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Journal
Places, 3(1)

ISSN
0731-0455

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Publication Date
1986-07-01

Peer reviewed

The Architecture of Joseph Esherick, or Anatomy against Composition

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After Joseph Esherick came to the School of Architecture of Barcelona in 1984 to give a lecture on his work, the students who attended wondered why such buildings as the Cannery on San Francisco's waterfront and the "Cary House" in Mill Valley, California, had been ignored for so long in Spain. Some keen comments throughout the lecture also struck us. For example, Esherick explained that the height of the ceiling in the Child Study Center at the University of California, Berkeley, had been determined neither by the size of the children nor by the size of the teachers but by the interrelation of the two, since under a very low ceiling teachers would look gigantic to children. This and other statements about architectural design caused me to investigate the work of Joseph Esherick.

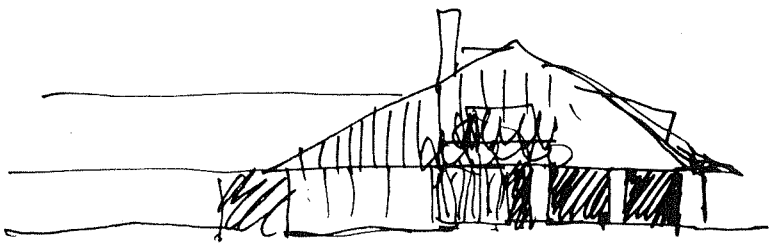
The ideas of Joseph Esherick have developed over almost fifty years of professional activities. He had wanted to be an engineer like his father; however, something happened that changed his mind. When he was visiting an aircraft factory, a worker asked him what he was doing there. He said that he was there with his father because he wanted to be an engineer, too. The response of the man decided him forever against engineering as a career. "Listen, boy," said the man. "You are wrong. In this profession all the basic problems are already solved; only refinements are left." Joseph Esherick turned to architecture; he did not want to work only on refinements.[1]

His training at the University of Pennsylvania School of Architecture did not change this basic attitude. Since he has recently described in detail his experience in Philadelphia,[2] I do not think it necessary to discuss it here beyond noting the eclectic atmosphere of the school following the "Beaux Arts" tradition, its respect for the vernacular American architecture, and its ignorance of the Modern movement "Avantgardes" both outside and within the United States. Esherick pointed out the relevance of the treatise by Guadet that he read as a textbook in French and that this treatise is fundamental to understanding the ideas of Louis Kahn, who attended the same school some years before.

Equally important in Esherick's training was the time he spent with his uncle, the important American sculptor Wharton Esherick. He learned from him and from other sculptors and artists the need for anatomical knowledge of a thing before trying to represent it. So he dissected real human bodies; he went to the forest to find the best wood. This anatomical principle, I will argue later, lasts throughout his work. We find, then, by surveying his training, an American "Beaux Arts" tradition, a sculptural and anatomical understanding, an interest in engineering and experimental technologies, and, finally, a skepticism toward any kind of architectural style, fashion, or "movement." Reality should be first, style second.

"Form is what things are," a statement published in one of the best and longest articles on Esherick's work in 1964,[3] expresses clearly his architectural empirical existentialism. It both opens and closes any dialogue, and it suggests to professionals and students the need for a real architecture projected from a dialogue with clients and users and from a creative mind free of prejudgments about style, fashion, composition, or any other architectural routine.

We cannot analyze all the buildings projected by Esherick during the last forty-five years. Each of these buildings defeats the critic who looks for laws of composition and regularity. The houses are experimental; they reflect in each case the dialogue between architect and client and the specifics of the site. We can point to the Metcalf House (1948); the Berma House (1962), an ideal aerial-engineering house; the "Oestriecher House" (1967), which optimizes the functional complexity of the site and the uses by the occupants; the "Woodside House" (1970); and, perhaps the best known, the Cary House (1960) and the "Sea Ranch" houses and store (1966–1972). The design process is essential in order to understand these single-family houses. Esherick explains, "I can recall only one house—Metcalf—when the design emerged as a whole—all at once—with all the parts neatly together and complete. And it didn't happen in the office but while riding in a Greyhound bus. That was the exception. Otherwise, it's been like making a fruit salad and, at the last minute, you realize you have to go down to the store because you forgot the mangoes."



