Fall 11-12-2008

Graduate Sessions 7: Anthony Vidler

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graduate sessions

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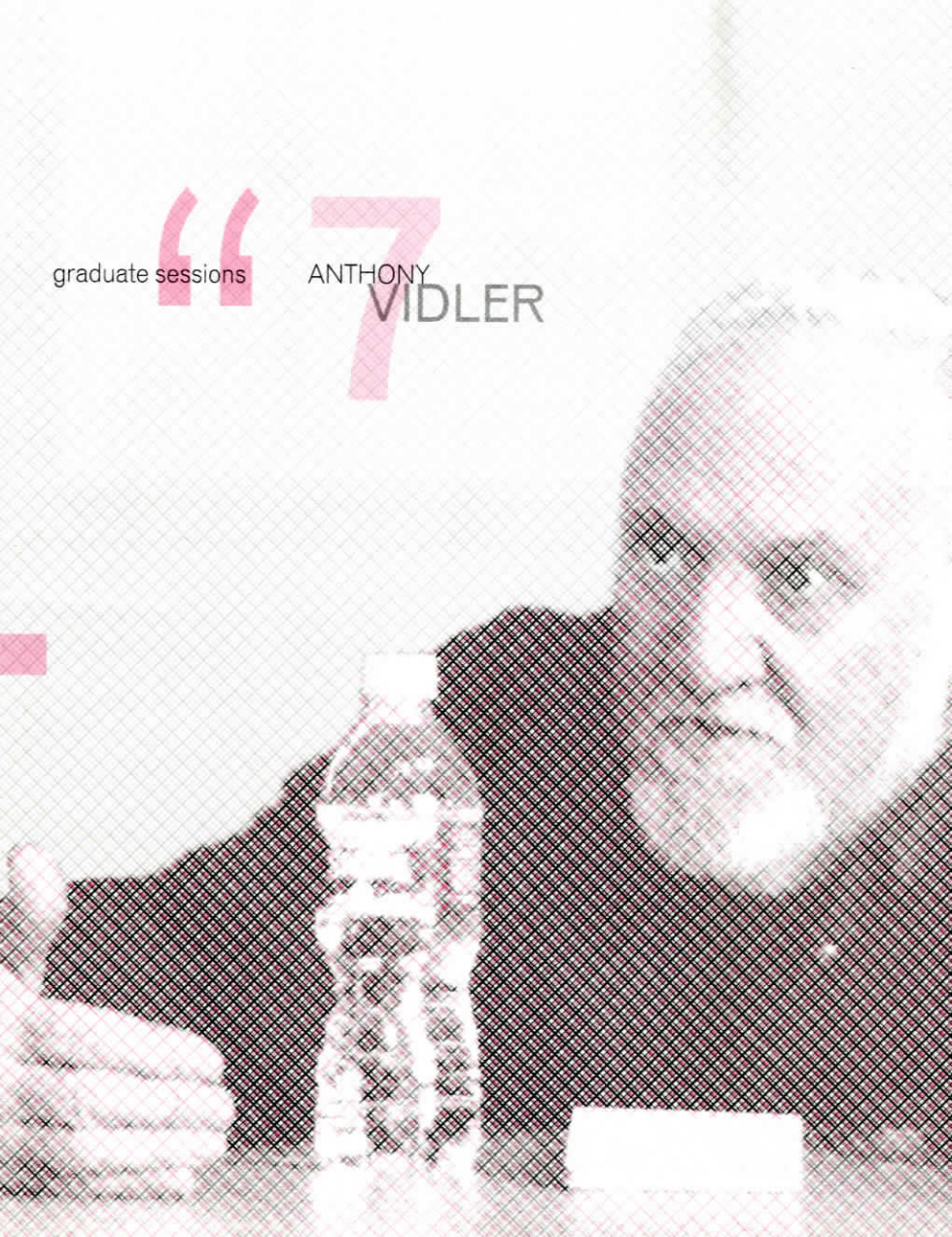

Anthony Vidler
Graduate Session 07
2008.11.12

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Anthony Vidler is Dean of the Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture of The Cooper Union. His books include *Histories of the Immediate Present, The Architectural Uncanny, Warped Space,* and *The Writing of the Walls.*

Graduate Sessions is a series of seminars and symposia offering Syracuse Architecture graduate students the opportunity to engage leading scholars and practitioners in conversation and debate. The resulting pamphlets offer unique insights into the work of our guests as well as the ongoing concerns of our students and the graduate programs.

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graduate session 07

NR: Let's start with your new book, *Histories of the Immediate Present*, which examines the impact of modernism on the writing of architectural history. What most interests us is the concluding chapter on the *posthistoire*—

AV: I thought you'd say that. [laughter]

NR: ...where you suggest that everything that we attribute to modernism is actually drawn from the past, whether it's in broad sweeping looks back or by selectively choosing elements from the past, be it from the enlightenment or the ancients. Is there only so much that we can cull from the past? Is the *posthistoire* a limitation?

