

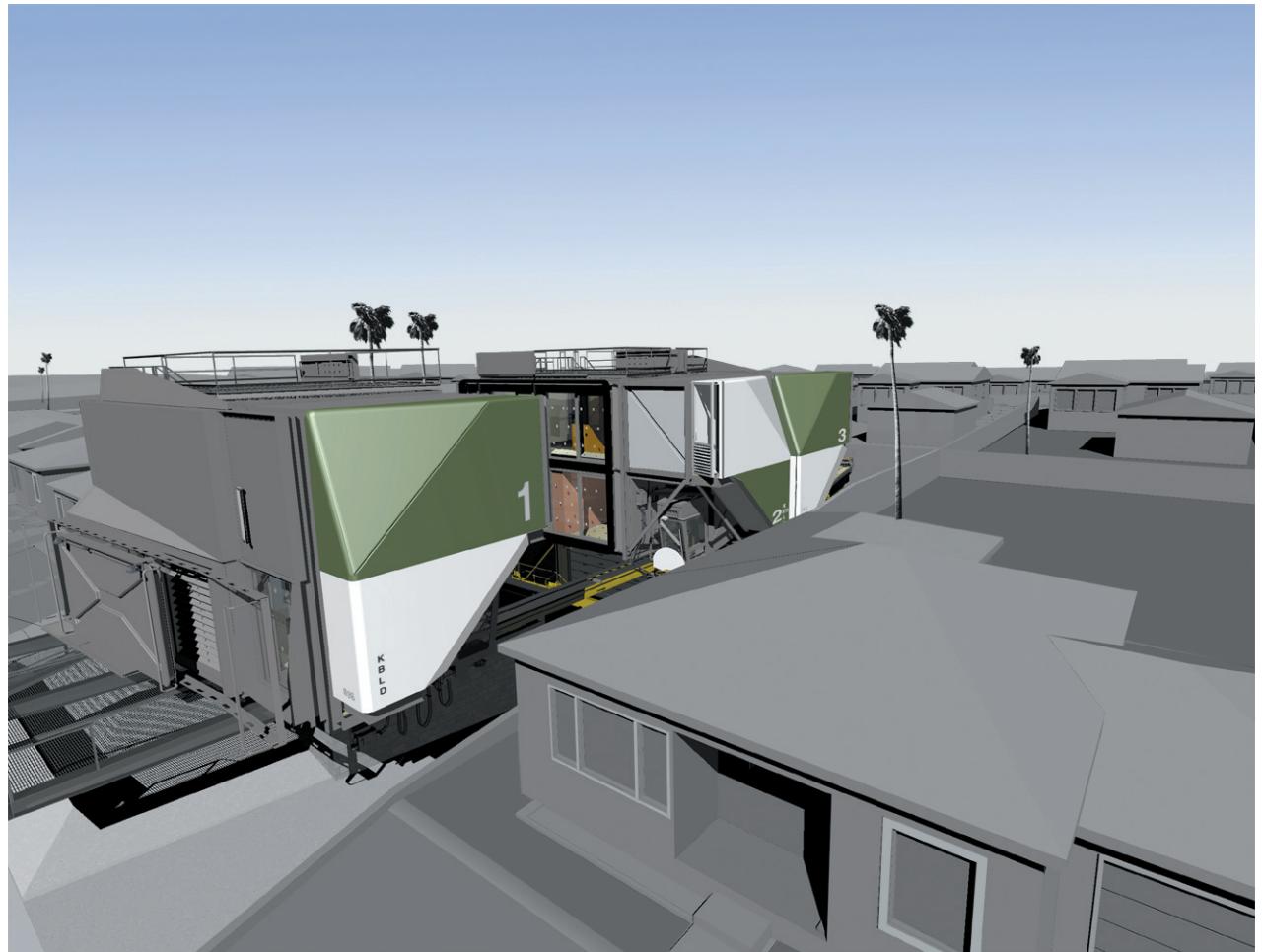
Stillness

Wes Jones

I. Moving Architecture—is this an oxymoron or a tautology? Read one way it names a contradiction, read the other way it states a trivial redundancy—for architecture is that which always stays still, but a building is only architecture when it is moving. Architecture is invested in fixity and stillness, and this moves us.

