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Oppositions Revisited – The Oppositions Reader

Oppositions is »now recognized as the definitive document and source in the emerging theorization of architecture that took place in (America) after 1970« asserts Kevin Lippert in his Preface to the *Oppositions Reader.* This is no mere hubris on the part of the publisher, for *Oppositions* introduced the American architectural public – at least those at the universities – to the tone and quality of the debate fostered under the auspices of the New York *Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies* (IAUS).

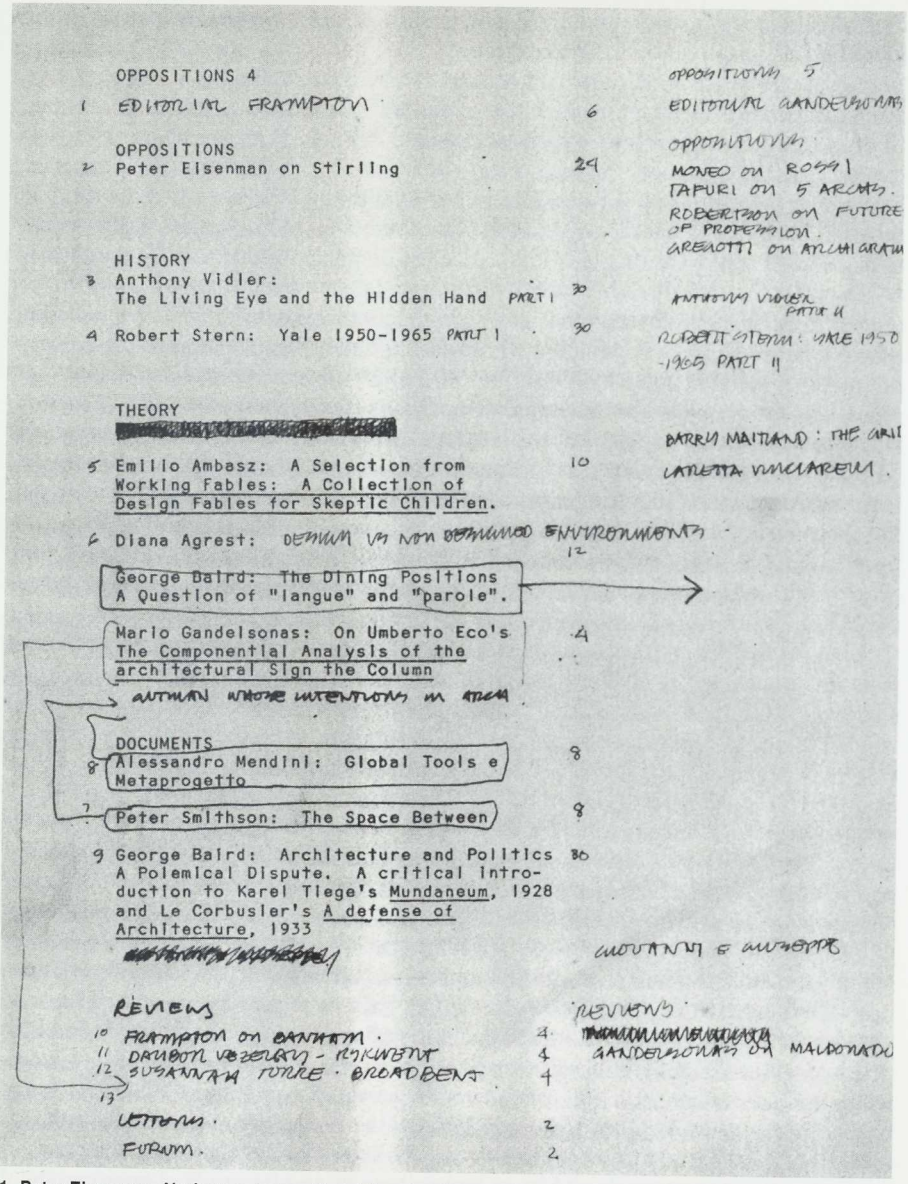
From its inception in 1967 until its untidy demise in the early 1980's, the IAUS provided an intellectually charged environment for the advancement of architectural criticism and theory and *Oppositions* was the organ through which much of this ferment was disseminated. Several of the IAUS »Forums« are documented in the early issues of *Oppositions*, the photographs vividly capturing the protagonists of the 1970's New York architectural milieu ranging from the timeless presence of Philip Johnson to the (then) very young Bernard Tschumi and Rem Koolhaas. If the architects of the »1968« generation were already making themselves known, they were complemented by both the presence of an older generation of scholars such as Vincent Scully and Alan Colquhoun and such committed modernists as Peter Smithson and Richard Meier. Guiding this heterogeneous mix and central to both the IAUS and *Oppositions* were the founding editors Peter Eisenman, Kenneth Frampton and Mario Gondelsonas. With the sixth issue this group expanded to include Anthony Vidler, Kurt W. Forster (as of issue 12) and Diana Agrest (for the final, 26th issue). Although the IAUS published further material including a number of notable exhibition catalogues, *Oppositions*, published from 1973 until 1984, is properly regarded as the institution's legacy to posterity.