AV: No, it's an attitude. If you have an attitude that history is coming to an end—that things are just going to repeat themselves, that there's no progress, that the bureaucratic and technological organization of the modern world has created a closed system—then you have a post-historical attitude. The post-historical attitude is an attitude that emerged in the late nineteenth century, when various mathematicians, scientists, and sociologists, were very suspicious of the ideas of progress and development that looked to the philosophy of Hegel: for example, the notion that history progresses *no matter what* to higher and higher stages of intelligence among societies. That was being challenged by sociologists who were looking at past societies—for example, the bureaucratic society of ancient China—and seeing that progress as it was understood in the nineteenth century in the West did not exist in that culture. It was a very different condition. There was also a mathematician called Cournot who decided that there were three kinds of societies that could be, in a sense, coexisting in the world. There was the *prehistoric* society, which anthropologists in the nineteenth century

called "primitive" society but which could also be called "traditional." There was the *historical* society, which had a sense of its own growth and a self-consciousness: Western society since the Renaissance, for example. And there was *post-historical* society, such as ancient China. These intellectuals in the late nineteenth century saw a kind of bureaucratic inertia taking over the world, and thought the West was in danger of becoming post-historical. It's a kind of pathology, like two doctors standing over the same body: they agree on the symptoms, but one doctor says, "This body is in decline and about to die," while the other doctor says, "No, it's terribly healthy." So it's an attitude.

The historian says, "This is something different and new."
The archeologist says, "It was done before."
And the anthropologist says, "It has always been the same."

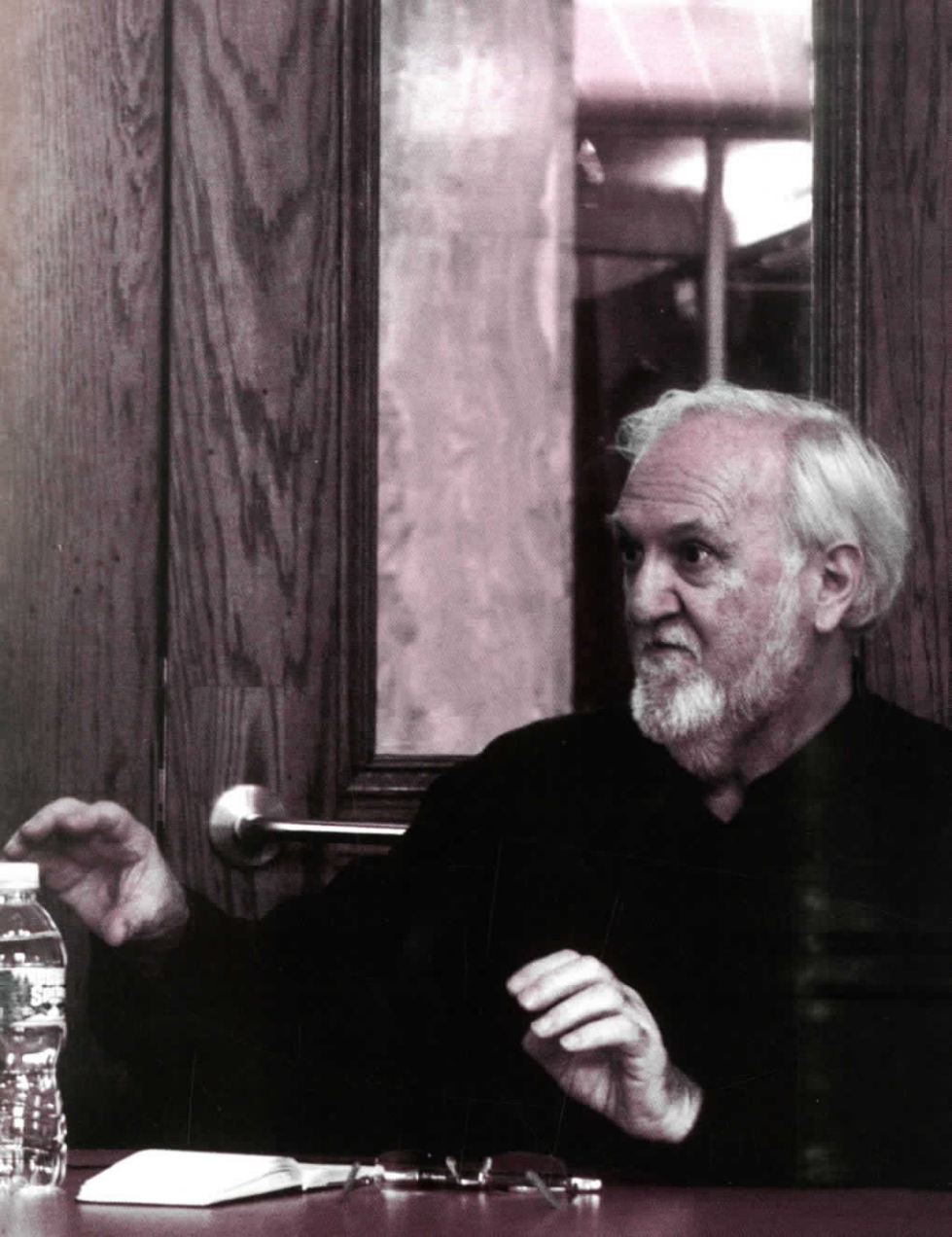
NF: Is the idea of *posthistoire* related in any way to the ideas in your earlier book, *Warped Space*, which discusses society's and individuals' responses in the twentieth century to the modern, metropolitan environment and problems like agoraphobia?

