

PETER EISENMAN AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE THERAPEUTIC

[E]vil and immorality are disappearing...mainly because our culture is changing its definition of human perfection. No longer the Saint, but the instinctual Everyman...is the communal ideal....[N]ever before has there been such a shifting of sides as now among intellectuals...self-considered the cultural elite, [who] have actually become spokesmen for what Freud called the instinctual "mass." By "mass" Freud means those who "have no love for instinctual renunciation." That such large numbers of the cultivated and intelligent have identified themselves deliberately with those who are supposed to have no *love* for instinctual renunciation, suggests the most elaborate act of suicide that western intellectuals have ever staged... [original emphasis]

--Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*

Question Authority? Says who?

--G.K. Picorbo

Peter Eisenman, God bless him, appears to be doing it. "It" is the personal and professional achievement of "between-ness," of concurrently occupying both the center and the edge of late-twentieth-century architectural practice. Long the marginal intellectual *bête noire* of the profession, a self-proclaimed "kinder, gentler" Eisenman is (concurrent with the opening of the Eisenman-designed Ohio State University's Wexner Center for the Visual Arts) emerging center stage in a centrist location near you: domestically, with major new and in-progress works in Ohio and western Pennsylvania; abroad, in Tokyo and (retrospectively and ironically) a reunited Berlin;¹ and in middle-of-the-road publications from *Progressive Architecture* to *Time* to the in-flight magazine of United Airlines.

Eisenman deserves all the hoopla, for two reasons. The first, and least important, is that he relentlessly cultivates media attention, and is now harvesting what he has so carefully and persistently sown. Eisenman himself will claim that the attention he receives is due less to his public relations genius than to the quality and character of his work. And though such a claim would not do justice to Eisenman's gamesmanship and self-promotional skills, it might nevertheless be substantially true---further testimony to Eisenman's professional persona as something *between* a serious architect / intellectual and a charismatic snake-oil peddler.

Much criticism of Eisenman and his work can rightly be attributed to and summarily dismissed as envy of his professional success. But it is the work itself and what it represents---intentionally or otherwise---that warrants critical attention. Eisenman engages in what he calls a "theoretical practice," by which he means an architectural practice from which the built work is to be understood primarily as an expression of certain ideas about architecture. Of course all architecture, even the most ugly or banal, is a consequence of "ideas." What sets Eisenman's work apart is his ideology, most particularly the way he understands and uses "texts" taken from outside the traditional discourse of architecture: from philosophy, literature, and psychoanalysis (e.g., post-structuralism, Shakespeare, ideas about the uncanny and the grotesque), as well as science and mathematics (e.g., in his Frankfurt Bio-Centrum and Pittsburgh Carnegie-Mellon

¹ *Post hoc* note a: This was a 1990 reference to Eisenman's early 1980s "Checkpoint Charlie" housing project in then West Berlin, which was apparently premised upon the permanent division of East and West.

Research Institute projects). Different from one another as they are, these texts are all "dislocating" with respect to architecture. Rather than an architecture self-consciously symbolic of its constructional origins and implicitly symbolic of moral and intellectual virtue (i.e., symbolic of sacred order), these texts result in an architecture intentionally severed from such symbolic associations---an architecture intended to evoke the psychological uneasiness that such dissociations do indeed cause.

Eisenman argues that dislocating texts sever architecture not only from sacred order, but also from a classically presumed relationship to "truthfulness." Architecture *has* traditionally symbolized---by its beauty and durability---truthfulness, in being ultimately symbolic of the presumed reality of sacred order. This reality has its consolations, to be sure, but its demands routinely produce forms of spiritual uneasiness (a.k.a. "conscience") perhaps too easily passed over by those dislocating angels of the modern intellect so eager to save us from our supposedly comfortable and opaque inner lives. Eisenman's own dislocating symbolic is allegedly opposed to the notion of representing truth in architecture. But essential to Eisenman's strategy of the dislocating text is his intended architectural symbolization of the presumed truth of the absence of sacred order---or, to put it another way, the symbolization of the alleged truth of our times, including the notion that "it is no longer possible" to believe in God. However unconventional Eisenman's architecture may be relative to common and traditional (in Eisenman's view hopelessly *retarditaire*) assumptions about the nature and purpose of architecture, architecture for Eisenman is not about promoting radical change. It is rather "merely the carrier of the record of our times...[recording] for history what we have been about." Note, therefore, these paradoxes: that the anti-truth strategy of the dislocating text is in fact serving Eisenman's perception of the truth of our cultural condition; and that Eisenman pursues this strategy faithful and obedient to the imperative that architecture should accurately mirror the age in which it is produced. Philip Rieff has aptly characterized the analytic thrust of Freud's work as being guided by "the ethic of honesty"---a characterization that in an odd, impure, "between" sort of way may also apply to Eisenman's work. But again---and again, paradoxically---ethical imperatives imply that very sacred order that honesty (and, perhaps, fear) presumably compels Eisenman to deny. As Rieff observed more than thirty years ago in *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist*:

