How Buildings Mean

Nelson Goodman

Arthur Schopenhauer ranked the several arts in a hierarchy, with literary and dramatic arts at the top, music soaring in a separate even higher heaven, and architecture sinking to the ground under the weight of beams and bricks and mortar.[1] The governing principle seems to be some measure of spirituality, with architecture ranking lowest by vice of being grossly material.

Nowadays such rankings are taken less seriously. Traditional ideologies and mythologies of the arts are undergoing deconstruction and disvaluation, making way for a neutral comparative study that can reveal a good deal not only about relations among the several arts[2] but also about the kinships and contrasts between the arts, the sciences, and other ways that symbols of various kinds participate in the advancement of the understanding.

In comparing architecture with the other arts, what may first strike us, despite Schopenhauer, is a close affinity with music: architectural and musical works, unlike paintings or plays or novels, are seldom descriptive or representational. With some interesting exceptions, architectural works do not denote—that is, do not describe, recount, depict, or portray. They mean, if at all, in other ways.

On the other hand, an architectural work contrasts with other works of art in scale. A building or park or city[3] is not only bigger spatially and temporally than a musical performance or painting—it is bigger even

Laurie Olin and John Whiteman have given me valuable help with the literature of architecture.

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than we are. We cannot take it all in from a single point of view; we must move around and within it to grasp the whole. Moreover, the architectural work is normally fixed in place. Unlike a painting that may be reframed and rehung or a concerto that may be heard in different halls, the architectural work is firmly set in a physical and cultural environment that alters slowly.

Finally, in architecture as in few other arts, a work usually has a practical function, such as protecting and facilitating certain activities, that is no less important than and often dominates its aesthetic function. The relationship between these two functions ranges from independence to mutual reinforcement and to outright contention, and can be highly complex.

Before considering some consequences of and questions raised by these characteristics of architecture, perhaps we should ask what a work of architectural art is. Plainly, not all buildings are works of art, and what makes the difference is not merit. The question "What is art?" must not be confused with the question "What is good art?" for most works of art are bad. Nor does being a work of art depend upon the maker's or anyone else's intentions but rather upon how the object in question functions. A building is a work of art only insofar as it signifies, means, refers, symbolizes in some way. That may seem less than obvious, for the sheer bulk of an architectural work and its daily dedication to a practical purpose often tend to obscure its symbolic function. Moreover, some formalist writers preach that pure art must be free of all symbolism, must exist and be looked upon solely in and for itself, and that any reference beyond it amounts virtually to pollution. But this contention, as we shall see, rests upon a cramped conception of reference.

Of course, not all symbolic functioning is aesthetic. A scientific treatise signifies abundantly but is not thereby a work of literary art; a painted sign giving directions is not thereby a work of pictorial art. And a building may mean in ways unrelated to being an architectural work—may become through association a symbol for sanctuary, or for a reign of terror, or for graft. Without attempting to characterize in general the features of symbolic function that distinguish works of art, we can proceed to look at some pertinent ways that architectural works as such symbolize.

Nelson Goodman, emeritus professor of philosophy at Harvard University, is the author of, among other works, *The Structure of Appearance, Languages of Art, Ways of Worldmaking,* and *Of Mind and Other Matters.* His previous contributions to *Critical Inquiry* are "The Status of Style" (June 1975), "Metaphor as Moonlighting" (Autumn 1979), "Twisted Tales; or, Story, Study, and Symphony" (Autumn 1980), "The Telling and the Told" (Summer 1981), and "Routes of Reference" (Autumn 1981).

I am neither an architect nor a historian or critic of architecture. My undertaking here is not to evaluate works or to provide canons for evaluation or even to say what is meant by particular works of architecture but rather to consider how such works may mean, how we determine what they mean, how they work, and why it matters.

The vocabulary of reference and related terms is vast: within a few brief passages from a couple of essays on architecture, we may read of buildings that allude, express, evoke, invoke, comment, quote; that are syntactical, literal, metaphorical, dialectical; that are ambiguous or even contradictory! All these terms, and many more, have to do in one way or another with reference and may help us to grasp what a building means. Here I want to outline some distinctions and interrelations among such terms.[4] To begin with, the varieties of reference may be grouped under four headings: "denotation", "exemplification", "expression", and "mediated reference".

Denotation includes naming, predication, narration, description, exposition, and also portrayal and all pictorial representation—indeed any labeling, any application of a symbol of any kind to an object, event, or other instance of it. "Berlin" and a certain postcard both denote Berlin, and so does "city" even though this word denotes other places as well. "Word" denotes many things, including itself.