At its most general, “architecture” is that which is fixed, in the sense of being located (space), and in being decided (time). From this localized determination proceeds a quality of stability, and then dependability: at its most general, architecture names the framework or structure (space) that secures (time) the relationships of the other terms in a discourse (the architecture of meaning is language). We refer to something as architectural, or an architecture (computer architecture, for example) to describe its assured invariance along these axes. The difference between an architecture and a mere organization or diagram is a stateliness that expresses architecture’s embodiment of authority. An organization or diagram becomes an architecture when it has been dignified by a perseverance that itself has been ratified by a proven generative capacity.

More specifically, architecture provides the datum upon which history depends for the (seeming) decisiveness of its relations, and the framework that stabilizes philosophical understanding;



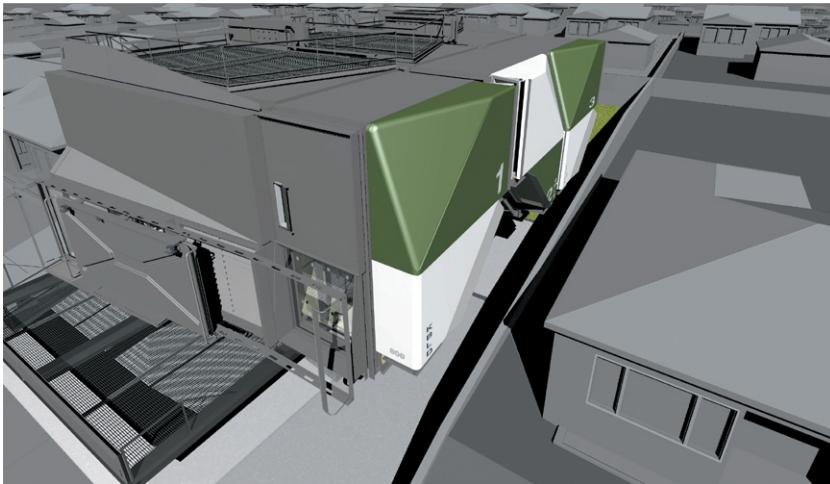
Redondo Beach House

etymologically, logically, it provides the “storia,” or shelf upon which history’s trophies are arranged (as well as being a trophy itself). This structure—the possibility of structure—promises a continuity that promotes a decidability that underwrites intentionality itself. Furthermore, the endurance of

such structure is magical, because all of our other experience tells us that time flows, that things change, we die.

Even more specifically, or at least more traditionally, architecture provides the sense of structure that orders space, providing for the possibility of location.

Space and architecture can be seen to form an irreducible duality, each defined in terms of the other, neither capable of standing alone enough to establish priority. In this view, architecture is either the result or the means of the first human sojourn into space. In-to space: “in” already implies



immersion, suggesting the infinite continuity we associate with space in common sense. “To,” on the other hand, already suggests some “place” or otherwise identifiable condition that might accept the directedness of this “toward-ness.” Space becomes comfortable when it can be addressed. This “in” is the seed of space, this “to” is the seed of architecture. From this perspective, the building is just the material embodiment of the comfort that the architectural already invests in space, preparing the possibility for a Something amidst a universe of Nothing.