Man is a remorseful killer, and religion is the history of his guilt. But why "guilt" at all? The animals feel none. Guilt is incurred by the infraction of a law or principle.... Freud [however] refused to go the one step further, to admit the universal objectivity of guilt. So, too, Otto Rank held that without the repression of the incest urge, civilization was unthinkable. But it did not occur to him to ask why man should have repressed the incest urge. Whatever so evidently tore man out of the context of nature was itself repressed....

---now too by Eisenman, perhaps, as much as Freud or Rank.

To borrow one of Eisenman's own metaphors, I don't play in his sandbox. I follow his work sporadically rather than faithfully, attending to it as the media or other circumstances thrust it upon me. I am therefore not the best person to do encyclopedic and descriptive justice to, or even to write enthusiastically about, his past and present architectural work. But attend to Eisenman's work I do, because it represents in often striking and original ways some of the most significant moral and intellectual trends of late-twentieth-century modern societies. My purpose here, therefore, is not reportorial, but instead analytic: to examine, under the rubric

"therapeutic," Eisenman's repression of the sacred as a constituent element of the metaphysics of architecture.

Culture and the Therapeutic

The term "therapeutic" is Philip Rieff's, developed over the last three decades in *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* (1959), *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966), and *Fellow Teachers: Of Culture and Its Second Death* (1973). It refers to what Rieff sees as the now dominant personality type of modern societies, Psychological Man. The type is intrinsically anti-cultural, in the following sense. Until recently² in the occident, human communities have defined both their purposes and themselves in reference to eternal sacred order. With reference to this order, and the various communities to which it has given rise, the ever-changing human organism in its ever-changing physical and social environment has both defined itself as a self and derived its sense of well-being. Culture is an individual and collective address to sacred order from *within* sacred order, and may be recognized both by the behavior that it sanctions and by the behavior that it prohibits. Books and vows, prayers and parading, law and architecture, music and the sciences, dancing and piety toward parents--all these marks of culture originate as an address to an eternal order that *also* issues forth a variety of "shalt nots," of *things that are not to be done*. Within the constraints afforded by these prohibitions arise both every human creative freedom and every possibility of remission / forgiveness for transgressing the prohibitions. In the absence of such prohibitions, when "God is dead," everything is permitted. Culture, therefore, is the "higher learning," in which, says Rieff, individuals learn "through ritual action to express fixed wants.... The limitation of possibilities is the very design of salvation."

In contrast, the therapeutic is a cultural revolutionary who, unlike preceding revolutionaries, seeks not a new, more correct relationship to sacred order, but rather freedom from sacred order. The salvation of which Rieff speaks, in the old "ladder-language of faith," was a byproduct of the self's commitment to communal purposes defined with reference to sacred order and its demands. In contrast, commitment in therapeutic social order is to the Self--a courtesy title, "self," borrowed from sacred order to describe the therapeutic's never-ending process of mask selection. The therapeutic seeks not salvation, but fulfillment; and since self-fulfillment, the self as project, is the goal rather than a byproduct of communal commitments, any means will do to achieve it--art³, science, even apparent "communal commitments," including religious ones. The wisdom [sic] of therapeutic social order does not reside, writes Rieff

in right doctrine, administered by the right men, who must be found, but rather in doctrines amounting to permission for each man to live an experimental life. [This does not necessarily imply] a "sensualist" culture, but one that prepares for adaptability in

² How recently? The publication dates of his books indicate that Rieff would concur with Tocqueville that "individualism" didn't start with Ronald Reagan.

³ Consider the typically most prominent and expensive buildings in the contemporary cityscape: office buildings, hospital complexes, and art museums, the ersatz sacred precincts of those ideological cousins the Bureaucrat, the Therapist, and the Artist. Observing that modern-day intellectuals spend inordinate time contemplating "the power and perversity of their instincts, disguising their rancorous worship of self in the religion of art," Rieff muses that perhaps "confronted thus with a picture gallery as the new center of self-worship, civilized men must become [temporarily, Bess presumes, until the revival of culture] anti-art, in the hope of shifting attention toward modalities of worship wholly other than that of self."

matters of the "spirit"... Psychological man, in his independence from all gods, can feel free to use all god-terms; I imagine he will be a hedger against his own bets, a user of any faith that lends itself to therapeutic use.