Buildings are not texts or pictures and usually do not describe or depict. Yet representation does occur in salient ways in some architectural works, notably in Byzantine churches with mosaic-covered interiors and in Romanesque facades that consist almost entirely of sculpture. Perhaps even in such cases, we are inclined to say that prominent *parts* of the building represent rather than that the building itself or as a whole represents. As buildings that themselves depict we may first think of shops that represent a peanut or an ice-cream cone or a hot dog, but not all cases are so banal. Jørn Utzon's Opera House (1973) in Sydney is almost as literal a depiction of sailboats, though with a primary concern for form (fig. 1). In Arland Dirlam's First Baptist Church (1964) in Gloucester, Massachusetts, a traditional peaked roof is modified and accentuated enough to reflect the forms of sailboats seen as we approach from the east; and the frame of the nave, made of curved wood beams, is an inverted image of the skeletons of fishing boats often seen under construction in nearby Essex. Again, the weird towers of Antoní Gaudi's church of the Sagrada Familia, in Barcelona, are revealed as startling representations when we come upon the tapering conical mountains a few miles away at Montserrat.

Yet since few architectural works depict either as wholes or in part, directly or indirectly, architecture never had to undergo the trauma brought on by the advent of modern abstractionism in painting. In painting, where representation was customary, the absence of representation sometimes left a sense of deprivation and gave rise to both acrid accusations

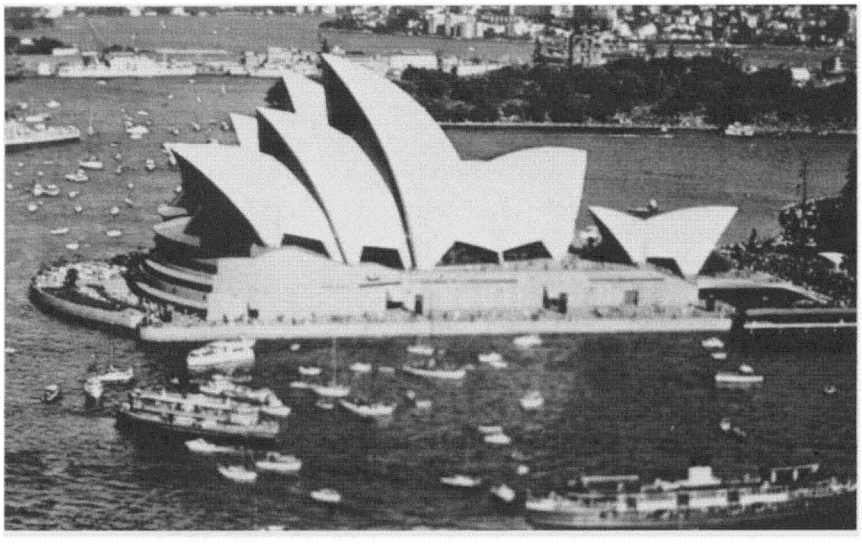

FIG. 1.—Jørn Utzon, Opera House, Sydney, 1973.

and defiant defenses of meaninglessness; but where representation is not expected, we readily focus upon other kinds of reference. These are no less important in painting or literature—indeed, their presence is a major feature distinguishing literary from nonliterary texts—but they are there often somewhat obscured by our concern with what is depicted or described or recounted.

Whether or not a building represents anything, it may exemplify or express certain properties. Such reference runs not, as does denotation, from symbol to what it applies to as label but in the opposite direction, from symbol to certain labels that apply to it or to properties possessed by it.[5] A commonplace case is a swatch of yellow plaid woolen serving as a sample. The swatch refers not to anything it pictures or describes or otherwise denotes but to its properties of being yellow, plaid, and woolen, or to the words "yellow", "plaid", and "woolen" that denote it. But it does not so exemplify all its properties nor all labels applying to it—not, for instance, its size or shape. The lady who ordered dress material 'exactly like the sample' did not want it in two-inch-square pieces with zigzag edges.