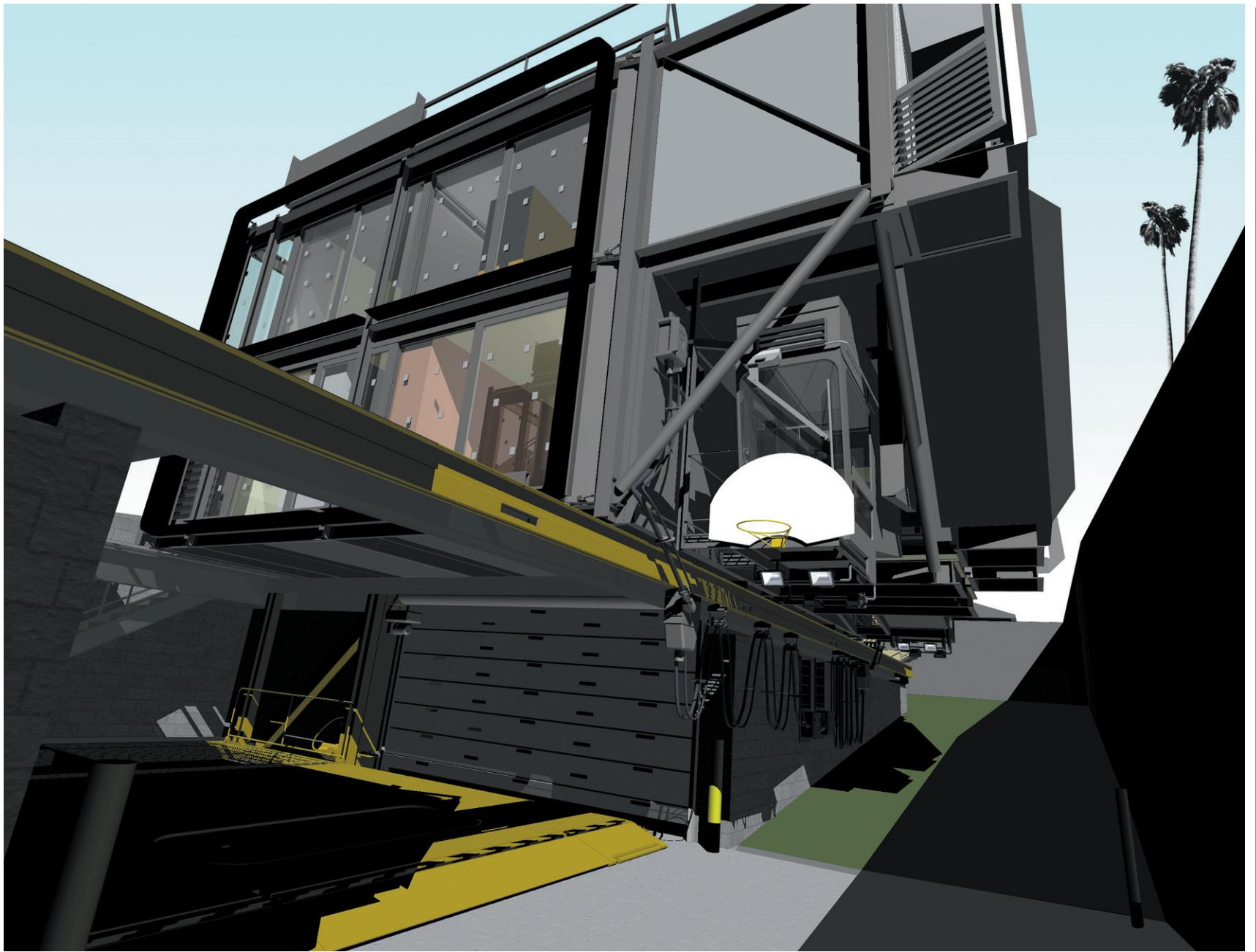
distance, concealed in the implied dash, in the address. Architecture identifies a destination, in space, in comfort-in-space, which must be fixed to be located and addressed, while at the same time encouraging the movement toward itself as that destination. This fugitive movement is beginning to assert itself as technology takes over from architecture the role of establishing our place in the world. Consequently, a non-architectural sense of space is becoming increasingly thinkable. This new space, insinuated in the synapses of digital wizardry or traced out by the contrails of more brute technology, escapes the sort of totalizing abstraction—and dignity—imposed by architecture. “It” “is” a wild and woolly hairball of virtuality that refuses the generalizations that architecture structures.



We can say “architecture” emerges in the first idea of space, or that “space” could not properly be said to have existed until architecture could describe it—but we can say this only because there is already an unspoken presumption (in place) of constancy and stillness underwriting the confidence of the sojourn and the comfort of the destination. Architecture’s relation to space is contingent upon this prior assumption of stability and the possibility of presence. For this reason, we can say architecture is specifically that which is always already there, always still there, always coming into existence as if it were always already still there.