AV: Well, what I argue is that there were a number of thinkers in the twentieth century who were terribly influenced by earlier ideas of post-history. In the 1920s, for example, some conservative thinkers really felt that everything had come to a kind of technological resolution. In a way, one has to say Le Corbusier was a post-historical thinker because he really believed his theory of type-forms. You see this in those photographs in *Towards an Architecture* that juxtapose Paestum and the Parthenon with the old English car, the Humber, lumbering along looking like a chariot and then the precision of the new French racing car, the Delage. Both type-forms had resolved themselves: the Greek temple and the automobile. So, in a

sense, everything after is post-historical, right? It doesn't grow or develop. It works on the type. Colin Rowe, who was also a post-historical thinker, was always complaining that the language of Western architecture was the same since Palladio, who had made a set of type-forms and elements for the Renaissance and which then were repeated *ad infinitum* through all of Neo-classicism, all the way to Jefferson's University of Virginia and beyond. It was the repetition of language. Rowe thought that Le Corbusier in the '20s and '30s had pushed modernism to the point where it became a language that could become easily repeatable. That's why someone like Hitchcock was able to call it the International Style. Then, when Rowe looked at the famous (or infamous) New York Five—from Meier to Eisenman—he thought they were just recuperating Corbusian languages. That's a post-historical idea. I'm saying that, in fact, *most* thinkers that talk about post-modernism in the '70s, '80s, and '90s have this attitude. Aldo Rossi and others are post-historical thinkers: They're taking type-forms from either the Renaissance or the enlightenment and saying, "Okay, let's repeat them in a contemporary way." It's not an idea of progress; it's an idea of stasis. It's as if an archeologist, an anthropologist, and a historian are arguing with each other, and the historian says, "There is something happening that's different and new," and the archeologist says, "Well, that was done before," and the anthropologist says, "It has always been the same." So history becomes a question of interpreting and understanding the present in relation to the past. It's never a question of just finding out the facts. You always have an attitude *towards* the facts.

NR: How would you characterize contemporary approaches, such as parametric design, which seem to reject typical form in favor of creating novel or *architecturally* novel form? Would you say that it's *against* post-history to strive for something that isn't derived from the past but from more contemporary inspiration like biology?

AV: I think of it in terms of a persistent question—certainly in Western architecture since the Renaissance and even before—of where the authority for building this very expensive object comes from. The authority in the Middle Ages was certainly the church: cathedrals represented religion and spirituality and at the same time operated as places for a religious community to worship. In the Renaissance, the authority was derived from a distant past. In the more modern periods, there's been a whole range of authorities. Modernism derived its authority from functionalism, from social and political movements, from technology. The aspiration of utilizing parametric iterations to produce new forms is actually an extension of functionalist traditions. It's an authority gained from outside the whim of the architect—just as the architects of the '60s said, "It's not me: it's *society* that wants this," or, "it's *this social group* that wants this." Or just as the formalists of the '20s and then later of the '70s and '80s —those Peter Eisenmans of the world—said, "It's not me that does that. It's the logic of form that does that." In each case there's an exterior authority that the architect needs to justify what she or he does. And, of course—from Vitruvius on—there's that big push to say, "We've got to balance the technology with the use and aesthetics—commodity, firmness, and delight." Vitruvius said, "We've got to do it all at once and have it all together," but then every so often a generation says, "Well, no, I'm actually going to accentuate *X*. Because I am Richard Rogers or Norman Foster, I'm going to accentuate the technological, or the structural." I'll be talking a little bit tonight about Reyner Banham who wanted to accentuate the technological, but I also am going talk about people who want to accentuate the ecological—the relationship of the building to its natural surroundings. I don't really think of sustainability as something that's new; just as iron transformed into steel transformed into reinforced concrete into high-stress high-tensile materials, so has architecture had an evolving relationship to the environment. The same is



true of questions of representation which have always had a very strong relationship to questions of design. When perspective was rediscovered in the Renaissance, the way in which buildings were designed transformed because people were designing them to look like perspectives. When the axonometric was discovered, design changed again. Architects from Le Corbusier to Jim Stirling were conceiving their buildings in axonometric form, and then the building took on a kind of axonometric three-dimensional form. Now parametrics can develop forms apparently autonomously, but they do not let us off the hook of having to apply judgment. I remember a review at a place that shall be nameless: there was a very proud student showing 500 iterations that had been developed from a particular algorithm. The algorithm was doing this and that and this and that, and then it came to an abrupt stop. So I said, "Okay, that was the final design? How did you choose?" He said, "Well, my hard disk filled up." [laughter] So I don't believe in the autonomy of algorithmic iteration, or the autonomy of parametrics, or the autonomy of structure, or the autonomy of social views, or the autonomy of aesthetics, or the autonomy of the architect—I don't think any of these are *fully* autonomous. I think they're all *relatively* autonomous, and they have their own internal disciplinary characteristics, but they have to be related to the coming-together of something in a much bigger environment.

Because we think holistically about the consequences of what we do, we have an ethical and political duty to testify.

NR: Authority from the future was clearly important in early Modernism when architects said, "This is our stance, and this is the future we want to see." Today we also seem to be looking to the future, but in a very different way. We're trying to look at things objectively in order to make decisions about the future, especially regarding the environment.