Exemplification is one of the major ways that architectural works mean. In formalist architecture it may take precedence over all other ways. For instance, according to William H. Jordy, "the Dutch architect Gerrit Rietveld . . . fragmented architecture into primal linear elements (columns, beams, and framing elements for openings) and planes (wall increments) in order to make visible the 'build' of the building".[6] That is, the building is designed to refer explicitly to certain properties of its

structure. In other buildings made of columns, beams, frames, and walls, the structure is not thus exemplified at all, serving only practical and perhaps also other symbolic functions. But exemplification of structure may accompany, and either take precedence over or be subordinate to, other ways of meaning. For instance, reference to structure is not the primary symbolic function of a church but may play a notable supporting role. Of the Vierzehnheiligen pilgrimage church near Bamberg, Christian Norberg-Schulz writes:

> Analysis shows that two systems have been combined in the layout [fig. 2]: a biaxial organism . . . and a conventional Latin cross. As the centre of the biaxial layout does not coincide with the crossing, an exceptionally strong syncopation results. Over the crossing, where traditionally the centre of the church ought to be, the vault is eaten away by the four adjacent baldachins. The space defined by the groundplan is thereby transposed relative to space defined by the vault and the resulting syncopated interpenetration implies a spatial integration more intimate than ever before in the history of architecture. This dynamic and ambiguous system of main spaces is surrounded by a secondary, outer zone, derived from the traditional aisles of the basilica.[7]

The shape of the church might have been as correctly described in many alternative ways—the ground plan as a highly complex polygon, and so on. But, induced by the greater familiarity of oblongs and crosses and by the long preceding history of basilicas and cruciform churches, what comes forth, what is exemplified here, is the structure as derivative from these simpler forms. The vault likewise tells not as a single undulating shell but as a smooth shape interrupted by others. The syncopation and dynamism mentioned depend upon the interrelation not of formal properties that the building merely possesses but of those that it exemplifies.

Not all the properties (or labels) that a building refers to are among those it literally possesses (or that literally apply to it). The vault in the Vierzehnheiligen church is not literally eaten away; the spaces do not actually move; and their organization is not literally but rather metaphorically dynamic. Again, although literally a building blows no brass and beats no drums, some buildings are aptly described as 'jazzy'. A building may express feelings it does not feel, ideas it cannot think or state, activities it cannot perform. That the ascription of certain properties to a building in such cases is metaphorical does not amount merely to its being literally false, for metaphorical truth is as distinct from metaphorical falsity as is literal truth from literal falsity. A Gothic cathedral that soars and sings does not equally droop and grumble. Although both descriptions are literally false, the former but not the latter is metaphorically true.

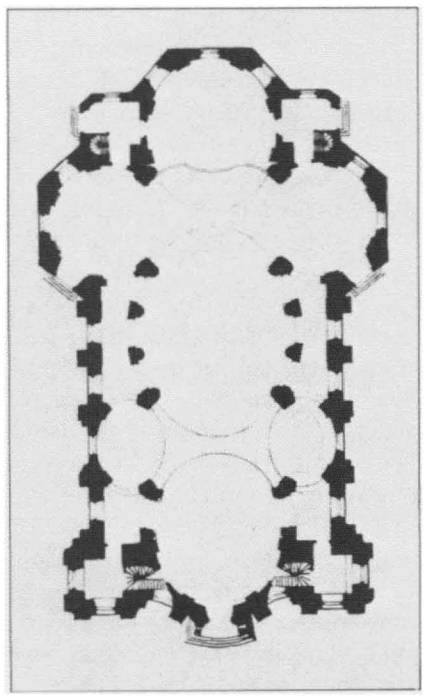

FIG. 2.—Balthasar Neumann, ground plan of Vierzehnheiligen pilgrimage church, Bamberg, 1743–72. Mainfränkisches Museum, Würzburg. Phot. Museum.

Reference by a building to properties possessed either literally or metaphorically is exemplification, but exemplification of metaphorically possessed properties is what we more commonly call "expression". To mark the distinction, I ordinarily use "exemplification" as short for "literal exemplification" and reserve "expression" for the metaphorical cases, although in much writing "expression" is used for cases of both sorts. For instance, we often read of a building's 'expressing' its function, but since a factory has the function of manufacturing, its exemplification of that function is of a property literally possessed. Only if the factory were to exemplify the function of, say, marketing, would it in my terminology be expressing a function. But distinguishing between exemplification and expression is less important than recognizing literal exemplification as an important variety of reference, especially in architecture. A purely formal building that neither depicts anything nor expresses any feelings or ideas is sometimes held not to function as a symbol at all. Actually, it exemplifies certain of its properties, and only so distinguishes itself from buildings that are not works of art at all.

