inducing calm (by removing sensory stimuli) and returning the mind to its original *tabula rasa*, were, with the Modern Movement, made general to all architecture. Ornament, already "detached" from the geometrically pure "bones" of structure by historicist eclecticism, was finally suppressed on behalf of cleanliness, machine-made surfaces, and simple economy. In this way modern architecture defined its life against the consciousness of death and decay introduced by modern physiology.

The fight against ornament was informed by another—but ultimately complementary—fear: that of art, seen on one level as a profoundly revolutionary and psychologically unsettling practice. Adolf Loos, in his celebrated dictum, "the work of Art

is revolutionary, the house conservative," separated out the craft of architecture (a commonsense response to the everyday needs of life) from the art of painting (a deeply shattering exploration of the psyche as embodied in the paintings of his friend Kokoshka). As Carl Schorske has pointed out, it was Loos' aim to provide the quiet wall on which to hang such a painting. The disturbing effects of art, linked to the erotic and play impulses, although seized upon by the Surrealists, were until recently generally eschewed by architects more concerned to develop "machines for living in" than art to wrestle with. The positivistic utopia of modern architecture was in this way based on the repression of death, decay, and the "pleasure principle."

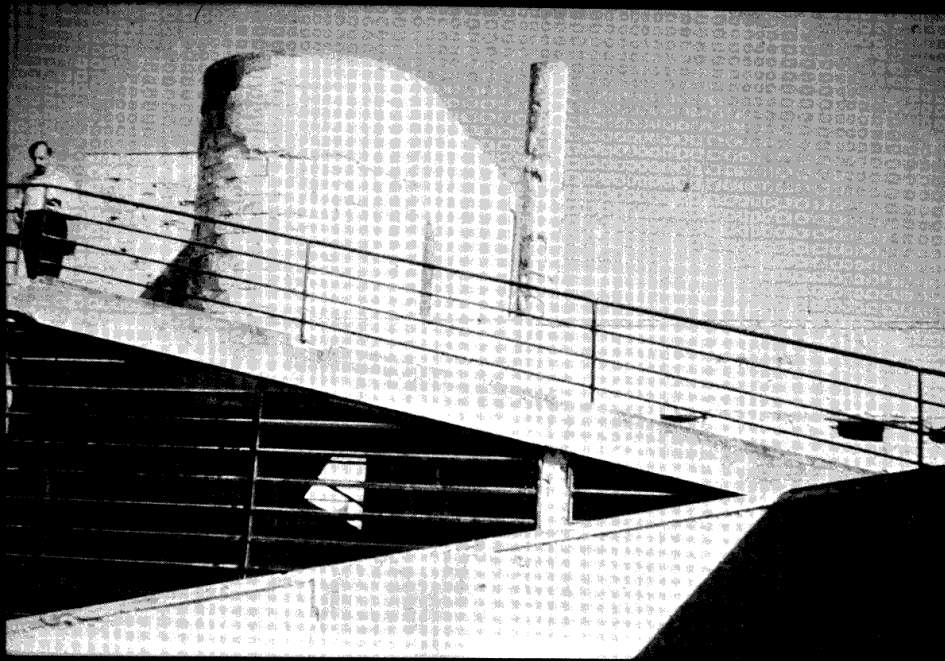
In this brief but evocative essay, Bernard Tschumi opens the question of the forbidden territories that lie beyond the limits of the mechanically therapeutic vision. He shows the connection between these limits and the taboo of death in modern middle class society. In the machine age the perception of the life and death of objects is hidden beneath the myth of their eternal life—ready disposability removes the decay of the object from sight. Transgressing these boundaries, Tschumi proposes that the philosophical position of Georges Bataille, concerned to reveal the underworld of thought—from eroticism to putrefaction—illuminates and perhaps overcomes the "false" dialectic of natural phenomena imposed by rational thought since the

Enlightenment.