AV: I think that looking at the present squarely with all the intellectual and technical devices that you have to analyze and understand the present is the only way to look to the future. But I think that we have yet to use—to *learn* to use—the devices that we like to play with right now, which are modeling devices of different kinds. And we have to learn to use them in certain ways to allow us to analyze our designs, analyze situations, and analyze the information we have, and transform information into three-dimensional iterations so that one can see what one has and then test it. I think what is happening too often in modern architecture, from the first avant-gardes of the 1920s to the present, is that we test architecture through building it. We don't test architecture enough *before* we build it, and I think that some of the questions that we can ask now—of the environmental conditions of an object, of the material conditions of an object, of the social conditions of the environment, and of the political implications of those conditions—I think they can be asked in ways that we can actually test. It's not just a question of sitting in front of a drawing in a review and saying, "I don't like the way you did this." It's a question of demonstrating that there is heat loss and heat gain, that there is a certain relationship to sun and to light, that there are certain relationships to ground water and so on that you considered in your design. I think now we have very good programs that can begin to work towards that, but the computer has really been used far too much as simply a mode of quick representation and quick making three-dimensional models. I think it should be much more. It's much more useful—and serving a more a truly digital operation—as an analytical tool, and I think that, yes, you have to build a three-dimensional model to analyze it, but you also have to have the program information that you can feed into those digital models in order to see what they're doing and how they're working. I think we have to test the environmental, the social, and even the aesthetic conditions of architecture much in the same way as structural engineers can now test structures.

NR: So building the model is just the first step.

AV: Absolutely. This leads to a big burden on education. See, you've all got to go back to school, including your teachers.

NF: You talk about how computers are used to represent things quickly—

AV: Too quickly, usually.

NF: ...*too* quickly, and that makes me think of how diagrams have become more generative in architecture and how architecture is often treated as an image or an image as architecture.

Some of us who've been working in history for a long time are convinced it was never better *then*—that it's actually always better *now*.

AV: Well, you know all the old stories of architects of Vienna sitting in a café and sketching a little plan of what they're going to do. The most effective of those stories features the greenhouse builder, Paxton. In the middle of the nineteenth century, when he went to his club in London, he was asked by some baron how he would build a very large greenhouse which then became the Crystal Palace of 1851, and he said, "Well, I would..." and he drew on his napkin, which in those days was probably a very beautiful linen napkin. He drew one piece of iron and another piece with a little curve in it and then a piece of glass, and he said, "I'd make it out of those." And that—in a sense—is the whole Crystal Palace. It's made out of prefabricated units. Diagrams have always existed. If you look at the way the Egyptians traced out their plans you will find diagrams inscribed in stone. The Greeks masons made diagrams, as did the master builders of cathedrals. The diagram has always been a tool of communication, of abstraction and of organization, structurally

and otherwise. I think that now we have to learn to use the more complex and more knowledge-filled diagrams that a proper use of computation can give us. It's not just pie charts: we can actually construct diagrams that have knowledge, lines that have information in them, and that information can stay with the line as we move it. I think that can be transferred to materials. Now we have materials that can actually store information about us and can actually respond to information about the environment. So I think there's a lot of interest to be gained in trying to use those tools, trying to dominate them just as we have to dominate the aesthetics that come to us from Silicon Valley in the form of Maya (that's M-A-Y-A, not M-E-I-E-R). [laughter]

NF: You wrote an article, "Technologies of Space and Spaces of Technology," in *JSAH*, where you start off by talking about how, given the tendencies of architectural history, not a lot has been said about spatiality. You suggest that Banham and Rowe were beginning to create a tradition of addressing spatiality as part of the history of architecture.

AV: I think what I was trying to say is that from the beginning of the twentieth century there was a tradition of talking about space and form in particular ways, but the abstraction of space and form by art historians, because that's where the concept came from, became the basis of what we now call modernist abstraction in architecture. Heinrich Wölfflin and various others in Germany were very interested in saying, "We're not talking about styles; we're talking about ways of composing—linearly, planometrically, cubically, and so on and so forth." What was not so clear was the way in which all the material and technological devices used to build architecture were going to be reconsidered at the same time as form. A tradition grew up in modernism whereby the technological services were all subordinated to form. The argument is, "here we have a form, and that's primary, and it's an abstract form, and everything else has to be either hidden or subordinated

to that." An alternative was presented by Banham, in his little book, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*, where he was trying to say that the services—all the things that make a building climatically, environmentally, and humanistically adequate—also have form. Certain architects try to isolate that: Kahn pulled out the services in the Richards Building, and Piano and Rogers pulled out all the tubes in the Centre Pompidou. Then you get those, like Buckminster Fuller, who make the form of technology into the form of the building: I would say that it's always important to achieve that delicate balance between spatiality, formality, and technology. They all have to come together as a way of thinking about making space for people because *we* are what architecture is *for*.

EA: In *The Architecture of the Uncanny* you write about the sublime, the romantic, and the uncanny through readings of the evolution of the home; and you write about the concept of nostalgia in architecture, specifically in regard to the home. How does the concept of nostalgia relate to historic preservation?

