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Campus Design as Critical Practice: Notes on University of Cincinnati's New Master Plan

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The vista, not the endpoint, matters.

—Richard Rorty

Six of the top ten reasons to visit Cincinnati are new buildings. Five of these belong to the University of Cincinnati; reason number one is the university itself. Over the last fifteen years, UC has spent a billion dollars on new architecture, new infrastructure, and new landscape, most of it high fashion. The result is a crisp, contemporary, urban identity. Today, scarcely a single square foot of the university's 200-acre campus remains unchanged, with more work planned or underway. In one audacious stroke, propelled by a single master plan, UC has transformed a nondescript, slipshod building complex into an international cultural destination.

The transformation started in the late 1980s, not long after Cincinnati transitioned from a municipal to a state university. This new status triggered a comprehensive reassessment of campus facilities, and in 1985 UC hired the San Francisco-based office of George Hargreaves to evaluate its long-range needs. In 1991 the board of trustees approved the Hargreaves master plan, and the year that followed UC wasted no time breaking ground. Today, all five university locations enjoy new facilities and improvements, but the most dramatic change has taken place on its Uptown campus, 86 buildings on two superblocks that touch diagonally at their corners.

While the energy and scope of UC's makeover is astounding strictly on its numbers, what most distinguishes the university's efforts to date is its selection of architects. The majority of firms responsible for UC's transformation meet Alejandro Zaera-Polo's criteria for critical practice, that is, practices whose product is fundamentally and primarily knowledge, rather than construction.¹ Give a cook and a chef a carrot and ask them to prepare it as though for a feast, one gives you back sliced carrots, the other an orange carnation. Cincinnati's achievement derives largely from its willingness to embrace the inherent risks of this distinction.²

Comprehensive Vision

The Hargreaves plan is part of an overall effort to use the power of the university as a fulcrum for urban reconstruction. Outside its gates, UC is determined to improve the quality of the surrounding urban fabric. Under the auspices of nonprofit development corporations, often created by the university for specific initiatives, it has launched several bold redevelopment schemes that aim to fortify

independent districts in ways that complement university objectives.

Northward, for example, the Uptown Crossings Development Plan adds a new park, new lofts and townhouses, a daycare center, and a pedestrian pathway to northern neighborhoods lying between the Cincinnati Zoo and west campus. Eastward, the University Village Urban Renewal Plan combines extensive residential and commercial investment to leverage the transformation of the seedy Short Vine shopping strip into an "Off Broadway" arts and entertainment district.

Southward, the Clifton Heights Calhoun Street Marketplace Project will soon complete construction of a formidable, half-block-long mixed-use anchor in the south-central shopping district, overlooking UC's new Varsity Village. The developers plan to infuse this complex with de-rigueur lifestyle retailing — cafes, bistros, fashion, books, sporting goods, home furnishings — all fed by 241 "upscale" residential units and a 600-car garage.

Westward, the UC-inspired Stratford Heights Project will introduce ten acres of student housing and recreational spaces to Greek Row along Clifton Avenue, specifically designed to service the University Honors scholars and graduate students from the Colleges of Law, Business, and Arts and Sciences. The French and Spanish departments plan to turn one property into a full-immersion domestic language lab.³

These interventions radiate from UC's Uptown campus, which vividly demonstrates the scope and depth of the university's ambition. Here Cincinnati has torn down a half dozen unsightly buildings, replaced acres of asphalt surface parking with new and expanded garages, constructed a million square feet of instructional and research space, and introduced a completely reformulated mix of student services — all developed around an integrated program of quads, courts, commons, and mews. Highly livable outdoor spaces showcase the university's notable collection of public art.⁴ Down to the smallest detail, new construction sustains the plan's exemplary modulation of scale.

The success of the master plan suggests the consistent application of two well-known orthodoxies. First, in varying degrees, the composition of the campus maintains faith in the unity of relation between part and whole — small things count; small things accrete to big things in significant ways. And yet the Hargreaves plan's interest in "forces" and "vectors" introduces a modern landscape that fully escapes the orbit of classical habits. Second, the master plan subscribes to a principle once enunciated by Allison Smithson: that the whole is something all new construc-

Several ruling metaphors help orchestrate the relationships among all these signature products. For example, “green windows” (or “gates”) code every major campus entrance with a unique arrangement of freestanding Ohio sandstone markers, sometimes in the form of columns, sometimes curving walls. Both blocks of the Uptown campus boast new “commons.” On the west block, the “Braid” of walkways twines diagonally across the length of the Campus Green, tracing the site’s long-buried creek bed. The Braid in turn leads to “Main Street,” which concentrates student life, athletics, retail activity, and recreation along a curving swath of circulation space midway between the low-lying Campus Green and higher elevations.