The question of the *art* of architecture, closed by the functional ethic, may well be opened, with all its disturbing implications, by this attempt in the domain of *ideas*. But one wonders whether the simple "liberation" of scatological thought will in the end provide the armature for a fundamental critique; or whether another utopia is not now in the making, this time in the soft ground of a Swiftian phenomenology beneath the ruins of bourgeois mores. AV

Bernard Tschumi was born in 1944, lived in Paris until 1954, and studied architecture in Zurich before joining the Architectural Association faculty in London in 1970. He organized, with Roselee Goldberg, the exhibition "A Space: A Thousand Words" for the Royal College of Art, London, in 1975. He has also taught at The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, New York, and is presently teaching at Princeton University. As part of his present research he is writing a series of articles: "The Pyramid and the Labyrinth" (*Studio International*); "The Garden of Don Juan" (*L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*); and "The Pleasure of Architecture" (*Architectural Design*). His recent projects include "La Casa Castrata" and "Don Juan in Central Park."

**The most architectural thing
about this building is
the state of decay in which it is.**



VILLASAVOYE, 1965

Architecture only survives where it negates
the form that society expects of it.
Where it negates itself by transgressing
the limits that history has set for it.

Transgression opens the door into what lies beyond the limits usually observed, but it maintains these limits just the same. Transgression is complementary to the profane world, exceeding its limits but not destroying it.

Georges Bataille, Eroticism

One issue rarely raised in architecture is that of taboo and transgression. Although society secretly delights in crime, excesses, and violated prohibitions of all sorts, there seems to be a certain puritanism among architectural theorists. They easily argue about rules, but rarely debate their transgression. From Vitruvius to Quatremère de Quincy, from Durand to Modern Movement writers, architectural theory is primarily the elaboration of rules, whether based on an analysis of historical tradition or on a New Man (as the twenties' architects conceived it). From the "Système des Beaux-Arts" to "computer-aided design," from functionalism to typologies, from the accepted rules to the invented ones, there is a comprehensive and ever-present network of protective precepts. However, my purpose here is not to criticize the notion of rules, nor to propose new ones. On the contrary, the present article will attempt to demonstrate that transgression is a whole, of which architectural rules are merely one part.

Before speaking about transgression, however, it is first necessary to recall the paradoxical relationship between architecture as a product of the mind, as a conceptual and dematerialized discipline, and architecture as the sensual experience of space and as a spatial praxis.

Part One: The Paradox of Architecture

If one has a passion for the absolute that cannot be healed, there is no other way out than to constantly contradict oneself and to reconcile opposite extremes.

Frederic Schlegel, quoted by Novalis in Blütenstaub

The very fact that something is written here makes it part of the field of architectural representation. Whether I use words, plans, or pictures, each page of this publication could be likened to the mythological world of Death: that is, it benefits from the privilege of extra-territoriality; it is outside architecture; it is outside the reality of space.

Words and plans are safeguarded among mental constructs. They are removed from real life, subjectivity, and sensuality. Even when the words of the printed page are metamorphosed into slogans sprayed on city walls, they are nothing but a discourse. Boullée's aphorism that "the production of the mind is what constitutes architecture" merely underlines the importance of conceptual aims in architecture, but it excludes the sensual reality of spatial experience altogether.

A debate at a recent Conceptual Architecture conference in London¹ (where the majority of contributors predictably concluded that "all architecture is conceptual") emphasized the strange paradox that seems to haunt architecture: namely, the impossibility of simultaneously questioning the nature of space and, at the same time, making or experiencing a real space. The controversy indirectly reflected the prevalent architectural attitudes of the past decade. If the political implications of the production of building had been abundantly emphasized in the years following the 1968 crisis, the subsequent Hegelian reaction was revealing: "architecture is whatever in a building does not point to utility,"² and of course, by extension, whatever cannot be the mere three-dimensional projection of ruling socio-economic structures, as theorists of urban politics were then maintaining. This emphasis on what Hegel called the "artistic supplement added to the simple building"—that is, on the immaterial quality that made it "architectural"—was no return to the old dichotomy between technology and cultural values. On the contrary, it set an ambiguous precedent for those "radical" architects who did not regard the constructed building as the sole and inevitable aim of their activity. Initially intended as an ideological means of stressing architectural "avant-garde attitudes" and refusing capitalist constraints, the work of such "radical" Italian or Austrian groups of the late sixties was an attempt to dematerialize architecture into the realm of concepts.³ The subsequent statement "everything is architecture" had more affinities with conceptual art than with all-inclusive eclecticism. But if everything was architecture, by virtue of the architect's decision, what distinguished architecture from any other human activity?