I stress the role of exemplification, for it is often overlooked or even denied by writers who insist that the supreme virtue of a purely abstract painting or a purely formal architectural work lies in its freedom from all reference to anything else. But such a work is not an inert unmeaning object, nor does it refer solely (if at all) to itself. Like the swatch of cloth, it picks out, points to, *refers to* some of its properties but not others. And most of these exemplified properties are also properties of other things which are thus associated with, and may be indirectly referred to by, the work.

An architectural work may of course both literally exemplify some properties and express others. Of the facade of San Miniato al Monte outside Florence, Rudolph Arnheim writes that it "expresses its character as a self-contained object dependent on . . . the earth; but it also symbolizes the human mind's struggle for maintaining its own centered integrity against the interference by outer powers".[8] In my vocabulary, the facade *exemplifies* the first (literal) property and *expresses* the second (metaphorical) one.

Representation, exemplification, and expression are elementary varieties of symbolization, but reference by a building to abstruse or complicated ideas sometimes runs along more devious paths, along homogeneous or heterogeneous chains of elementary referential links. For instance, if a church represents sailboats, sailboats exemplify freedom from earth, and freedom from earth in turn exemplifies spirituality, then the church refers to spirituality via a three-link chain. Parts of a Michael Graves building may exemplify keystonelike and other forms depicted or exemplified by Egyptian or Greek architecture and, thus, indirectly refer to such buildings and in turn to properties these exemplify and express.[9] Such indirect or mediate reference is often appropriately termed "allusion", as when 'The Five' architects are described as making "allusions to ancient and Renaissance classicism" and as being "attracted by Le Corbusier's witty introduction of collage allusion into his buildings".[10] And when Robert Venturi writes of 'contradiction' in architecture, he is not supposing that a building can actually assert a self-contradictory sentence but is speaking of exemplification by a building of forms that give rise when juxtaposed, because they are also severally exemplified in architecture of contrasting kinds (for example, classical and baroque), to expectations that contravene each other.[11] The 'contradiction' thus arises from indirect reference.

Not all chains consisting of referential links conduct reference from one end to the other. The name of the name of the rose is not the name of the rose; and "Gaudí's famous church in Barcelona" refers to a certain building but not to the mountains that that building refers to. On the other hand, a symbol that refers via a chain may also refer directly to the same thing; and sometimes where reference via a given chain becomes common, shortcircuiting occurs. For instance, if a building alludes to

Greek temples that in turn exemplify classical proportions that it does not itself possess, it may come to express these proportions directly. Moreover, reference by a work via a chain is seldom unique; a building may reach symbolically to the same referent along several routes. The reader will find his own examples.

Sometimes other relationships a building may stand in—for instance, to effects or causes of it—are mistaken for reference. What an architectural work means cannot in general be identified either with thoughts it inspires and feelings it arouses or with circumstances responsible for its existence or design. Although "evocation" is sometimes used almost interchangeably with "allusion" or "expression", it should be distinguished from them; for while some works allude to or express feelings they evoke, not all do. A building of an earlier era does not always express the nostalgia it evokes, nor does a skyscraper in a New England town always refer to the fury, however widespread and lasting, it may arouse. Equally, allusion and all other reference must be distinguished from causation. Even if in some cases "an epoch is inscribed in its monuments[, so] architecture is not neutral[;] it expresses political, social, economic, and cultural 'finalities' ",[12] still, an architectural work does not always refer to economic or social or psychological or other factors or ideas that brought about its construction or affected its design.

Even when a building does mean, that may have nothing to do with its architecture. A building of any design may come to stand for some of its causes or effects, or for some historical event that occurred in it or on its site, or for its designated use: any abattoir may symbolize slaughter, and any mausoleum, death; and a costly county courthouse may symbolize extravagance. To mean in such a way is not thereby to function as an architectural work.

So much for some of the ways that architectural works as such do mean and some they do not. But when does a work actually mean as such? Some writing about architecture may give the impression that prose is as prominent an ingredient in architecture as steel and stone and cement. Does a work mean just whatever anyone says it means, or is there a difference between right and wrong statements about how and what it means?

On one view, correct interpretation is unique; there are no alternatives, and rightness is tested by accord with the artist's intentions. Obviously, drastic adjustments in this are needed to accommodate works that fail to realize the artist's intentions or that exceed and diverge from them: not only the road to hell is paved with unfulfilled intentions, and great works are often full of unintended realizations. Moreover, we are seldom utterly at a loss to interpret a prehistoric or other work when virtually nothing is known of the artist or his intentions. But the main fault I find in this view lies in its absolutism rather than in the particular test of rightness specified. A work of art typically means in varied and contrasting

and shifting ways and is open to many equally good and enlightening interpretations.