“Main Street” is an odd choice of metaphor. It evokes Pleasantville more than Over the Rhine, the venerable downtown neighborhood surrounding the city’s real Main



Street, site of Cincinnati’s infamous April 2001 race riot. Long before this urban disturbance, however — mindful that it competes with four other state universities for Ohio’s best students — UC wisely cultivated a plan that would communicate a strong sense of safety and insulate student life within a secure perimeter, tactfully defined by the aforementioned system of “gates.”

In practice, UC’s Main Street tailors classic mixed-use development formulas to suit the appetites of eighteen-to-twenty-three year olds, although a much more varied constituency enjoys its amenities, not least the two-story Starbucks.⁶ When the new recreation center opens for business in 2005, UC planners confidently predict students will complete 90 percent of their daily transactions on campus.

Main Street’s center of gravity is a large, stepped terrace called Bearcat Plaza, which overlooks Nippert Stadium at the intersection of the university’s primary pedestrian thoroughways. Three vivid arcs delimit this gathering place: the new Tangeman University Center, designed by Gwathmey Siegel & Associates (with GBBN Architects); the new Steger Student Life Center, designed by Moore Ruble Yudell (with Glaserworks); and the new student recreation center, just north of the plaza, designed by Morphosis (with KZF Design). Pedestrians enter Bearcat Plaza along several axes: downhill from the west, along the north edge of McMicken Commons, between the prow of Steger Center and Tangeman; and uphill from the north by two alternate routes — through Steger’s portal, which connects the plaza to a narrow, cascading walkway between the Steger Center and a row of older university buildings (called the “Mews”), and between the Steger Center the student recreation center, along a route that leads up to the College Conservatory of Music.

The most breathtaking moment in the whole campus plan may be the northern entrance to Main Street, a powerful canyon that channels space along the sleek and varied facets of the recreation center, upstream to Bearcat Plaza, and downstream past Sigma Sigma Commons into the meandering rivulets of Campus Green. Shifting width-to-height ratios frame and serialize views along this corridor: some deep (over into the bowl of the stadium, for instance); some narrow (up into the Mews); some distant (down across Campus Green). The planners and designers who formulated this moment seem equally predisposed to a postmodern picturesque, insofar as each element individually and in concert exhibits what historian Sidney Robinson has called “[inhospitality to] a tradition of systematic centeredness.”⁷

A Wealth of Architecture

There is easily enough exceptional architecture at Cincinnati to fill a book (indeed, Princeton Architectural Press issued a Campus Guide in 2001).

Cobb has designed a beautifully understated background building that coaxes the highest possible value out of its unruly context. It reorders its site just below the southwest crest of UC’s ridge with deft massing and physiognomy, setting off the chain of chords that carom

Above: The “Braid.” Hargreaves Associates.

Opposite: College Conservatory of Music, designed by Pei Cobb Freed & Partners Architects, looking north. Photographer: Timothy Hursley.

down the west campus's central swale. One of these chords is the faux vault atop the engineering building, which offers Cincinnati a collector's specimen of Graves's trademark PrismaColor scenography. Meanwhile, on the east campus, Gehry's Vontz Center offers homage to Oldenburg — certainly not his best work, but no less a landmark.

The latest campus headline is the new recreation center by Morphosis, which incorporates two swimming pools, a basketball gym, multipurpose courts, a fitness center and climbing wall, a food court, and a dormitory. For the dormitory wing, Mayne hoists a broad, north-facing bar of student apartments onto piloti overlooking a roofscape of folded plate. The rest of the building sweeps around Nippert Stadium with the horizontal velocity of an action sport. Its walls are porous and excitable; its scale oscillates; its composition defines an essential edge, like CCM, while activating everything that surrounds it.

Given all this star-power, what if any are the theoretical dividends of UC's aesthetic audacity? Mayne's recreation center, Eisenman's Aronoff Center for Art and Design, and Hargreaves's Campus Green offer useful opportunities for comparisons and evaluation, first in respect to questions about how high-design affects campus life, but also in respect to questions about the general relationship between architecture and landscape.

