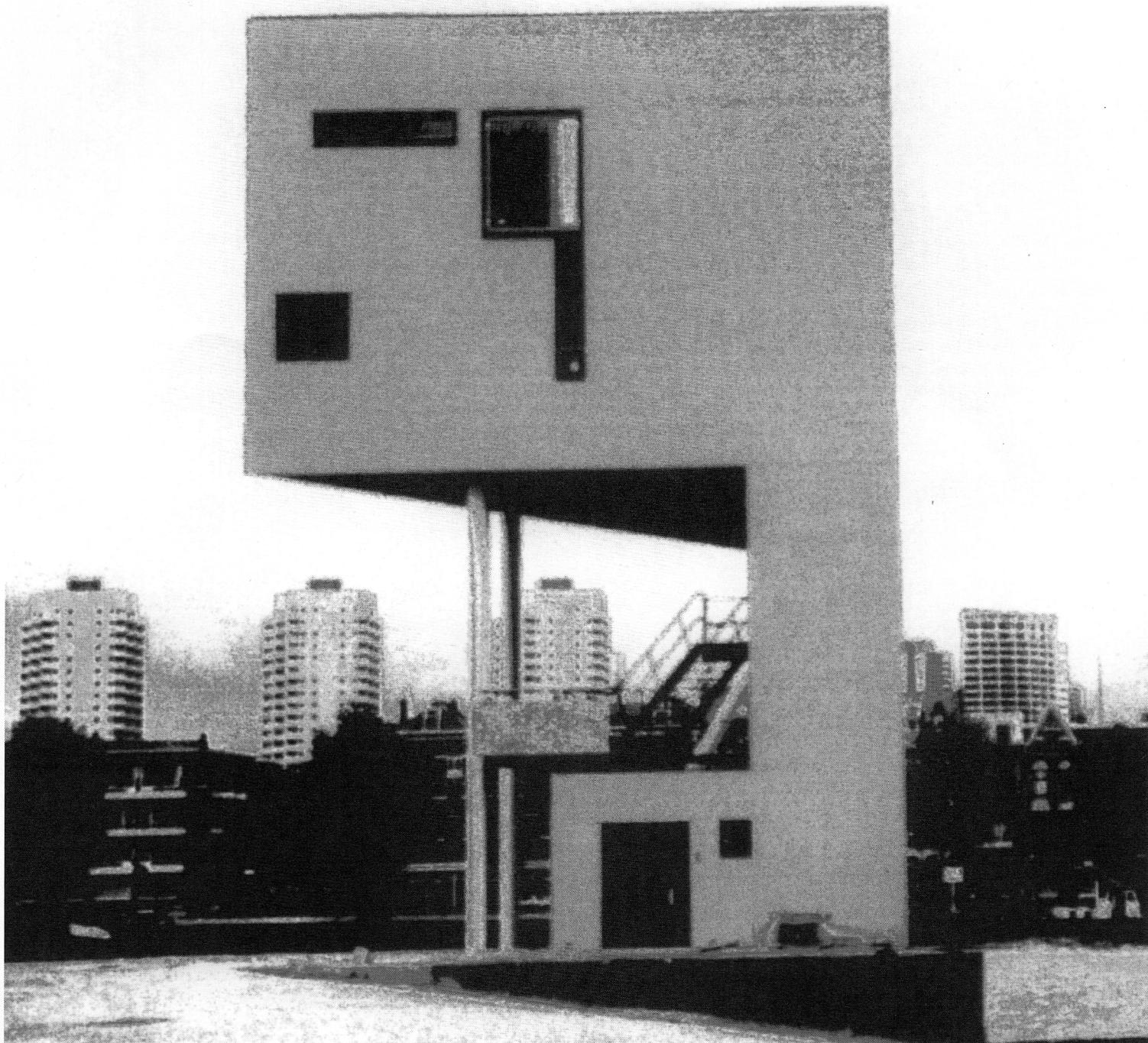


Mass in the Age of Media

Peter Wilson



The current status of a work of architecture must be measured against a background of today's technological and perceptual possibilities.

Electronically conveyed information, like

Walter Benjamin's mechanical reproduction, re-constitutes not only the visible and the procedural but also our relation to time and material. Today the digital overshadows the topographical, the virtual deposes the physical. Beside the everyday revolutionizing of its production processes there now seems for architecture (in the wake of media) the possibility to abandon troublesome materiality in favor of seductive but ultimately inaccessible virtuality. This option we reject.

The question is whether architecture can or should convey the same qualities endemic to our new mediated sensibility (transparency, impermanence). A transference comparable to the appropriation and aestheticising of industrial forms and utilitarian principles by early twentieth century modernism. A house/machine comparison is plausible, they share a relatively similar scale and duration. A CDROM/building comparison is quite another question.

What qualities do the built and the digital have in common? **Surface-monitor and facade**, both surfaces of inscription, one with virtual depth, one with material depth. As carrier of information (post Gutenberg, post TV) architecture has become a silent bystander. No longer read (as book or menu) it cannot be beamed by satellite to any point on the globe, it simply cannot compete as information carrier with the phenomenal capacity of software.

The qualities of architecture lie elsewhere. Its duration, its concrete and haptic presence, its framing of everyday life. In terms of duration media is instantaneous. Buildings on the other hand, after their protracted and laborious incubation and realization, "stay." We get to know them slowly, through the habits of use.

In their "staying" **buildings become their place**, their site. Such singular locations are as unrepeatable as teletransported information is ubiquitous and simultaneous.

Media comes to us (anywhere), we go to architecture. The media facade, architectures new clothes, is in this sense anachronistic, a hybrid. A spectacle in the traditional sense, it demands the close proximity of its audience. But the field of social interaction is no longer place specific, TV and internet are today's piazzas.

Architecture gives measure to its immediate context, to the comings and goings of daily use. It can never be totally disconnected from the scale, the imprint of the human body. The dizzying fractal permutations of microcircuitry on the other hand results in the non depth, the equal nearness and blandness of 24-hour news. Such a depth seems also to characterize our infinitely permeable and infinitely forgettable post-urban settlement patterns. Ultimately it is its mass which most distinguishes architecture from the fleeting images of electronic media. Exemplifying mass leads towards an Eduardo Chillida-like form language. A solid homogenous volume modulated within the material limits of its corporal integrity. In architecture mass speaks of a solidity that is implied but not literal. Like cooling towers, the external massivity of which facilitates the complete voiding of its interior. An allowing of its function (the efficient flow of air): BOLLES+WILSON 1993 Technology Center in Munster used such an apparent mass to focus and anchor an otherwise nebulous peripheral context. In today's carpet like urban field (the physical consequence of the indeterminacy of logistics) architecture can no longer hope to order the whole (the ambition of nineteenth century planning). Instead by focusing, by its unambiguous presence, by its mass, it has the possibility to hold fast, to anchor, to give measure to the surrounding flux. The iceberg strategy—mass in the age of media.

At the level of detail, and on the level of phenomenological experience, the perseverance of mass, the haptic quality of material surface, is today a necessary counterpoint to the dematerialized projections of cinema, video and media. It is now more consequent for architecture to "stay," not to chase chimeral electronic shadows, but to insist on the necessity and clarity of its mass.