AV: There is a strong element of nostalgia—nostalgia for things remembered and sometimes nostalgia for things imagined—in all cultures. We're learning more and more that those cultures that the anthropologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries thought didn't *have* history and were only living in the moment actually *did* have ways of recording history—that there are ways of recording memory in *all* cultures. The temporal lines and the kinds of history that each culture can be very different, but there's always an element of looking back. There's always an element of nostalgia because you always think that maybe it was better then. Some of us who've been working in history for a long time are convinced it was never better *then*—that it's actually always better *now* even though we think that it's horrible. Still, it's very hard to think of one's own personal history without

a tinge of nostalgia, because you know that temporally it's gone, but it's in your mind, and you remember it with fondness. You can even have nostalgia for a row you had with your boyfriend ten years ago—five years ago, sorry. [laughter] You know, there is a certain sense that *everything* is tinged with nostalgia and that historians have a certain kind of nostalgia for the *future*. I remember Banham always used to say he was writing the history of the immediate future, which is why I entitled my book *Histories of the Immediate Present*: because in fact all the historians I discuss were writing for their present—for that moment. I wrote that book precisely because I wanted to demonstrate that here were four historians, all of whom were rewriting the history of a sort of modernism at a certain distance. In the 1950s, '60s, and '70s they're rewriting the history of the 1920s so that they can further

I'm interested in preserving all those buildings that we love to hate from the '60s...

their particular, individual ideas of what architecture should be in their present. No historian is impartial. They say that they're telling the truth. They're not. Even the selection of the texts and the buildings and the objects and the themes and the questions—they're all biased by personal questions, by personal tastes, by a particular ways of getting you to think about things. They're not writing just because they're interested in the past. They're writing because they're interested in the present. So to get back to nostalgia, yes, there's always nostalgia.

EA: Do you think your work could effect a change in attitudes toward restoration or historic preservation? What is the role of historians?

AV: I have no idea. *Role* is not my role. But I'm always very concerned. I think we can say that in most Western cultures, certain buildings of the past are fairly safe. We've come to think of Gothic buildings as meriting

preservation. Historic preservation emerged in the early nineteenth century because Gothic buildings were being torn down. Medieval buildings were just being wiped out because people didn't think of them as being aesthetically pleasing or good and they had neither historic value nor aesthetic value. There's a wonderful little essay written in 1900 by the Viennese historian Alois Riegl called "The Modern Cult of Monuments." He was asked to write it because the Austrian government saw that the Catholic Church was expanding enormously and was tearing down Renaissance and Gothic parts of its churches because it was more interested—in some ways legitimately—with its congregation than it was with the history of its churches. The Austrian government understood that a whole heritage was in danger of being destroyed and asked this very prominent art historian to come up with some criteria by which it could judge the value of a historical

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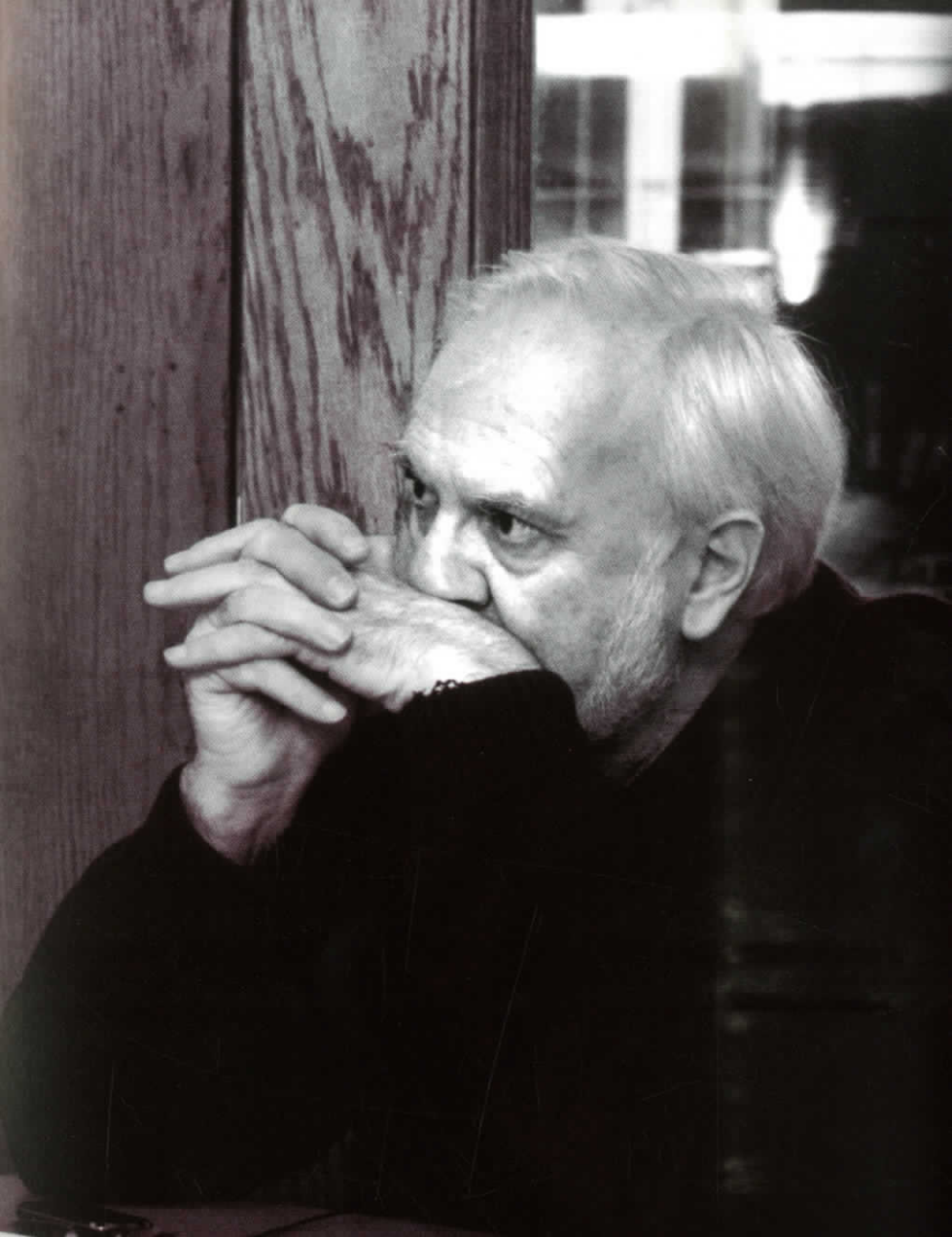
monument so that it could say, "*That* should be preserved." So this little essay is really worth reading because it still works today. He isolates the criteria for determining value but demonstrates that each of the criteria, if it's elevated to the sole criterion, destroys all the others. If you think only of *historical* value, everything from yesterday back has historical value, so you'll be bound to keep every piece of paper, every laundry list, every stained sheet—you'll keep *everything*. If you think only of the value something has because it can't be repeated, then you can't restore it because modern materials and modern craftsmanship are inadequate—only *that* stone could have done it, only *that* culture could have done it—so you let it sit there until it turns into a pile of dust. That's a problem. If you think only of *use* value, then you can't protect a church by transforming it into a casino because doing so transforms its use to the point where its whole value as a historical