Oppositions demanded the interest of not only architects and architectural theorists but also architectural historians, the journal having been organized under headings including those of »History« and »Documents«. »History« featured articles by such respected historians and critics as Joseph Rykwert, Anthony Vidler, Stanford Anderson, Kenneth Frampton, Georges Teyssot, Manfredo Tafuri, Jean-Louis Cohen and Kurt W. Forster. »Documents« featured source material – much of it difficult to find and previously untranslated – and *Oppositions* featured texts by Rudolph Schindler, Adolf Behne, Alois Riegl, Otto Wagner, Bruno Taut, Sergei Eisenstein, Nikolai Punin, Kurt Schwitters, J.J.P. Oud and the *Gruppo Sette.* This organisational structure served to grant the early modernist avant-garde a direct voice in a contemporary publication while contextualising modernist polemics in a manner intended to revitalize contemporary architectural discourse. In the words of the editors, *Oppositions* was »not concerned with presenting current issues in the same manner as the established architectural magazines.«[1] Rather, *Oppositions* sought to »link the present with the past,«[2] to reassess the »past as a means of determining the necessary relationships existing between built form and social values«[3] and to »advance scholarship and thought.«[4] Within this framework the founding editors were committed to exploring the »aspect which precede(s) any built work – the ideas which inform any architecture«[5] and to stimulating a debate exposing the »indivisible ideological and sociopolitical implications of architectural production as a who-

le.«[6] That the editors themselves were of different ideological inclination served to enrich the journal. That they also provoked tensions was anticipated with the first issue: »The opposition alluded to in the title will first and foremost begin at home«[7] wrote the editors.

These ideological oppositions have been succinctly identified by Michael Hays in his brief introduction as editor for the *Oppositions Reader.* As professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, editor of both the journal Assemblage and an important collection of seminal texts entitled *Architecture Theory since 1968*, Hays was an obvious choice to cull articles from the twenty-six issues of *Oppositions* for inclusion in the *Reader.* Indeed, the Publisher notes that, given the differing positions of the original editors, Hays was »one choice on which everyone could agree« and he has balanced positions ranging from Gandelsonas's semiotics to Forster's historical materialism. But in order to truly appreciate the significance of the *Reader*, it is necessary to more fully understand the importance of the original *Oppositions*, for the journal had directed its efforts towards mediating between two greater discursive registers, that is, between the discourse of the avant-garde-which placed itself »in« the stream of history in its commitment to fusing life, art and philosophy into the seamless whole of an unmediated present – and the slower, scholarly discourse associated with architectural history; a discourse wishing to assert an »objective« and critical distance from the flow of architectural production. Contemporary architectural theory mediates between these two poles and the original editors insisted that »whatever our differences, *Oppositions* continues [...] to assert our belief in the importance of theory as the critical basis of significant practice.«[8]