At the opposite extreme from such absolutism is a radical relativism that takes any interpretation to be as right or wrong as any other. Everything goes if anything does. All interpretations are extraneous to the work, and the critic's function is to strip them off. A work means whatever it may be said to mean—or, in other words, it does not mean at all. No difference between rightness and wrongness of interpretation is recognized. So stated, this view obviously involves a gross oversimplification. More than any other art, architecture makes us aware that interpretation cannot be so easily distinguished from the work. A painting can be presented all at once—though our perception of it involves synthesizing the results of scanning—but a building has to be put together from a heterogeneous assortment of visual and kinesthetic experiences: from views at different distances and angles, from walks through the interior, from climbing stairs and straining necks, from photographs, miniature models, sketches, plans, and from actual use. Such construction of the work as known is itself of the same sort as interpretation and will be affected by our ideas about the building and by what it and its parts mean or are coming to mean. The same altar may be a central pivot or an incidental deviation. A mosque will not have the same structure for a Muslim, a Christian, an atheist. Stripping off or ripping out *all* construals (that is, all interpretation and construction) does not leave a work cleansed of all encrustation but demolishes it.[13]

The resolute deconstructionist will not flinch at this. He will dismiss unconstrued works as will-o'-the-wisps and treat interpretation not as *of* anything but as mere storytelling. He is thus released from any stereotyped conception of a work and from the hampering and hopeless search for the single right interpretation. A heady freedom replaces oppressive obligation. But the freedom is bought at the price of inconsequence. Whatever may be said counts as a right interpretation of any work.

Thus both the absolutist's view that a work is and means what the architect intended, and the extreme relativist's view that a work is and means whatever anyone happens to say, have serious shortcomings. A third view that might be called constructive relativism takes deconstruction to be a prelude to *re*construction and insists on recognition that among the many construals of a work some—even some that conflict with one another—are right while others are wrong. Consideration of what constitutes the difference thus becomes obligatory.

That question cannot be confined to construals of works of art but concerns equally the rightness of works themselves as world construals. And whenever we inquire about such rightness, we are confronting a formidable question that embraces and goes beyond the whole question of truth, for truth pertains to verbal statements only. Obviously, no full and final answer to this question will be forthcoming. Not only is any

search for a ready and conclusive test of rightness (for a key, no less, to all knowledge!) patently absurd, but even a pat and satisfying definition can hardly be expected. The particular determination of which works are right and which wrong is no more the philosopher's responsibility than is the determination of which statements are true in a particular science or of what are the facts of life. Those who are most concerned must apply and constantly develop their own procedures and sensibilities. The philosopher is no expert in all fields or, indeed, in any. His role is to study particular judgments made and general principles proposed on the basis of them and examine how tensions between particular judgments and general principles are resolved—sometimes by altering a principle, sometimes by changing a judgment. All I can offer here are some reflections on the *nature* of rightness and on factors affecting our tentative decisions concerning what versions are right or more nearly right than others.[14]

Judgments of rightness of a building as a work of architecture (of how well it works as a work of art) are often in terms of some sort of good fit—fit of the parts together and of the whole to context and background. What constitutes such fit is not fixed but evolves. As illustrated in the case of 'contradiction' in architecture, drastic changes in standards of fit start from and are effected against some concepts and expectations that give way slowly. *Entrenchment* established by habit is centrally involved in the determination of rightness and is, indeed, the basis that makes innovation possible. In Venturi's words, "Order must exist before it can be broken".[15]

As an example of the judgment of rightness in terms of fit, consider Julia Trilling's discussion of Charles Garnier's Opéra in Paris (fig. 3):