58 Structural linguistic studies developed in the sixties in France and Italy conveniently suggested a possible answer: analogies with language appeared everywhere, some useful, some particularly misleading. The chief characteristic of these analogies was their insistence on concepts. Whether these theorists stated that architecture always represented something other than itself—the idea of God, the power of institutions, etc.—or whether they took issue with the interpretation of architecture as a (linguistic) product of social determinants (and thus insisted on the autonomy of an architecture that only referred to itself, to its own language and history), their discourse reintroduced *rules* that were to govern architectural work by making use of old concepts such as types and models.⁴

This constant questioning in the last decade about the nature of architecture only underlined the inevitable split between discourse and the domain of daily experience:⁵ . . . *Yes, space is real, for it seems to affect my senses long before my reason. The materiality of my body apparently coincides with the materiality of space. My body carries spatial properties and spatial determination: up, down, right, left, symmetry, asymmetry. In the midst of fragmenting suburban redevelopments, my subjectivity is trying to rediscover its lost unity. . . .*⁶

The architectural paradox had intruded once more. By definition architectural concepts were absent from the experience of space. Again, *it was impossible to question the nature of space and at the same time make or experience a real space. One could not experience and at the same time think one experienced; "the concept of dog does not bark," the concept of space is not in a space, ideal space is not real space.*

While "ideal space" ambiguously referred to the product of mental processes and to the Hegelian "artistic supplement," "real space" referred to the product of social praxis and to the immediacy of a spatial sensation. Such a complex opposition between ideal and real space was certainly not ideologically neutral, and the paradox it implied was fundamental.

Caught, then, between sensuality and a search for rigor,

between a perverse taste for seduction and a quest for the absolute, architecture seemed to be defined by the questions it raised. *Was architecture really made of two terms that were interdependent but mutually exclusive? Did architecture constitute the reality of subjective experience while this reality got in the way of the overall concept? Or did architecture constitute the abstract language of absolute truth while this very language got in the way of feeling? Was architecture thus always the expression of a lack, of a shortcoming, or something incomplete? And if so, did architecture always necessarily miss either the reality or the concept? Was the only alternative to the paradox silence, a final nihilistic statement which would provide modern architectural history with its ultimate punchline, its self-annihilation?*⁷

Such questions are not rhetorical. It may be tempting to answer "yes" to all of them and accept the paralyzing consequences of a paradox which recalls philosophical battles of the past—Descartes versus Hume, Spinoza versus Nietzsche, Rationalists versus Raumempfindung symbolists. It is even more tempting, however, to suggest another way around this paradox, to refute the silence the paradox seems to imply, even if this alternative proves intolerable.

Part Two: eROTicism

It appears that there is a certain point in the mind wherefrom life and death, reality and imaginary, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable cease to be perceived in a contradictory way.

André Breton, *The Second Manifesto*

Paradoxes equivocate. They lie, and they don't, they tell the truth, and they don't. Each meaning has always to be taken with the others. The experience of the liar paradox is like standing between two mirrors, its meanings infinitely reflected. The paradox is literally speculative.⁸ To explore it, it is useful to consider two correspondences without which much remains obscure.⁹

First correspondence

The first correspondence is obvious and immediate. It is the

correspondence of eroticism. Not to be confused with sensuality, eroticism does not simply mean the pleasure of the senses. Sensuality is as different from eroticism as a simple spatial perception is different from architecture. "Eroticism is not the excess of pleasure, but the pleasure of excess": this popular definition mirrors our argument. Just as the sensual experience of space does not make architecture, the pure pleasure of the senses does not constitute eroticism. On the contrary, "the pleasure of excess" requires consciousness as well as voluptuousness. Just as eroticism means a double pleasure that involves both mental constructs and sensuality, the resolution of the architectural paradox calls for architectural concepts and at the same instant the immediate experience of space. Architecture has the same status, the same function, and the same meaning as eroticism. At the possible/impossible junction of concepts and experience, architecture appears as the image of two worlds: personal and universal. Eroticism is no different; for one whose concept leads to pleasure (excess), eroticism is "personal" by nature. And by nature it is also "universal." Thus, on the one hand, there is sensual pleasure, the other and the I; on the other hand, historical inquiry and ultimate rationality. Architecture is the ultimate erotic "object," because an architectural act, brought to the level of excess, is the only way to reveal both the traces of history and its own immediate experiential truth.¹⁰

Second correspondence

The junction between ideal space and real space is seen differently in the second correspondence. This second correspondence is immensely general and inevitably contains the present argument as it would contain many others. It is nothing less than the analogy of life-and-death, applied here to one celebrated architectural example.