Campus Green and Art Center

Critical practices are risky because they appear to put "architecture" first, sometimes at the expense of the user. Campus Green, however, surrounds users with a demonstrably improved and enriched environment. On what used to be a six-acre, 700-car, asphalt parking lot, Hargreaves and his partner Mary Margaret Jones designed a broad arboreal park, site of the Braid. They placed a tall, cone-



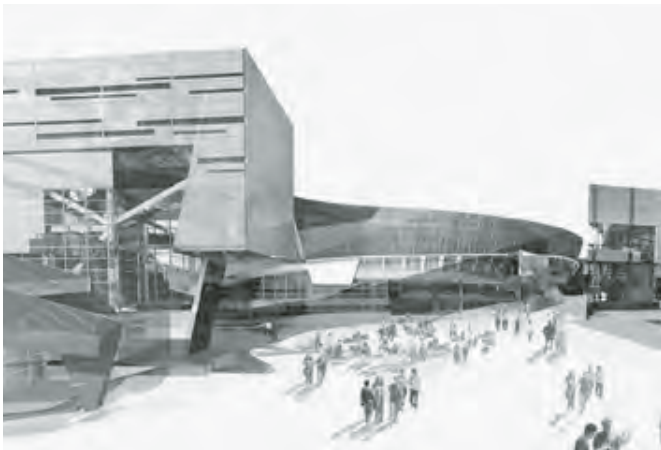
shaped mound at the north edge to shield the park from the noise and sight of traffic, also to connect it to the adjacent woods across a congested boulevard. Specimen trees line walkways that crisscross a sprawling lawn, defined on the east edge by three sloped, triangular planes. These small terraces offer visitors a place to sit, talk, read, watch, or otherwise enjoy their subtle prospect; in spring, miniature daffodils dot the winter creeper that carpets their embankments. Just south of the mound, two limestone stair-step waterfalls recycle storm water runoff.

With abundant squares of grass and stone benches, this is one of the university's primary social amenities. There is no better place in Cincinnati to teach a child how to ride a bike, since the infinite combination of straightaways and slow curves reward success with amplified sensations of freedom in variety.⁸

But what sets Campus Green apart from ordinary

ard Serra's site-specific sculptures. It maintains a connection that allows it to both criticize and communicate with surrounding architecture.¹⁰

Hargreaves's Campus Green — indeed, every tactical intervention he and Jones employ in the reconstruction of UC's landscape — constitutes what landscape theorist Bernard Cache calls a "mnemotechnical object."¹¹ Hargreaves's landforms work "beneath the surface of identity," in Cache's words. "What counts is the reading of a territory in terms of a conjunction between two sorts of images: concrete gravitational vectors and abstract vectorial space."¹² UC's new landscape introduces an alternate, poetic formation within the everyday experience and rhythms of campus life. In contrast to the conventional sculpture garden, Hargreaves fuses landform with vegetation in highly affected but unobtrusively constructed topographies, less something to look at than be in. These