Hays has written that »since 1968 ›architecture theory‹ has all but subsumed ›architecture culture‹, for the prevailing sentiment in these years has been that cultural production in the traditional sense [...] can no longer be expected to rise spontaneously, as a matter of social course, but must now be constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed through more self-conscious theoretical procedures.«[9] Although Hays does not explicitly link this claim to Eisenman's formation of the IAUS, a correspondence with the trajectory of *Oppositions* can be inferred. Eisenman himself had returned to America from England in the early 1960's, having completed his Ph.D. at the University of Cambridge, where he had also been exposed to Colin Rowe.[10] Lamenting that America had never produced a polemical modern architecture, Eisenman organised the first of a series of CASE meetings. CASE, an acronym for the *Conference of Architects for the Study of the Environment*, was intended as a sequel to the better-known CIAM. It is to these meetings, based largely in Princeton, that Eisenman invited such luminaries as Scully, Anderson, Rowe and Henry Millon. He also brought Vidler, a young historian and student of his at Cambridge, and Frampton, then Technical Director at *Architectural Design.* It was Eisenman's intention that Frampton promote the objectives of the group; furthering a new polemical American architecture much as Sigfried Giedion had done for European architecture a few decades earlier and similar to Scully's then current involvement with the Philadelphia School. Frampton declined this role, but the interest in founding a publication remained. Eisenman eventually left for New York, where he was supported by Arthur Drexler, Director of the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art. The IAUS ultimately replaced the CASE group, but a CASE meeting took place at the invitation of the Museum of Modern Art as late as 1969.



1 Peter Eisenman, Notizen auf einer Redaktionskonferenz, die Inhalte von Oppositions 4 und 5 betreffend

Out of this meeting came the 1972 publication *Five Architects*[11] which Hays has identified as a »prequel« to *Oppositions*.

Not unexpectedly *Five Architects* featured an introduction by Colin Rowe and a central essay by Frampton. The white, square cover was not unlike Eisenman's first designs for *Oppositions*, which he intended to be gray. It may be that this association alluded to the ongoing architectural debate between the »white« rigorists and the »gray« inclusivists, but it was Massimo Vignelli, the Milanese graphic designer based in New York, who convinced the other editors to adopt the glossy »revolutionary« orange-red cover that was to become the distinctive trademark of the journal. In his preface to the *Five Architects* Drexler noted that »an alternative to political romance is to be an architect,« that these architects (Eisenman included) »picked up where the thirties left off, pursuing what was implied before an architecture of rational poetry was interrupted by World War II and its subsequent mood of disenchantment, restlessness and resentment.« *Oppositions* clearly played on an association with the optimistic architectural publications of the early modernists. However, the editors were cautious about overly stressing these associations, writing that »*Oppositions* presents itself in a similar vein to the so-called ›little magazines‹ of the twenties and thirties, and this is scarcely an accident since the editors continue to be admirers of such polemical journals as *De Stijl* and *L'Esprit Nouveau.* [However] the time for this kind of polemical discourse has passed and we have no interest in resurrecting it.«[12]

In »Resurrecting the Avant-Garde: The History and Program of *Oppositions*« Joan Ockman[13] writes that the inspiration for Eisenman were indeed the journals *Casabella* and, most particularly, the didactic *L'Architecture vivante*. Eisenman, intrigued by polemics, was also fascinated with semantic play and extending this interest to the cover of the journal itself. Ockman's insightful essay – unfortunately not reprinted in the *Reader* - elaborates on the »p« in »*Oppositions*,« the first one of which was left as an empty outline on the initial issues. Eisenman wished for the title to suggest both »position« and »opposition« as well as »0« positions. The latter was a further play on both Eisenman's interest in semiotics (Roland Barth's *Writing: Degree-Zero*) and in his identification with the European Avant-Garde and its return to »origins« or new beginnings. By the third issue Vignelli had convinced the other editors to abandon this game; the »p« appearing as solid for the remaining issues.