Each society expects architecture to reflect its ideals and domesticate its deeper fears. And architecture and its theorists rarely negate the form that the society expects of it. Loos' celebrated attack on the intrinsic criminality of ornament was echoed by the Modern Movement's admiration for engineering "purity," and its admiration was translated into architectural terms by an unconscious consensus. "The engineers fabricate the tools of their time—

everything except moth-eaten boudoirs and moldy houses. . . ."¹¹ This consistent repudiation of the so-called "obscene scrawl"¹² (as opposed to the puritan sense of hygiene) is not unlike mankind's horror for decaying and putrefied bodies. Death is tolerated only when the bones are white: if architects cannot succeed in their quest for "healthy and virile, active and useful, ethical and happy"¹³ people and houses, they can at least be comfortable in front of the white ruins of the Parthenon. Young life and decent death, such was the architectural order.

Calling itself "modern" as well as independent of the "bourgeois" rules of the time, the heroic tradition of the thirties nevertheless reflected the deep and unconscious fears of society. Life was seen as a negation of death—it condemned death and even excluded it—a negation which went beyond the idea of death itself and extended to the rot of the putrefying flesh. The anguish about death, however, only related to the phase of decomposition, for white bones did not possess the intolerable aspect of corrupted flesh. Architecture reflected these deep feelings: putrefying buildings were seen as unacceptable, but dry white ruins afforded decency and respectability. From being respectful to seeking respectability, there is only one step. Are the rationalists or the New York "Five" today unconsciously striving for respect through the white and timeless skeletons they propose?

Moreover, the fear of decaying organisms—as opposed to the nostalgic search for the "outmoded purity of architecture"—appears in conservationist enterprises as much as in utopian projects. Those who in 1965 visited the then derelict Villa Savoye certainly remember the squalid walls of the small service rooms on the ground floor, stinking of urine, smeared with excrement, and covered with obscene graffiti. Not surprisingly, the long campaign to save the threatened "purity" of the Villa Savoye doubled in intensity in the months that followed, and finally succeeded.

Society scares easily at those aspects of sensuality that it qualifies as obscene. "*Inter faeces et urinam nascimur*" ("we are born between excrement and urine"), wrote St. Augustin. In fact, the connection between death, fecal mat-

60 ter, and menstrual blood has often been demonstrated. In his studies of eroticism, Le Corbusier's contemporary, Georges Bataille,¹⁴ pointed out that the fundamental prohibitions of mankind were centered on two radically opposed domains: death and its obverse, sexual reproduction. As a result, any discourse about life, death, and putrefaction implicitly contained a discourse on sex. Bataille claimed that at the key moment when life moved toward death, there could no longer be reproduction, but only sex. Since eroticism implied sex without reproduction, the movement from life to death was erotic; "eroticism is assenting to life up to the point of death," wrote Bataille.

Just as Bataille's approach was certainly not exempt from the social taboos of his time, similar taboos surrounded many of the Modern Movement's attitudes. The Modern Movement loved both life and death, but separately. Architects generally do not love that part of life that resembles death: decaying constructions—the dissolving traces that time leaves on buildings—are incompatible with both the ideology of modernity and with what might be called conceptual esthetics. But in the opinion of this author—which is admittedly subjective—the Villa Savoye was never so moving as when plaster fell off its concrete blocks. While the puritanism of the Modern Movement and its followers has often been pointed out, its refusal to recognize the passing of time has rarely been noticed. (Not surprisingly, glass and glazed tiles have been among the preferred materials of the movement—for they do not reveal the traces of time.)

But to pursue this "distasteful" demonstration to the logical point where the distinction between argument and metaphor becomes blurred, it is my contention that the *moment of architecture* is that moment when architecture is life and death at the same time, when the experience of space becomes its own concept. In the paradox of architecture, the contradiction between architectural concept and sensual experience of space resolves itself at one point of tangency: *the rotten point*, the very point that taboos and culture have always rejected. This metaphorical rot is where architecture lies. Rot bridges sensory pleasure and reason.