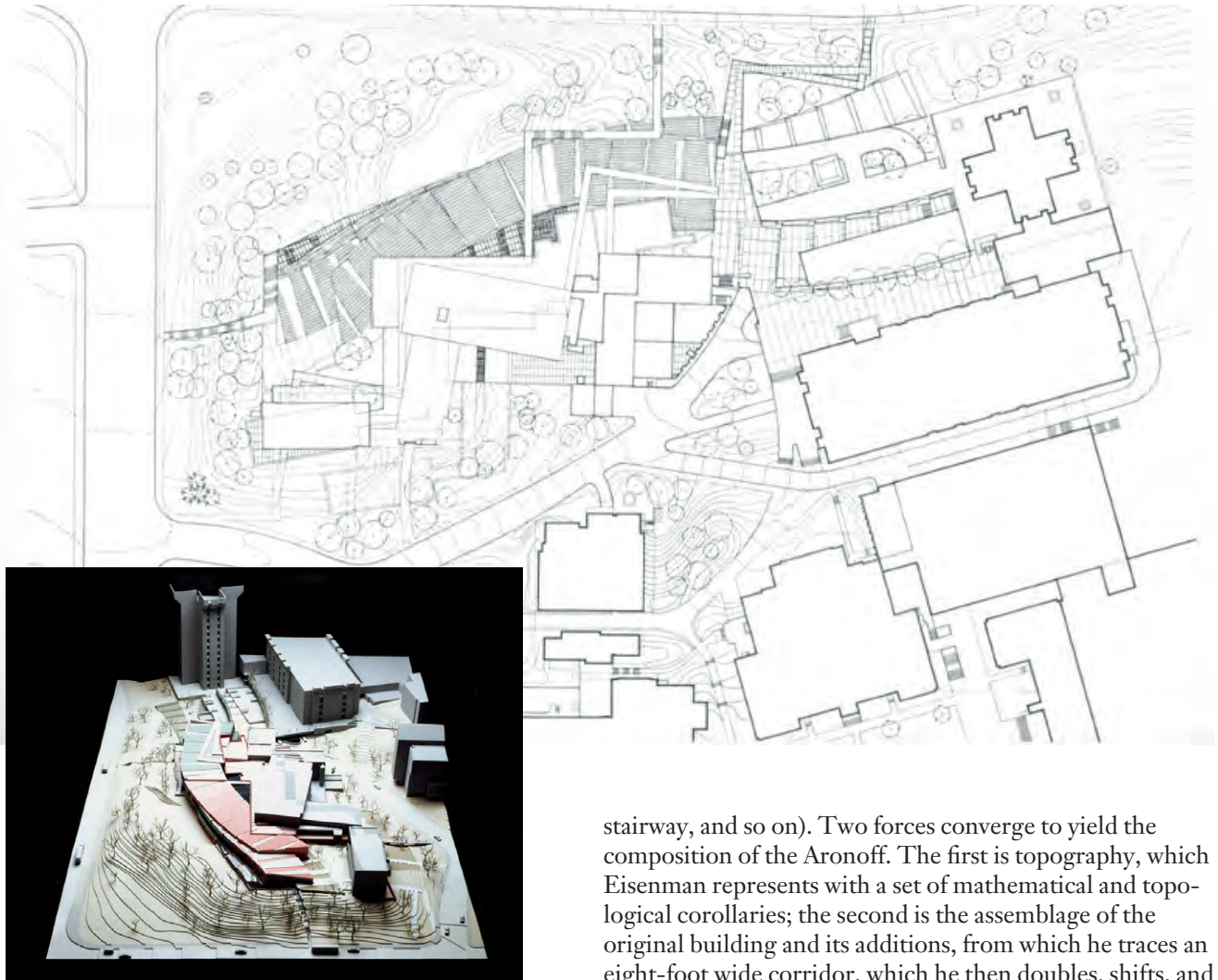
parks or campus commons is the way it operates as fecund ground between vertical and horizontal orientations. Form takes its place not strictly as "landscape," but rather as an aggregation of terms "on the periphery of a field in which there are other, differently structured possibilities."⁹ It is strong enough to regulate the disarray of existing buildings, which is an important part of its job, and yet not so strong that it dominates its context. Rather, Campus Green engages its context — critically — not unlike Rich-

forms ornament time as much as space. Gates, quads, commons, and greens all produce dynamically "inflected" environments that represent "a totality of possibilities" (here again citing Cache) — "openness," "receptiveness," "anticipation."¹³

In Hargreaves's composition, "landscape" mutates in the direction of the static object, insofar as his landforms adopt qualities typical of tectonic geometry — sharp edges, oblique planes, raked steps, Euclidean solids. Contrariwise, in Eisenman's composition, "building" mutates in the direction of fluid event, insofar as he sets every plane of the composition into falling or slipping motion, right angles tilting awry, planes sliding away like plate tectonics. Underlying each project is a heterodox conception

Left: Student Recreation Center, designed by Morphosis. Simulated view from northeast, looking west along Main Street.

Right: View down Main Street from the east. Model image courtesy of Moore Ruble Yudell Architects.



of space, Piranesian in flavor, “a complex spatial wandering, in which the objectives of the journey [are] not revealed” — in which axes and centers are always dislocated, always multiple.¹⁴

In a work by Eisenman no assumption about architecture is ever completely safe. Just as Hargreaves discards the basic tropes of landscape composition (background quads and quiet courtyards), Eisenman discards the basic tropes of building composition (exterior, interior, entrance,

stairway, and so on). Two forces converge to yield the composition of the Aronoff. The first is topography, which Eisenman represents with a set of mathematical and topological corollaries; the second is the assemblage of the original building and its additions, from which he traces an eight-foot wide corridor, which he then doubles, shifts, and rotates.¹⁵ Eisenman’s diagram effaces conventional typological antecedents, like “grand stair” or “central space,” at the same time it renders these antecedents legible.¹⁶

An Alternate Template

Different as they are, Eisenman’s and Hargreaves’s compositions are not just about difference. Sanford Kwinter has rightly noted that “the very phrase ‘avant-garde’... represents not only the idea of directed novelty, that is, not the idea of any-novelty-whatever, but specifically novelty in the service of hope.”¹⁷ The connection between avant-garde composition and this idea of hopeful novelty has little appeal to warriors of opinion who diminish or deride anything beyond their immediate understanding. And yet there is no better way to honor avant-garde discourse than to have strong doubts about it.