By the same token, it is becoming equally possible to imagine architecture non-spatially as architecture’s meta-positive role is diminished. Other dimensions of the architectural are emerging as non-trivial, courtesy of the computer’s de-emphasis of physical space as a medium of engaging experience and society’s de-emphasis of architecture as the standard of order. In balancing against this the prospects for architecture’s continuing relevance in a cyber-dominated world, architecture’s solidity and “reality” and bigness carry more weight than immaterial space ever could. Once the importance of these other dimensions is accepted,

Meanwhile, the confluence of space and time gives motion. The quality we call “architectural” harbors movement just under the surface, proscribed yet tacit: “in” – “to” suggests some bridged



it is a short step to consideration of the will that ties the material presence together, and the freedom of movement the willful entity desires.

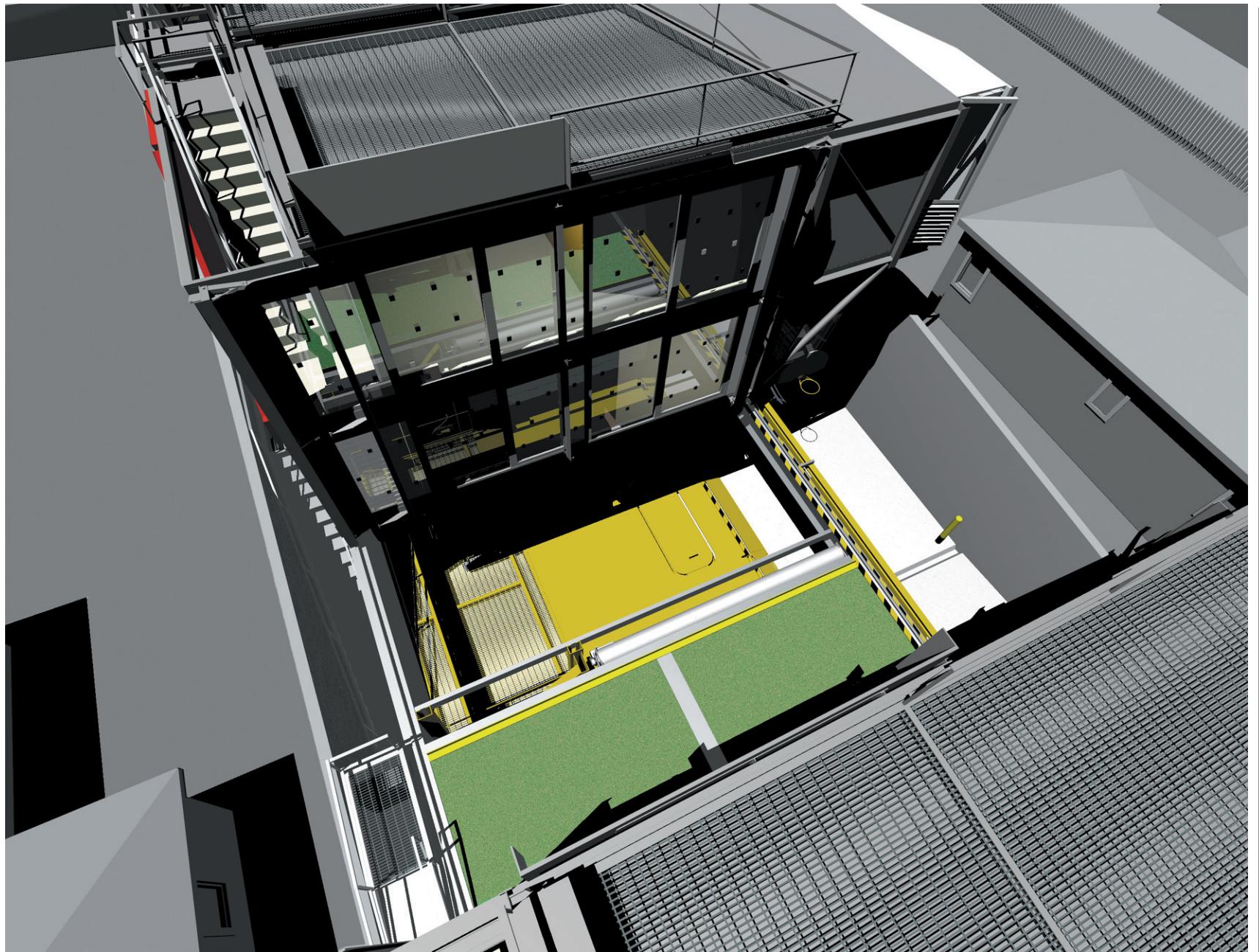
2. So what does it mean then to think architecture in motion? It depends on what we really mean by motion. At one level, the concept is not foreign: the idea that architecture could be seen as “frozen music” already suggests