What distinguishes therapeutic social order from traditional culture is, of course, the absence in the former of those "shalt nots" that are the definitive mark of a common life directed toward sacred order. In therapeutic social order, old disciplines may be useful, but there is nothing sacred about them. "There is nothing sacred"---according to Rieff, the last four words of a culture:

The rules of health indicate activity; psychological man can exploit older cultural precepts, ritual struggle no less than play therapy, in order to maintain the dynamism of his culture. Of course, the newest Adam cannot be expected to limit himself to the use of old constraints. If "immoral" materials, rejected under earlier cultural criteria, are therapeutically effective, enhancing somebody's sense of well-being, then they are useful. The "end" or "goal" is to keep going. Americans, as F. Scott Fitzgerald concluded, believe in the green light.

The Architecture of the Therapeutic

Peter Eisenman's architecture embodies in a peculiarly apt and pointed way the spirit of therapeutic social order: the denial that architecture relates in any necessary way to (non-existent) sacred order; the systematic transgression of architecture's symbolic conventions not in service to any professed "higher" vision of architecture, but rather because it both can be done and (in accordance with the allegedly transgressive demands of the present) should be done; the use, in principle, of any handy "text" to demonstrate his theories; and the practice of architecture as self-fulfillment. Note well, however, that Eisenman is not the only but merely the most knowing and articulate theorist and practitioner of "therapeutic architecture," consciously bringing to contemporary architectural sensibility tendencies that Rieff and others would argue have been at work in the larger social and artistic fabric of the west for at least two hundred years. Eisenman's most obvious contemporary [1990] therapeutic companions are his colleagues and adversaries found in the dislocating and *angst*-symbolizing sandbox of deconstruction / deconstructivism. Other companions, perhaps less aware of it but no less therapeutic in intent, are architects and theorists more commonly perceived at odds with Eisenman: vague, more-or-less kindly, non-ideological architectural humanists such as Charles Jencks, Charles Moore, and Robert Stern. Unlike the professional dislocators, the latter are doctrinal about architectural pluralism as a value and end in itself. This understanding of pluralism, however, is the *sine qua non* of Psychological Man; it guarantees him the fullness of means of self-fulfillment, but cannot in principle oppose anything. Charles Jencks's exemplifies this in his recent "Deconstruction: The Pleasures of Absence," an entertaining and informative essay that ultimately concludes that the only thing *really* wrong with "de-con" architecture is that it is insufficiently pluralistic. The professional pluralists---for understandable reasons---love Italy; but may or may not have missed the famous student *graffito* that Rieff observed scrawled on Florence's *Ponte Vecchio*: "*E vietato vietare*," it is forbidden to forbid---the definitive creed of therapeutic social order.⁴

⁴ Note however that pluralism in sacred order, including its prohibitions, is a different kind of pluralism: to wit, the variety of addresses to sacred order. So too is pluralism in the traditional metaphysic of architecture---the variety of ways in which buildings are made durable, efficient, meaningful, and beautiful, consciously located in a hierarchy defined with reference to legitimate authority, i.e., sacred order.

What is objectionable in principle to therapeutic architecture generally, and Peter Eisenman's architecture in particular? After all, Eisenman's new Wexner Center is in many ways a remarkable achievement. Carefully conceived, painstakingly detailed,⁵ perversely pleasurable but hardly in these remissive times shocking, it is both what it houses and what it represents, and rather like its architect: an endless series of performances, but for its ideological intentions virtually impossible not to enjoy. Why not simply enjoy it?

Habituated as we are to evaluate art in terms of virtuosity of technique, and to the cliché that the purpose of art is simply to shock rather than to clarify some aspect of sacred order, it is both tempting and *prima facie* painless to evaluate therapeutic architecture without reference to its larger social and philosophical implications. But the pains are worth taking because, whether done solemnly or (like Eisenman) playfully, the denial of sacred order implicit in therapeutic social order generally, and therapeutic architecture in particular, inevitably results in the reduction of moral and aesthetic judgments to the crudest issues of power. Again, there is more than a little irony in this. The largely victorious battles fought against sacred order by pioneers of modern thought have been understood and represented by the latter as heroic resistance to entrenched power by and / or on behalf of the politically and spiritually disenfranchised; but the victory they claim for the powerless is pyrrhic. Freud and Marx both saw religion---the institutional acknowledgement of sacred order---with tunnel vision, as a sanctifier of existing social orders and existing power relations. But they were only half right. Religion is also the ultimate means by which existing social orders are judged wanting, and thereby resisted, in the name of What is Right. The truth of our time and of any time is that without reference to sacred order and its demands all intellectual criticism, all politics, and all social life---in many ways truly and intrinsically endless power games---are *nothing but* power games. Peter Eisenman presumably understands all this very well; though I suspect that whether he would admit it depends upon the audience to whom he is speaking.