monument goes away. If you value modernity, then you'll advocate restoration in the manner of Viollet-le-Duc, who thought "real Gothic" could improve upon "ancient Gothic." His idea of restoration was to transform a medieval building into something that it wanted to be but never was, so that it became more Gothic than the Gothic was able to be in its own time. So all these criteria are, ironically, working against each other. What I'm interested in is the rapid change in taste, the rapid change in "style taste," the rapid change in cultural values, especially with media and fashion. I'm interested in preserving all those buildings that we love to hate from the '60s. And I'll soon be going out there trying to preserve horrible postmodern buildings because I don't believe that we should tear a thing down just because we're of a particular generation that prefers X, Y, and Z. That's what was at stake in New York recently in the battle over Edward Durell Stone's little building for the Huntington Hartford Museum on Columbus Circle. To modernists it was an affront because it had a kind of Venetian arcade and a perforated screen and so on and so forth. I never really liked it, but it marks a moment in a shift—a rapid shift, a major shift—in architectural taste, in his *own* architectural taste, which to me was a historic shift. So I fought against renovating it. Now it's tepidly redone, so a little bit of it appears, and some of it is covered over. It's a horrible compromise. They should have restored it faithfully or torn it down and done a really great building. The same goes for Saarinen's TWA Building, which was the first building I stepped into out of my TWA flight to the United States on 1 June 1964. It had an incredible cocktail lounge on the top floor. So my friends and I went up, and we had cocktails, and then we had cocktails, and then we had cocktails, and then we were able to find a cab, and then we were *just* able to afford to take it to the 42nd Street YMCA where I was *just* able to afford to stay there for two weeks while I used every dime that I had in the telephone box calling architects, going through the Yellow Pages starting at A. I got a job at S. I had a grant to come from Cambridge,



but Cambridge was very nice and gave me a one-way fare. I don't know what they were trying to say. [laughter] I did earn the fare back to finish my degree, but it took a few months. Anyway, the point is I fought for that building because I think history offers a cautionary guide for looking at architectural values more closely.

It's an attitude—one doctor says, "This body is in decline and about to die," and the other doctor says, "No, it's terribly healthy."

BF: In your example of the two doctors who in analyzing a single patient arrive at different diagnoses and in your idea of the *posthistoire* as an attitude toward history, you're describing people on the outside looking in. The doctors are merely diagnosing rather than treating.

AV: Because that's what historians do.

BF: And you've said that you have no role in historic preservation, but could you describe what you understand your position to be? What is your agency in the realm of architecture?

AV: *Agency* I could say I have. A *role* is something else. I may have—I hope—a little bit of agency. I wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times* on behalf of the TWA Building for the reasons I told you about. But, you see, I'm a mutt in relationship to architecture because I'm trained as an architect, and so I love drawing and designing, and I teach design. I was also trained as a historian, so I love history, and I love writing history. I also write criticism, and I sometimes write theory, so each of those different roles have different attitudes towards architecture built into them, and I can't give up any of them. At one point it was necessary for me to find a place to teach at a specific university so I took a job as an art historian—as head of an art history

department. I never quite felt comfortable just doing history, so I found myself teaching in the architecture department. Yet when I'm teaching in a professional architecture school I want to be in art history again. I feel a little bit locked in, so I do a course at the Institute of Fine Arts or Columbia. I always want that balance between involvement in professional education and the kind of speculative and historical work that I like to do as a critic and historian. I do quite self-consciously separate the historical aspects of *Warped Space* and *Architecture of the Uncanny* from the theoretical and critical aspects. The historical examples are fairly correct historically, but they are not history books. They are books of architectural interpretation. How might you look at an object produced by an architect that could reveal an aspect of that architecture that we haven't seen before? We could do a formal analysis. We could do a technological analysis, a sociological analysis, a political analysis. What if we looked at it from the psychoanalytic point of view? I try to find work and ideas about work that are not totally anachronistic—that are not totally out of phase with the architecture itself. There was a tremendous amount of interest and speculation about psychology by architects in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries at the moment when psychology became a paramount interest and then a discipline. The gradual insertion of specialized words—words like *agoraphobia* or *phobia*—into the broader culture including architecture shows that architects who were justifying their work with those words were, in fact, developing a different attitude towards space, although there's usually a little time lag because architects are a little, you know, slow. But they eventually catch up.