Thus began this »little magazine.« The first twenty-four issues were graced with rather luxurious gatefolds that listed the various corporate, institutional and individual sponsors of the journal. More than merely a roster of distinguished architects, the lists of sponsors indicate the enthusiastic dissemination of the discourse engendered by the IAUS beyond New York and the Ivy League Schools into such far reaches of North America as Manitoba and Montana. Published during the years of the first major energy crisis and in an atmosphere of an often radical environmental awareness it is also of note that, avant-gardist aspirations and Marxist inclinations aside, *Oppositions* secured the sponsorship of several major oil corporations. This attests not only to Eisenman's consummate abilities as impresario but also to an inherent pragmatism underlying much American cultural production, including the production of architectural theory. So too the journal accommodated the wishes of booksellers for illustrated covers in order to easily distinguish between issues. Ironically, the first to be emblazoned on the »revolutionary« orange-red of the journal

was the plan of that great symbol of the nineteenth century urban bourgeoisie: Charles Garnier's Opera.

This issue, the eighth, followed the MoMA exhibition of the »Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts« held at the end of 1975 which, due to the sheer visual power of the exhibited drawings, had a marked influence on the stylistic gymnastics of postmodernism. Here too *Oppositions* sought to mediate the simplistic negation of modernism that postmodernism purported to offer. Under the editorial guidance of Vidler, who noted that the exhibition »emerged in fact as the Museum of Modern Art's auto-critical act, exorcising in 1977 the Modern Movement principles it so heartily embraced in 1932,«[14] *Oppositions* asserted that the »attempt to counter modernism by resurrecting its longstanding opponent seems merely to repeat, or at least to be blinded by, a similar historical mythology. [...] A truly critical history of the modern period must be more than such a neat reversal.«[15] It was this interest in developing a »critical history« with the »hope to encourage the investigation of the recent past as an instrument for the analysis and criticism of the present«[16] that attracted the journal's many readers, serving to reintroduce architects in the Anglo-Saxon countries to the scope and depth of history both as fact and as a means by which they could better understand their own historical position.

If the initial modernist rupture with history occurred in Europe, then much of the interpretive apparatti employed as critical probes and sutures employed to staunch the bleeding were also imported from Europe. The pages of the journal are laced with often heavy doses of Marxism, phenomenology, psychology, structuralism and semiotics and while this tended to make some of the discussions abstruse, it is indicative of the rich swirl of European discourse that was brought to bear on the American architectural scene. All of this had a tremendous impact on academic discourse, encouraging architectural students (and their professors) to engage texts by the likes of Barthes, Heidegger, Benjamin and Adorno. And although *Oppositions* ended its publishing run prior to the influx of the post-structuralist discourse concerned with relationships of power and knowledge, gender and boundary as well as institutional formation and deconstruction, it did further serve to prepare the ground for the assimilation of these strands of critical thought into American architectural discourse.

By the late 1980's these developments had the cumulative effect of establishing critical history and architectural theory at not only the better-known American universities, but several other excellent schools not generally known in Europe. This also helped to underscore a continuing commitment to developing new doctoral programs in these fields. Thus, *Oppositions* was not simply symptomatic of the thrust towards theory, but instrumental in creating both the discourse and a public willing to engage it. There may be an ironic twist to this for, having once positioned itself to mediate between the extremes of an agile, daring and engaged avant-garde and the measured and reserved distance of traditional scholarship, theory itself has today been largely institutionalized. With many of those who had written for *Oppositions* now well established as Chairs, Heads or Deans of various architectural faculties, *Oppositions* can serve a new generation: those historians beginning the task of writing a critical history of the institution of theorizing architecture. Therefore, whether as a compendium of excellent articles on architectural history and theory, as an historical document or as an important instrument through which architectural theory

institutionalised itself, *Oppositions* is clearly, as claimed by the publisher of the *Oppositions Reader*, a »definitive document and source.« Therefore, the correct question to ask is whether the *Reader*, conceived of as the »best articles (...) in a single volume,« does this rich and varied legacy proper justice.