Above: Site plan showing relationship of original building and new Eisenman addition. Image courtesy of Eisenman Architects.

Inset: Aerial view of final model. Photographed by Dick Frank; image courtesy of Eisenman Architects.

Hargreaves was the first signature on UC’s master plan, Eisenman the second. Their early influence on Cincinnati’s transformation (now waning, I’m afraid) suggests a bracing reorientation to modern university experience best expressed perhaps by Bill Readings, in his seminal critique of contemporary higher education, *The University in Ruins*.

[The] claim for an ideal community in the University still exerts its power despite its glaring inaccuracy—evident to anyone who has ever sat on a faculty committee.... [W]e should recognize that the loss of the University’s cultural function opens up a space in which it is possible to think the notion of community otherwise, without recourse to notions of unity, consensus, and communication. At this point, the University becomes no longer a model of the ideal society but rather a place where the impossibility of such models can be thought—practically thought, rather than thought under ideal conditions. Here the University loses its privileged status as the model of society and does not regain it by becoming the model of the absence of models. Rather, the University becomes one site among others where the question of being-together is raised, raised with an urgency that proceeds from the absence of the institutional forms... , which have historically served to mask that question....¹⁸

Cincinnati has emerged as a standard-setting case study in contemporary academic planning, which increasingly integrates intellectual resources with other strategic priorities, especially marketing, customer service, security, convenience, recreation, athletics, and brand management, usually under the banner of “excellence.” As the new American university continues to adapt to market pressure, this level of commercial development seems increasingly unavoidable. Especially among cash-strapped, “state-assisted” public universities, branding campaigns and “quality-service” initiatives now compete with the great conversations of liberal education. Still, the risk of commercial contamination may be less threatening to public education than declining enrollments and attrition. In today’s economy, brand marketing and capital development are the price we pay to ensure our continuing social relevance.

Many critics who reward Main Street with approbation for its sensitivity to student users also can’t resist ridiculing Eisenman for his “aloofness” and “star-quality.”¹⁹ Yet Eisenman’s composition is singularly courageous and vital in the following respect: it provides an unflinching critique



of the homogenization of knowledge and experience that Bill Readings calls “the university of excellence.”²⁰ Education isn’t comfort food. Richard Rorty admonishes us to remember that “the real social function of the humanistic intellectuals is to instill doubts in the students about the students’ own self-images, and about the society to which they belong.”²¹ More so than any other building on UC’s campus, the space of Eisenman’s composition instills doubt: it eschews the possibility of models and raises the question of being together through a vision of the campus not as “a place set apart,” but rather as a place engaged, a place set into motion by the proliferation of analogies and signs.²²

“Literature,” declared Ezra Pound, “is news that stays news.”²³ What happens when we apply Pound’s dictum to architecture? We put up two hundred thousand new build-

¹⁸“Mews” behind the new Steger Student Center and paralleling Main Street. Photo courtesy of Moore Ruble Yudell Architects.

ings every year, but only a handful are likely to change our view of the world. Buildings that stay news earn our attention by demonstrating their relation to ideas that fuel the public imagination. These ideas engird our basic responsibility to accommodate use, to ennoble, and to incite questioning through “directed novelty” — to produce what Henry Cobb has called “instruments of speculation.”²⁴ Great buildings and great spaces put us in touch with our deeper poetic intuition and with alternate temporalities. In the presence of newsworthy architecture, we live more fully, more self-aware, and more open to the irony of our own finitude.

Most campus plans fall short of these admittedly rare and lofty but nonetheless essential criteria. And yet there is one newsworthy plan that multiplies our horizons and increases our chances for an encounter with this plenitude — and that plan is taking shape in Cincinnati, of all places.