Part Three: The Transgression

Living in conformity with the archetypes amounted to respecting the 'law' . . . through the repetition of paradigmatic gestures, archaic man succeeded in annulling time.

Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*

I was subject to respecting too much in my youth.
Stendhal, *Souvenirs d'egotisme*.

It is tempting to leave the argument here and let the reader determine for himself where this metaphorical "rot" becomes architecture and where architecture becomes erotic. For like eroticism, the phenomenon described here is of universal nature, although the suggested attitudes are subjective and particular. However, it is important to underline exactly what the two correspondences imply.

First, the two correspondences—that of rot and that of life and death—are aspects of the same phenomenon. In both cases, the meeting point of ideal and real space is a proscribed place; just as it is "forbidden" to experience pleasure while thinking about it, it is forbidden to look at the place where life touches death: Orpheus is not allowed to watch Eurydices' passage from death to life.

The life-and-death correspondence materializes the meeting place: the meeting place becomes the "memory" of life between death, the "rotten" place where spatial praxis meets mental constructs, the convergence of two interdependent but mutually exclusive aspects.

Second, and very literally, such a place may possess the moldy traces that time leaves on built form, the soiled remnants of everyday life, the inscriptions of man or of the elements—all, in fact, that *marks* a building.

Third, by extension, this meeting place is a threat to the autonomy of, and the distinction between, concepts and spatial praxis. We have seen the Beaux-Arts architects at the turn of the century display blindness toward pure engineering structures, and most contemporary architects close their eyes to the traces of decay. Of course, the taboos

that haunt architects are hardly surprising. Most architects work from paradigms acquired through education and through subsequent exposure to architectural literature, often without knowing what characteristics have given these paradigms the status of rules or, by inversion, that such paradigms imply subsequent taboos. These paradigms-taboos may be more binding and more complex than any set of rules that might be abstracted from them; they remain entrenched because of the difficulty in unveiling the hidden rules that have guided the particular architectural approaches that generated them. Rules stay obscured, for schools of architecture never teach concepts or theories in the abstract. As a result, architects' perceptions are often as culturally conditioned as those of a school child, even if the nature of this conditioning changes throughout history.

Fourth, by a further extension, the meeting place is ultimately architecture. It thrives on its ambiguous location between cultural autonomy and commitment, between contemplation and habit. In fact, if a piece of architecture renounces its conceptual autonomy by recognizing its latent dependency on reality—social or economic—it accepts its integration into the restrictive mechanisms of society. On the other hand, it sanctuarizes itself in an art for art's sake position; it does not escape classification among existing ideological compartments. So architecture seems to survive in its "erotic" capacity only wherever it *negates* itself, where it transcends its paradoxical nature by negating the form that society expects of it. In other words, it is not a matter of destruction or "avant-garde" subversion, but of *transgression*.

While recently the rules called for the rejection of "ornament," today's sensibility has changed and purity is under attack. In a similar way, while the crowded street of the turn of the century was criticized by CIAM's theories of urban fragmentation, today the ruling status of the social and conceptual mechanisms eroding urban life is already the next to be transgressed.

Whether through literal or "phenomenal" transgression, architecture is seen here as the momentary and sacrilegious

convergence of real space and ideal space. Limits remain, for transgression does not mean the methodical destruction of any code or rule that concerns space or architecture. On the contrary, it introduces new articulations between inside and outside, between concept and experience. Very simply it means overcoming unacceptable prevalences.