EA: Slow or not, architecture is described in *The Architecture of the Uncanny* and *Warped Space* as being "in phase with" contemporary intellectual issues. Do you think psychoanalytic issues are perhaps dismissed too quickly as viable avenues of architectural research and design nowadays?

AV: One of the problems with writing books that interpret architecture through certain lenses is that you get questions like 'How can I design an uncanny building?' or 'How can I design a building that will make you crazy?' (The second one is easy, by the way; the uncanny is hard, but you can always design buildings to make you crazy.) People think of it in reverse; as opposed to an interpretive strategy, people think of it as a normative strategy. None of the works that I look at were ever designed with intentions similar to my interpretation of the work. That has to be very clear. Questions like 'What is uncanny?' emerge in particular cultures, in particular ways and

How might you look at an object produced by an architect that could reveal an aspect of that architecture that we haven't seen before?

for different reasons. For the generation immediately after the French Revolution, for the generation of German poets like Hölderlin and the short story writers like Hoffmann, they emerged in a culture that had been deeply destabilized—first by the French Revolution and then by the Napoleonic Empire and invasion. They were also deeply rooted in a self-consciousness that comes from their reading of Enlightenment philosophers like Rousseau. They have a real consciousness of *self*. But self is intangible. How do you deal with self? You're continuously interrogating your emotions, and in doing so you interrogate your darkest emotion and your most joyful emotion, and there's a moment where it's very much like a kind of action movie, which tests your responses to blood and violence and pushes you to vertigo. (I saw in the paper today an advertisement for a new movie which they bill as "screaming therapy.") The Romantics were very interested in *testing*. How can you make a short story as frightening as possible? How can you make an environment as gloomy or obscure as possible? They were following Edmund Burke's notion from the 1750s of a psychological relationship to

the environment; he said, "You know, there're a lot of things that happen in the world that I want to appreciate, but I can't appreciate them through the normal lens of aesthetics. I can't say that this flood is beautiful, that this tsunami is beautiful, that this volcanic eruption or the destruction of Pompeii or the destruction of a town by an earthquake is beautiful. I can't call something that deeply shocks me to my core and terrifies me 'beautiful'." So what's the aesthetic of that something that inspires shock and awe? (Interestingly enough, 'shock and awe' as a slogan is an aestheticization of something which is otherwise too brutal to comprehend: that's the sublime moved into the public relations of terror.) But for the Romantics it was really a question of the poetics of nature's terrifying aspects. Burke's definition of the sublime was 'that which was as close as possible to the terror of facing death'—facing nothingness, the deepest and gloomiest forests, the most infinite sense of spatiality, the sense of the cosmos being infinitely large. As he said, the most incredibly sublime statement of all literature is biblical 'And God said, *Let there be light.*' This incredible sense of brilliant light flooding the world as opposed to deep darkness can evoke sublime sensations. The uncanny is a sensation which is a little bit removed from the sublime because you might want to taste a fear as you're reading a short story, but you really don't want to go there. You want to be a little bit nervous—to feel just a little tingle around the spine, the need to lock the door and make sure nobody's coming in. The best place to read an uncanny novel is in a nicely shuttered cottage with a nice warm fire and a storm raging outside. All these questions of the uncanny and sublime, even psychoanalysis, have to do with buffering the effects of life. They're aesthetic conditions that allow you to look from a distance at things that you really do fear.

It had an incredible cocktail lounge on the top floor, so my friends and I went up, and we had cocktails. And then we had cocktails. And then we had cocktails.

NF: I'm really interested in your references to Edgar Allen Poe and Victor Hugo. How did your interest in these writers' relationship to the uncanny come to be?

I will say is that there is a very strong element of nostalgia—nostalgia for things remembered and sometimes nostalgia for things imagined—in all cultures.

AV: Well, I always wanted to be an English major, but when I was fourteen, I decided I wanted to be an architect; I didn't have any idea what that meant, but I knew that architecture had history in it because I lived in England in a small town around lots of villages with old churches. I had a bicycle, so I would go to these old churches, and I would sketch them and draw them. I was a really weird fourteen-year-old! [laughter] I would look at the tombs which were engraved in brass, and I would make rubbings and stuff like that. I would read, and I would write poetry and little short stories. My first book was about the history of a local church, which I bound. The poetry I destroyed. [laughter] I've always thought that architecture was something that brought everything in. I could write about it. I could read about it. When I read a novel, the writers are evoking spaces. When I read philosophy, the philosophers are using architectural analogies to get you to understand the construction of their thought. Especially Kant. Which is why he was so popular among art historians, architects, and musicians in the later nineteenth century. I take everything in because I cannot *not*. For me it's all architecture. It's not literature. It's not music. It's not theater. Everything is architecture. Architecture is social, political, and environmental; it's the way we express ourselves *in* space and the way writers expresses themselves *about* space—about the world we live in. So I find that writers have been very powerful keys to how a culture is thinking, how architecture was viewed at that moment—especially writers that were popular in their own time.