Notes

- Alejandro Zaera-Polo, “The Making of the Machine: Powerless Control as a Critical Strategy,” in Cynthia C. Davidson, ed., *Eleven Authors in Search of a Building* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1996), p. 27.
- Prof. Jay Chatterjee, who served as Dean of the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning from 1986 until 2001, originally formulated this approach for his own unit’s expansion. In the formative years that followed, under the leadership of University President Joseph Steger, he and three other primary actors helped to shape the vision of the campus: Hargreaves (in collaboration with Mary Margaret Jones); Dale McGirr, Senior Vice President for Planning, Finance, and Community Development; and Ron Kull, University Architect. Hargreaves and Jones remain Cincinnati’s master planners for the current phase of the university makeover. Peter Eisenman was one of the first “signature” architects commissioned to design a major university building. Jay Chatterjee, telephone interview, Nov. 22, 2004.
- These and other descriptions throughout this essay benefit from meticulous and detailed documentation of campus capital development by the University of Cincinnati public relations office. For more information, see <http://www.uc.edu/ucinfo/sigarch.htm> (accessed regularly between Nov. 22, 2004, and Feb. 8, 2005).
- New public sculpture includes works by Nam June Paik, Joel Shapiro, Kenneth Snelson, James Carpenter, Sam Gilliam, George Rickey, Tim Prentice, and Terry Allen.
- Other significant buildings and renovations strengthen this aggregate: Nippert Stadium, Swift Hall, the French Building, and the new baseball stadium. In almost all cases, “signature” firms teamed collaboratively with highly respected and accomplished local, regional and national offices, including BHDP, KZF Design, Glaserworks, GBBN, SFA, Wilson & Associates, and Lorenz+Williams — all from the Cincinnati area; and VOA in Chicago.
- The total 2004–05 full- and part-time enrollment of the Uptown campus is 27,178; the university employs about 13,800 people, of whom 1,148 are full-time Uptown campus faculty; the 2003 freshman retention rate was 70.8 percent. For more information, see the homepage of the University’s Office of Institutional Research, <http://www.uc.edu/institutionalresearch/report.htm>.
- Sidney K. Robinson, *Inquiry Into the Picturesque* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 166.
- Interview with Leigh Taylor Friedman, Dec. 10, 2004 (in reminiscence of her first bike-riding lessons on Campus Green, spring 2000, age five years).
- Rosiland E. Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986), p. 284.
- Yve-Alain Bois, “A Picturesque Stroll around *Clara-Clara*,” in Annette Michelson et al., ed., *October: The First Decade, 1976–1986*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987), p. 350.
- Bernard Cache, “Territorial Image,” in *Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories*, trans. Anne Boyman (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), p. 12.
- Ibid.*, pp. 14, 11.
- Ibid.*, p. 17.
- Vincent Scully Jr., *Modern Architecture* (New York: Braziller, 1965), p. 10, as quoted in Bois, “A Picturesque Stroll,” p. 354; and Richard Serra, *Richard Serra: Interviews, Etc. 1970–1980* (Yonkers, NY: The Hudson Museum, 1980), p. 33, as quoted in Bois, “A Picturesque Stroll,” p. 355.
- For the source and further explanation of these and other terms in Eisenman’s Aronoff center, see Donna Barry, “Connecting the Dots: The Dimensions of a Wireframe,” in Davidson, ed., *Eleven Authors in Search of a Building*, pp. 48–59 (Barry was a project architect for the Aronoff Center). See also Sanford Kwinter, “The Genius of Matter: Eisenman’s Cincinnati Project,” in *Peter Eisenman & Frank Gehry*, catalogue of the Fifth International Exhibition of Architecture of the Biennale, Venice, 1991; and the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, 1992, n.p.; also Peter Eisenman, *Diagram Diaries* (New York: Universe, 1999).
- Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G.C. Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. xviii.
- Sanford Kwinter, “The Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness and the ‘Avant-Garde’ in America,” in R.E. Somol, ed., *Autonomy and Ideology: Positioning as Avant-Garde in America* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997), p. 264.
- See Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 20.
- See Susan S. Szenasy, “R-E-S-P-E-C-T,” in *Metropolis* (February 2005), p. 21.
- Readings, *The University in Ruins*, pp. 21–43.
- Richard Rorty, “The Humanistic Intellectual: Eleven Theses,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 127.
- See Robert A.M. Stern, “The Campus: A Place Apart” [video recording], in *Pride of Place: Building the American Dream* [video series] (Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities, c1986). My thanks to Sharon Haar for recommending this reference.
- Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 29.
- Henry N. Cobb, “Ethics and Architecture,” *Harvard Architecture Review* 8, p. 45.