arrested movement, for example. The Baroque and Deconstructivism showed us that architecture could engage this directly, if metaphorically. Modernism showed another way, by embodying references to speed. Recent fashions in form-making are inspired by a complexity theory thoroughly steeped in movement. Yet in none of these examples has anything ever actually moved. The music has always

been frozen, all the action happens on the drawing board or screen, not the building.

Why doesn't architecture move? Beyond the conceptual/definitional issues mentioned above, there are a host of obvious practical impediments. For one thing, it is too big. For another, it is too expensive, too difficult. The ease with which these objections

spring to mind is more evidence of habitual thinking, though, than true reasoning. They owe much of their force to the historically unexamined proscriptions outlined above: it only seems that architecture might be too big, or the costs prohibitive because we are not accustomed to thinking otherwise. Only because architecture has never moved do we believe we value its stillness. Actually, some really big



things do move—aircraft carriers, 747s, launch assemblies, retractable stadium roofs, trains, radio telescopes, Japanese parking garages, Bucketwheel excavators, for example—though we might not consider them architecture. Conversely, some things we would consider architecture are quite small and could easily be put in motion: the Tempio, say, or the Photomat. In fact, these could be launched.

While the economics of the building process can be blamed for many of architecture's shortcomings, this is not a sufficient excuse to explain its lack of motion as well: even in a situation without a budget, like the Getty Center or the Hong Kong Bank, we are not necessarily spurred to assume the possibility of movement. More likely the issue never comes up in the first place. We are not thinking: if only

there was more money this tower could spin on its axis, or, with a few more bucks this wing of the building could just fold over here to shelter the entrance in the rain.

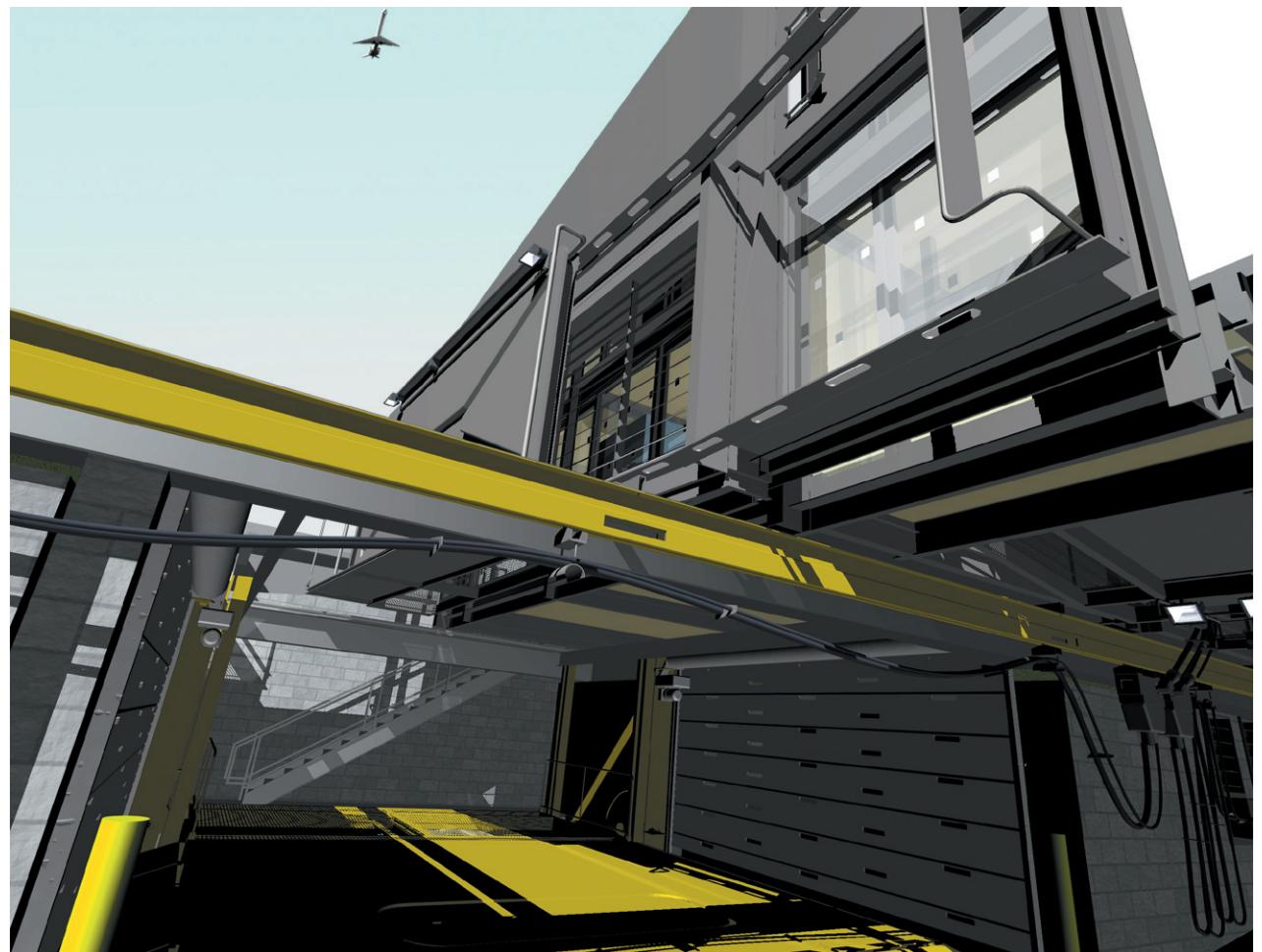
Instead we are taught to think that architecture's stillness is a hard-won battle with the forces of gravity and the claims of entropy, without considering other positive forces it could engage