- 62 1. London, 1975. With Peter Eisenman, Roselee Goldberg, Peter Cook, Colin Rowe, J. Stezaker, Bernard Tschumi, Cedric Price, W. Alsop, Charles Jencks, Joseph Rykwert, etc.
2. Cf. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, Vol. I (London: 1928). Is the architectural discourse a discourse about whatever does not relate to "building" itself? Hegel concluded in the affirmative: architecture is whatever does not point to utility. Hegel's conclusion seems to find a belated echo among those who have recently rediscovered the notion of architectural autonomy.
3. It seems superfluous to document in detail the numerous contributions that have appeared under the generic title of "Radical Architecture" and which were included in "The New Italian Landscape" exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, 1972. See also various magazines such as *Casabella*, *Architectural Design*, etc., for their documentation of the work of Superstudio, Archizoom, Hans Hollein, Walter Pichler, Raimund Abraham, etc.
4. Cf. *Architettura Razionale*, Franco Angeli, ed. (Milan: 1973), and the publications that followed the XV Milan Triennale organized by Aldo Rossi. See also Manfredo Tafuri's critique of the claim that architecture is an endless manipulation of the grammar and the syntax of the architectural sign (*Oppositions 3*). Freed from reality, apparently independent of ideology, architectural values seem to strive toward a "purity" that recalls the Russian formalist criticism of the twenties, when it was argued that the only valid object of literary criticism was the literary text.
5. Cf. *A Space: A Thousand Words* (London: RCA Gallery, 1975); *The Chronicle of Space*, documenting student work done in the Diploma School of the Architectural Association, London, from 1974-1975; the "Real Space" conference at the Architectural Association with G. Celant, A. Buren, Eno, etc.
6. This purely sensory approach has been a recurrent theme in this century's understanding and appreciation of space. It is not necessary to expatiate at length on the twentieth century precedents. Suffice it to say that current discourse seems to fluctuate between a) the 1910 German aesthetic overtones of the Raumempfindung theory, whereby space is to be "felt" as something affecting the inner nature of man by a symbolic *Einführung*, and b) one that echoes Schlemmer's work at the Bauhaus, whereby space was not only the medium of experience but also the materialization of theory. Much analysis of the "reality" of space has recently been done by artists in the last few years, especially with Vito Acconci's performances ("Performing a space—my body should start to haunt the space between me and the box"), Irwin, Asher, Wheeler, and Nauman, whose spatial work tends to see visual and physical perception as restricted to the faintest of all stimulations. By a series of exclusions that become significant only in opposition to the remote exterior space and general social context, the "participant" only experiences his own experience. See also Roselee Goldberg's "Space as Praxis," *Studio International*, Sept.-Oct., 1975, and Germano Celant's "Artspaces" in the same issue.
7. Cf. Bernard Tschumi, "Questions of Space: The Pyramid and the Labyrinth or the Architectural Paradox," *Studio International*, Sept.-Oct., 1975, where the historical context of the paradox of space and the nature of its terms is discussed at length.
8. This infinite tension between the two mirrors constitutes a void. As Oscar Wilde once pointed out, in order to defend any paradox, the wit depends on *memory*. By absorbing and reflecting all information, the mirrors—and the mind—become a wheel, a sort of circular retrieval system. In architecture, between the mirrors of ideal space and real space, the same thing happens. Long proscribed in an amnesic world where only progress and technological advance count, architectural memory returns. Cf. Antoine Grumbach, "L'Architecture et l'Evidente Nécessité de la Mémoire," *L'Art Vivant*, no. 56, January 1975.
9. I only discuss here the resolution of the paradox in terms of a space *outside* the "subject." The argument could indeed be extended to the unqualifiable pleasure of drawing and to what could be called the "experience of concepts." Tracing Chinese ideograms, for example, means a double pleasure: for the experience of drawing reveals itself as a praxis of the sign, as a sensitive materiality with meaning. While with the paradox, it is tempting to try to uncover the mode of inscription of architectural concepts upon the unconscious. Especially if we admit that there is libido in all human activities, we may also consider that some architectural concepts are the expression of a sublimated model. See Sibony's article in *Psychanalyse et Sémiotique*, 10/18 (Paris: Collection Tel Quel, 1975).
10. Too little research has been done on the relationship between architectonic concepts and the sensory experience of space: "Those who negate sensations, who negate direct experience, who negate personal participation in a praxis which is aimed at transforming reality, are not materialists" (Mao Tse Tung, *Four Philosophical Essays* [Peking: 1967]).
11. Le Corbusier, *Vers Une Architecture* (Paris: L'Esprit Nouveau, 1928). One chapter is entitled "Architecture et Transgression." Not surprisingly, Le Corbusier's interpretation considerably differs from Bataille's and from the one discussed in my text.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. Georges Bataille, *Eroticism* (London: Calder, 1962).

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**Sensuality has been known
to overcome even the
most rational of buildings.**



VILLA SAVOYE, 1965

Architecture is the ultimate erotic act.
Carry it to excess and it will reveal
both the traces of reason and the sensual
experience of space. Simultaneously.