If nothing is sacred, everything is permitted: genocide, murder, abortion, rape, theft, incest, dislocating architecture. Is it "unfair" or "wrong" or "absurd" to group these together? To so object implies sacred order every bit as much as does my identification of these actions as transgressions of sacred order. Objection to these or other transgressions of sacred order may be prompted by a concern that little transgressive habits may lead to bigger ones, and I share these concerns. But I have a larger and different concern: that the denial of sacred order is arguably the biggest transgression, and that this transgression celebrated eventually undermines every small civility. Peter Eisenman, for example, possesses admirable habits of intellectual curiosity and care for craftsmanship; but he is consuming cultural capital that he is not replenishing. There is nothing sacred. Does the reader suppose, however, that Eisenman tolerates sloppy drawings and models from his employees? Bad manners or bad grammar from

⁵ *Post hoc* note b: A reader writes subsequent to the original publication of this essay, and asks whether I have actually seen the Wexner Center, noting in part that "it is remarkably shabby...[and the client] has engaged an architect to try and 'repair' all the damage from poor detailing to the utter frustration of mounting exhibits..." I *have* been to the Wexner Center, but only as it was nearing completion. Nevertheless, I'm not surprised that the Wexner has not held up well; Eisenman's architecture often doesn't, because of his general indifference to durable construction. But "painstakingly detailed" was not intending to predict the Wexner Center's durability, rather to describe Eisenman's excruciating self-imposed necessity to make a building intended to be unique (or to at least represent uniqueness) *in virtually every condition*. At the heart of Eisenman's work is an essential denial of and/or disinterest in the realities of time-tested constructional convention.

his secretaries? Poorly designed books from his publishers, or badly executed buildings from his contractors? Fear for those of Eisenman's students and followers not immediately subject to the power of his inherited *virtues* who take his *theories* too much to heart. Rieff, noting "the irony revealing the truth it would conceal," wryly cites Thomas De Quincey's "On Murder Considered as One of The Fine Arts":

If once a man indulges himself in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing; and from robbing he comes next to drinking and sabbath-breaking, and from that to incivility and procrastination. Once upon this downward path, you never know where to stop. Many a man has dated his ruin from some murder or other that perhaps he thought little of at the time.

Rieff's genius is like Freud's, analytic, totally unsentimental. As uncertain of sacred order as any modern intellectual, Rieff's vocation has been to examine the present and probable consequences of individual and social life lived where nothing is sacred, and he has grown increasingly skeptical of its merits. Though he has the highest regard for Freud's character and intellect, Rieff is less than enthusiastic that psychoanalysis and its successor therapies are leading many in the modern west (including Eisenman) "back to a new Egypt, strangely like a California, of the mind." No prophet himself, Rieff's sympathies lie nearer that earlier pivotal figure, Moses, who put a stop to the golden calf festivities of his day and superintended the organization of those ancient party animals toward sacred and communal purposes. Rieff's recommended prayer for our time, suited especially for artists, scientists, and other intellectuals, is brief: God forbid.

Gilbert Chesterton, asked once whether his longtime friend and intellectual adversary George Bernard Shaw should be viewed as a "coming peril," responded cheerfully, "Heavens no; he's a disappearing pleasure." In contrast, Peter Eisenman, now at the fullness of his artistic powers and professional prestige and moving relentlessly toward the center (which some doubt that anyone can long occupy in therapeutic social order; see, for example, *The Collected Wisdom of A. Warhol*), shows no imminent signs of disappearing. Whether his future is our collective architectural peril remains to be seen. Ambiguity is Eisenman's big intellectual game; played too hard, says Rieff, "that game builds bad character." One predicts at one's own peril, however, just what Eisenman will do next. There is a world full of unlikely texts waiting to be employed, perhaps even the joys and terrors of unrepressed sacred order---in which case, of course, the Text would employ Eisenman. Whatever he does, however, he will have his reward, so God bless him. As for me and all my fellow backsliders in that order which is nothing if not sacred, currently marooned in therapeutic social order and infected with it as surely as Eisenman is dimly guided by a concern for truth, God help us, everyone.

An earlier version of this essay first appeared in the May 1990 issue of *Inland Architect*.