through movement. Instead, we feel that if a building moves, it is a catastrophe, caused by gravity, leading to ruin(s). The structural science of "statics" is named as an expression of desire as much as fact. Structural expressionism is a non-metaphoric dramatization of the efforts expended to control this movement. The visual dynamism it may affect is in contrast to the physical dynamism it tries to prevent.

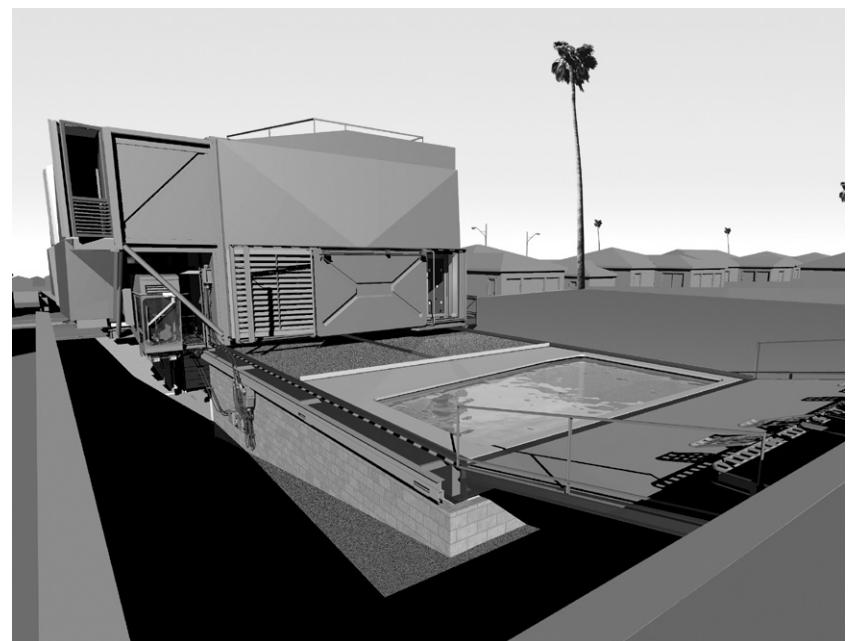
Finally, though, in all honesty, architecture doesn't really need to move, does it? Why should a building move? Where would it go, what would it do? Conventionally it satisfies its program by just sitting there. That's why we put it there in the first place. And yet, is even this really a limitation of architecture or of our conception of it? In fact, conventionally, programs are written to avoid movement as much as possible—even by the users. The passion for efficient layouts and rational use of space is not just economically based; it also expresses a belief in the harmful effects of distance and the inconvenience of travel across it. In fact, the intensity of the profession's devotion to minimizing the distance between a desk and a restroom, or the sink and the refrigerator borders on the absurd, when considered in terms of the actual differences in travel time affected. This absurdity extends to the "zoning" of the plan to avoid movement among unpleasant adjacencies, pushing unlike activities as far apart as the building can accommodate. The repressive nature of the social partitioning that results from such thinking is inspiring a contemporary critical response.