To anyone having long perused bookstores for a stray copy of the long out-of-print originals, seeing the bright orange-red cover of the *Reader* comes as a welcome surprise. Nonetheless, if one were to make a few judgments of the *Reader's* cover, it is necessary to note that – having made this understandable decision – the publisher should have remained more fully faithful to the original. Though the format is identical to the original and Eisenman's outline »p« has reclaimed its position on the cover, both the high gloss finish and the gatefolds are absent. The *Reader* therefore appears closest to the last two issues – those published by Rizzolli – and is unfortunately reminiscent of the journal in its late decline. Also not included anywhere in the *Reader* are the names of the many sponsors; perhaps a minor point but an aspect of the original publication that might well have interested new readers.

Sliding between the covers, one notes that the structure of *Oppositions* itself was utilised to organise the edited contents and follow the sequence of Editorials, Oppositions, Theory, History, Documents, Reviews and Forum. A small inconsistency might be noted here, for though the outline »p« of the cover denotes the first two issues, the sequence of the contents is that which was adopted only with the ninth issue when the editors »felt the need to re-assess its initial aims and format.«[17] With this issue the editors underscored the »close relation between ›oppositions‹ – the critical practice of architecture – and ›theory‹« and placed the headings in that order, thus positioning »history« directly adjacent to »documents.« Whatever the merits of this detail, it was important enough to the original editors to explicate and it would have been helpful to have noted this shift in the *Reader*.

Two other points of criticism need to be mentioned. The »Letters« section has been entirely omitted without comment. Though the letters were not many, some did respond to a number of the reprinted articles and others were often witty or biting and helped to locate the discourse in a larger context. Thus we miss the chance of hearing James Stirling's wry reference to himself as an »oldy out of touch with the scene« (issue 5), Al Carciofi's marvellous send-up of the Long Island »whites, grays and ducks« (issue 7), or the thoughtful responses to published articles by such individuals as Rosemarie Haag Bletter and Mary McLeod (issue 13). Also, although a listing of the original contents is to be found in the last pages of the Reader, the listing is slightly inconsistent: sometimes the books reviewed in the Review section are listed, sometimes not. Apparently, these contents were simply scanned from the original issues – which were also inconsistent – and theefore a number of valuable reviews including Yves-Alain Bois's discussion of Manfredo Tafuri's *Théories et histoire de l'architecture* (issue 11) and fully six reviews by Kenneth Frampton (ranging from books on Alvar Aalto to Max Bill) have not been listed.

These are all relatively minor points compared to the substance of the volume and Hays has admirably culled nearly 700 pages of valuable material for inclusion in the *Reader*. There were certainly difficult decisions to make and, of the original twenty-six issues published, numbers 10, 11, 12, 22 and 26 are not represented. What is represented is a valuable cross-section of the wide-ranging debate that developed over a decade during which architecture and the manner in which it is under-