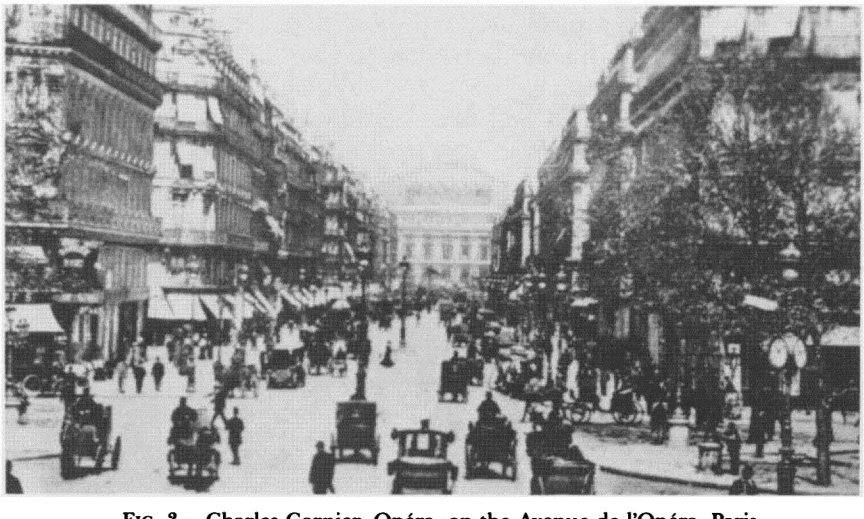

FIG. 3.—Charles Garnier, Opéra, on the Avenue de l'Opéra, Paris.

> Even Haussmann didn't always get the proportions right. The Garnier opera house, while indisputably monumental itself, doesn't really work to complete the Avenue de l'Opéra. It is too wide for its site, spilling over the sides of the frame defined by the buildings adjoining the avenue. In the case of the Place de la Bastille, the correct site for the new opera house would not be the designated one, on the old railway yards, but adjacent to it on the canal that completes Haussmann's Boulevard Richard-Lenoir.[16]

What is being discussed here is not physical fit; there is no complaint of blocked access or light or of intrusion into the public way. The fit in question is of exemplified forms to each other and into the form exemplified by the whole. It thus depends upon what the components and the whole signify in one way or another—in this case, primarily by exemplification. In other cases, fit may depend upon what is expressed or denoted or referred to via complex chains. And I am not suggesting that all rightness is a matter of fit.

To summarize briefly, I have tried to suggest some of the ways buildings may mean and ways that their meaning is involved in factors that affect judgment of their effective functioning as works of art. I have not tried to say how to determine what and how particular buildings mean, for we have no general rules for this any more than for determining what a text means or a drawing depicts; but I have tried to give some examples of the kinds of meaning involved. As for the further question, why it matters how and when a building means, I think that a work of architecture, or any other art, works as such to the extent that it enters into the way we see, feel, perceive, conceive, comprehend in general. A visit to an exhibition of paintings may transform our vision, and I have argued elsewhere that excellence of a work is a matter of enlightenment rather than of pleasure. A building, more than most works, alters our environment physically; but moreover, as a work of art it may, through various avenues of meaning, inform and reorganize our entire experience. Like other works of art—and like scientific theories, too—it can give new insight, advance understanding, participate in our continual remaking of a world.

1. See Bryan Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 176–78.

2. A recent contribution is *Das Laokoon-Projekt,* ed. Gunter Gebauer (Stuttgart, 1984); see esp. Gebauer's own essay, "Symbolstrukturen und die Grenzen der Kunst. Zu Lessings Kritik der Darstellungsfähigkeit künstlerischer Symbole," pp. 137–65.

3. Hereafter, I shall ordinarily use "building" as the generic term for all such cases.

4. For fuller treatment, see Nelson Goodman, "Routes of Reference," *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 55–71, and Catherine Z. Elgin, *With Reference to Reference* (Indianapolis, 1983).

5. I shall speak indifferently of properties or labels as being exemplified. For a discussion of this matter, see Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols,* 2d ed. (Indianapolis, 1976), pp. 54–57.

6. William H. Jordy, "Aedicular Modern: The Architecture of Michael Graves," *New Criterion* 2 (Oct. 1983): 46.

7. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Meaning in Western Architecture* (London, 1975), p. 311.

8. Rudolph Arnheim, "The Symbolism of Centric and Linear Composition," *Perspecta* 20 (1983): 142.

9. Although a link in an ordinary chain is nondirectional, one element in a referential link may refer to but not be referred to by the other. Where one element exemplifies the other, however, reference runs in both directions, for the exemplified element denotes what exemplifies it.

10. Jordy, "Aedicular Modern," p. 45.

11. See Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York, 1966).

12. François Mitterand, quoted in Julia Trilling, "Architecture as Politics," *Atlantic Monthly,* Oct. 1983, p. 35.

13. See Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters,* pp. 33–36.

14. Further discussion may be found in Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, 1978), chap. 7.

15. Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture,* p. 46.

16. Trilling, "Architecture as Politics," pp. 33–34.