3. This response is taking the form of programs written by critical architects to maximize the positive tension between unlike activities by purposely throwing them together in close proximity. The intention, however, is not to resolve this tension by encouraging movement, but to take advantage of the habits of stasis to stoke the anxiety levels and heighten an empowering awareness of the surroundings.

The most influential critics are those who also practice; they have a greater effect on what happens in the built environment because they are filling that space with images. In fact, theory has gone to great lengths to challenge the repressive effects of the convention of stillness, embracing complexity and chaos and the



anxious realm of politics. To escape the grip of establishment and convention—to break into the clear blue sky of novelty or the virtual—design has become dynamic, the play of abstract mechanisms, fields of flux, gestural forces. A new standard has emerged for the appreciation of reality, challenging our faith in plain appearance or brute materiality—Photoshop, SGI, and Pixar are replacing a general indifference before the mundane with a more delightful expectation of transformation. Our imaginations have been teased with digital images of animate will everywhere. The beef, however, has yet to be found. It is this work that provides the clearest illustration of the distance between the thematizing of motion and the flight



from actual movement—without this difference being at all evident. How this can happen unnoticed is hard to understand, except as a demonstration of the magnitude of the threat that movement holds for architecture: even the theory that questions stasis does not think to consider actual movement as a remedy. We can tolerate architecture's being sliced, diced, smeared, torqued, stretched, scattered, morphed, etc.—so long as it doesn't actually, simply, move. Again the question arises: why not? In this context another answer comes to mind, maybe the real one, the one that addresses where the power is located in this exchange. More than any other party to the hairball of relationships surrounding the production of environmental objects and effects, the critical architect is interested in the object's staying where he put it. The best chaos and choicest effects-of-chance (that many critical practices today depend on for their notoriety) are closely scripted and the results carefully evaluated before release. Authorship in general is interested in fixity for the continuity it assures or

even immortality, but critique values it even more, for the control that secures the critic's meta-position.

Such formal critiques fail to account for the object as a force in life. A practice-oriented critique has arisen to solve this problem by diffusing authorship and the design process into the object's eventual constituency; yet even this work forgets a life for the object itself, still assigning the object an ultimately lifeless fixity that must ossify into repressiveness at some point. The still object must at some point be in the way.

Real movement is empowerment. It liberates. The proscription of movement is not absolute. It is conventional. It can be overturned.

4. The potential for an object's motion is usually defined on a scale measuring "degrees of freedom." This is an interesting expression. It captures the quality of willfulness in movement that we naturally ascribe to animate form. For the designed object this willfulness can be credited to the movement that acts out the object's own desires,

and movement that traces the will of another upon it. The author is left behind in these relationships; the moving object takes the responsibility for engagement and extends its own invitation to be tuned, manipulated, configured. In this gesture of respect the bond of engagement is cemented, directly, between the object and the observer, and a richer, more empowering, relationship established.

Ultimately, though, it all comes down to this: the architectural should embrace movement because it can. For the same reason that technological progress will eventually make even blobs buildable, and so they will be built, movement will become as common as stillness is today...and it will lose its capacity to sustain wonder. Today, however, the potential of movement is still untested, its realization still floating out there as the next big thing. We have the opportunity to feel the tension as that stillness gives way, and the wonder as architecture grows a new dimension.