stood underwent a monumental change. Each of the editors are represented by an editorial and one major essay. Other essays include those by Stanford Anderson on Peter Behrens, Giorgio Grassi on the Avant-Garde, Mary Mcleod on Le Corbusier, Giorgio Ciucci on the Modern Movement, Jorge Silvetti on the Beauty of Shadows, Bernard Tschumi on Architecture and Transgression and Manfredo Tafuri on L'Architecture dans le Boudoir. Hays has also introduced the various sections with archival »illustrations«: editorial notes from Eisenman, a mock-up for the first cover, promotional material and the like. These tidbits, provocative and enticing, mark the need to write what the publisher has termed the »yet-unwritten history of the Institute,« while inviting us to take part in the discussion once again. Also noticeable is that Hays himself wishes to engage this debate and a certain partisanship is discernible in his methodological interpretation of the *Oppositions* decade. Hays asserts that »the pages of the journal would become saturated with, conflicted with, and haunted by the presences of Colin Rowe and Manfredo Tafuri – the rock and the hard place, the light and the dark, between which *Oppositions's* discourse was often conducted.«[18] If Colin Rowe had influenced the young Eisenman, then Tafuri is considered as having the next decisive impact. For Hays, the polarity embodied by Rowe and Tafuri were central to the journal, becoming the dominant theme »that gathers up much of the work of the editors and what they published.«[19] In this regard, »opposition« involved the »essential contradiction between architecture's autonomy – its self-organisation into a body of formal elements and operations that separate it from any particular place and time – and its contingency on, even determination by, historical forces beyond its control.«[20]

Cannily, Hays immediately differentiates and qualifies his argument by opening the collection of articles with Frampton's »On Reading Heidegger,« a text expanding the direction Frampton had begun to chart in »Apropos Ulm: Curriculum and Critical Theory« (issue 2). Influenced by the Argentinean Tomás Maldonado (who had taught at Ulm before moving on to Princeton), Frampton's writings for *Oppositions* operate with concerns limited to neither formal autonomy nor historical determinism. Rather, he insists on the importance of both place and the act of »making«-understood in terms of self-determination and not as reductivist formal or technological efficacy-in developing an architecture resistant to the onslaughts of modern consumerism, including the consumption of culture. Frampton's interests would lead him, at the close of the *Oppositions* decade, to his formulation of the concept of Critical Regionalism. For others, a recognition of the importance of place would lead to the critical histories of the geographically oriented Annales School. Together with developments in post-structuralist thought, these too would serve to fold architecture into themes of »subjectivity and gender, power, property and geopolitics«[21] that Hays identifies as the »new textual strategies, based on those forged by *Oppositions*.«[22]

Clearly, *Oppositions* opened an important door for many. If the *Reader* accomplishes a fraction of this, or if it serves to make many now unaware of the legacy of *Oppositions* to take note and return to the original, then the *Reader* will unquestionably be worthy of the original.

Oppositions Reader edited and with an introduction by K. Michael Hays, Princeton Architectural Press, 1998; DM 118 Cloth, DM 78 Paperback

1 Editorial Oppositions 2, Jan. 1974.
2 Editorial; Oppositions 1, Sept. 1973.
3 Editorial; Oppositions 2, Jan. 1974.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Editorial; Oppositions 1, Sept. 1973
8 Editorial; Oppositions 2, Jan. 1974.
9 Hays, Michael K.; Architecture Theory since 1968, (Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Pr. 1998): pp. 10.
10 Rowe had studied architecture at the University of Liverpool and, thereafter, art history under Rudolf Wittkower at the Warburg Institute of London. Later, he was to become the leading »Texas Ranger«, a group of architectural educators that had a great influence through their teaching and writing.
11 This was first published by George Wittenborn, who had fled his native Altona (Hamburg) after the National Socialists came to power. In New York he established a well-known bookstore that served as an informal gathering place for many of those young architects eventually associated with Oppositions. Wittenborn also published Oppositions 4, Oct. 1974. See also Frampton's homage to Wittenborn in Oppositions 4 and Joyce Wittenborn's Letter to the Editor in Oppositions 5, Summer 1976.
12 Editorial; Oppositions 2, Jan. 1974.
13 in: Architectureproduction, ed. by Beatriz Colomina, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Pr, 1988): 180-199.
14 Editorial; Oppositions 8, Spring 1977, cf. Arthur Drexler, The architecture of the Beaux-Arts, (London: Seckler & Warburg, 1977).
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Editorial; Oppositions 9, Summer 1977.
18 Introduction; Oppositions Reader. p. IX.
19 Ibid: p. IX.
20 Ibid: p. IX.
21 Ibid: p. XIV.
22 Ibid: p. XIV.