When Victor Hugo writes about Gothic architecture in the 1830s and '40s there's a big struggle to make Gothic architecture an object of interest, an object of historical preservation, for instance. So I read them historically, but I also read them with great pleasure. But it's all architecture to me. Hegel was a fabulous architect. There are two reasons I read *Hegel's Aesthetics*: First, because in his descriptions of architecture and the aesthetics of architecture he invents whole spatial constructions of buildings which then actually affect architects of the next generations. Second, because it helps me go to sleep at night: there is a point in the two volumes of *Hegel's Aesthetics* that I have never gotten beyond! [laughter]

NR: In the very recent past—the past few days—what things have been exciting you?

AV: Besides having to write a lecture for this evening?

NR: Besides anything that is your "work." As you're sitting in the car looking out the window, what makes you say, "Aha!"?

I have very rarely heard an architect testify as a public representative, against or for major developments in cities.

AV: Well, I have had progressively, I think like many of us—I won't go so far as saying all of us, but *many* of us—have had over the past week a sense of *I can't believe it!* Well, maybe I can believe it. Maybe I don't have to be as worried and as terrified as I was before. Maybe I can say that at least we've come so far as the results of the last election. And if we can do it in politics, we can do it in architecture. We can do it in terms of opening up architecture to a much wider and diverse population of designers, architects, and engineers in all genders and all ethnicities. I think we can do it by opening up architecture to a much broader public and allowing the public to understand

what it is we do and listen to what they say and engage in a much bigger debate. I think that—and this is my real message today—for such a long time architects have been so concerned with getting jobs and maintaining offices that they will do anything for almost any client. I think architects, as Vitruvius said, should be like doctors. Doctors have a Hippocratic Oath, and (unless they're being paid by drug companies) they have no fear of going out and warning people. There are doctors who testify to the health dangers of certain things, to the positive virtues of certain things. I have very rarely heard an architect testify in public, as a public representative, against or for major developments in cities. I think architects are citizens as well as designers. And *because* we think holistically about the consequences of what we do, we have a duty—an ethical and political duty—to testify, to be public and civic testifiers like doctors and scientists. We have to be able to warn against the dangers of development just as we ask our scientists to warn against the dangers of environmental depredation or nuclear fission. It might not help, but at least we've done our duty.

Because we think holistically about the consequences of what we do, we have an ethical and political duty to testify.

AL: Doctors are testifying about something objective. Are you advocating for objectivity in architecture? Or a moral standard?

AV: We had a big debate the other day at Cooper Union with a doctor who's analyzing the causes of Alzheimer's. They know what Alzheimer's is, and they know what happens to the proteins in the brain when Alzheimer's occurs, but they don't quite know the processes by which the proteins get there and cause plaque, and they don't quite know what kinds of drugs will buffer or mediate those processes. So you can't say with objectivity that you can take drug X and it will be good for you or that you can take a certain

route and it will be good to you. But he said that, in the end, you can't say with objectivity even what constitutes a healthy lifestyle: You take exercise, you deal with your heart, and you have a healthy diet, but you can't say with objectivity for every single person what a healthy diet would be even if *in general* you know that it's fruit and vegetables and not too much fat or whatever. So I'm not asking architects to be objective because I think everything is relative to a particular community, to a particular locality, to a particular historical condition, to a particular environmental condition. I'm asking architects to be able to speak on behalf of the receivers of architecture in the kinds of public hearings that always occur whenever large-scale developments are proposed for a particular area. We've seen the rather terrifying results of large-scale developments in the center of cities in the '60s and '70s, and we are seeing those developments occur all across the developing world right now, and we are threatened. Although this economic downturn has, fortunately, blocked a lot of major developments, we're still being threatened (and will be more so when the upturn comes) with large-scale developments that will determine the future of one part of the city or another. I'm simply asking for the architect to be a specialist and say, "You know, this development is going to have an effect on the groundwater," or, "This development is going to have this effect." For example, ethanol is "good," right? Natural gas is "good," right? We've all heard that natural gas is "good." So what do we do with a corporation who then says, "We'll drill 10,000-foot-deep wells all through this area, and we'll pump water—not totally toxic water, but water with some chemicals in it—down in there to push up the natural gas. All right? We have to dispose of this water somehow anyway. And it *probably* won't go into the water system. We'll just make big pools with plastic lining. The plastic lining *probably* won't break. And we'll move it in big water trucks, which *probably* won't crash." And all of this on top of the *expected* ruination caused by the roads

and pumping stations. That's a problem, but the environmental scientists and ecologists are standing up to that, right? I think we, as architects, should be interested in saying, "You know, this development is going to raise the carbon footprint of that particular area of that city and what are you doing to mitigate that? And how is it that your 'green building' being beautifully designed by a major-name architect is completely unbalancing the ecological nature of the region or the traffic circulation or forcing out a particular segment of the lower-middle class population because you're forcing out small businesses." We have to be experts in our field, and not simply servants. We have to be brave enough. I think there *are* careers to be had as the Ralph Naders of architecture. "Yes we can!"