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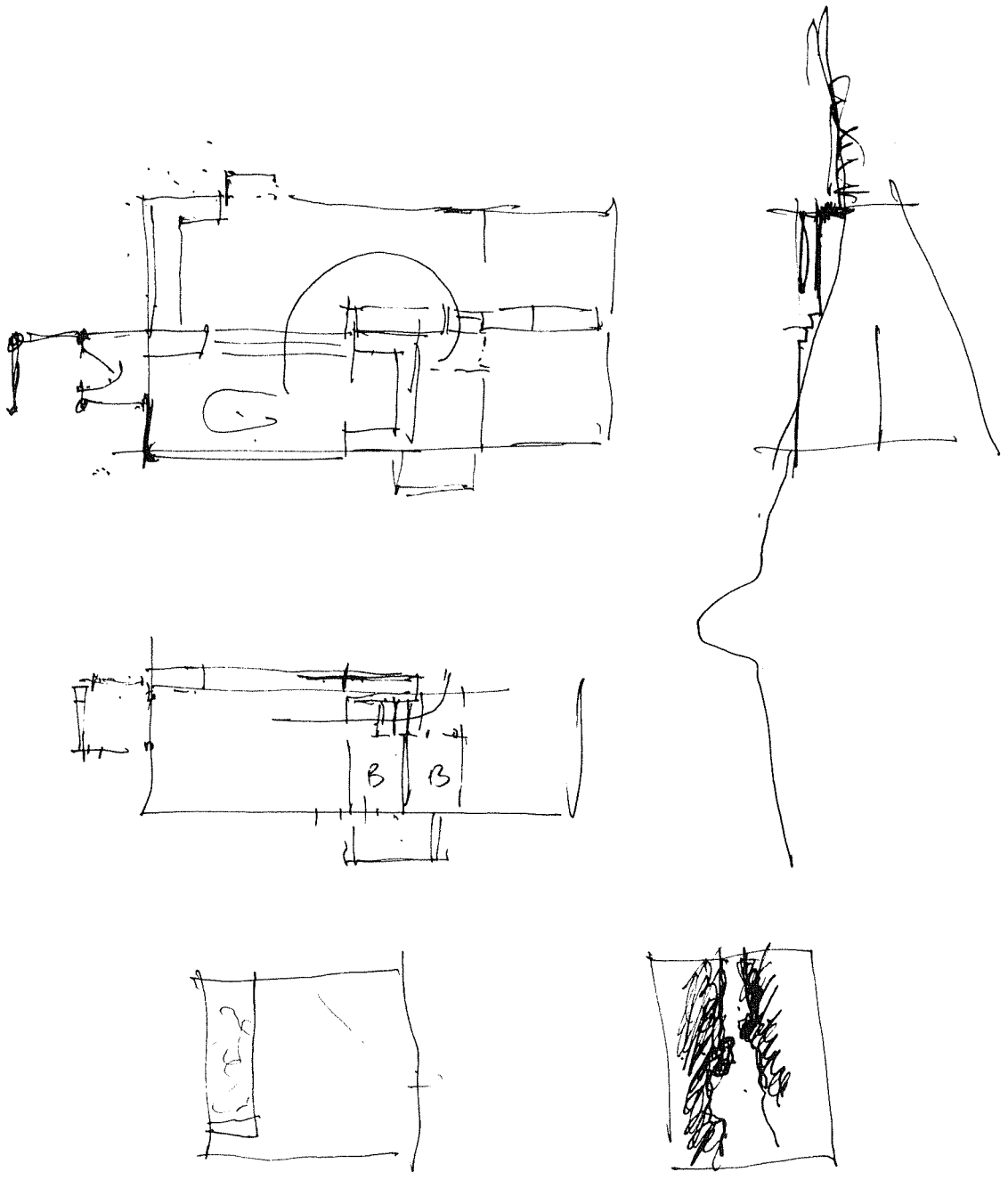
All these houses explore the views, the light, the earth/building accommodation, the physical structures, the vernacular images of the Bay area, the climatic conditions throughout the seasons, the needs of the client, and the empirical experience of space and time on concrete singular places. It is easy to understand that these principles lead to very singular poetic experiences. And this is just what these houses are: singular poetic experiences rooted in the Bay area tradition and open to new social and physical conditions. However, as I have said before, it is difficult to find rhetorical rules of composition and persuasion. One statement by Esherick is very relevant here. He says, "I have never built a monument, but if I do project one, sometime, I will make one which escapes from the older visual monumental compositions towards other nonvisual experiences." I will not agree, however, with an early criticism about Esherick's buildings, which argued that the Cary House was a "casual" set of relationships between the structure and the site, light, views, etc. The lack of visual composition in a modern sense is not enough reason to claim "casualness."

In some cases, Esherick's works follow clear rules of composition, as in the Lyons House (1958), which is arranged with a fairly rigid frame and japanese design strategies, or his own cottage house at the Sea Ranch, where he organizes the shape of the house through a "spiral promenade," from the entrance to a very important room at the top of the house. Some of the other houses have an organization generated from the internal experience, even including the furniture arrangement and specific views and functions. Some very old strategies of design are used, such as repetition and amplification. Structural elements and textures are combined with formal shapes and dispositions in order to obtain a poetic vernacular flavor. Old methods of construction and new technologies are linked without prejudices, each having a role in the overall structure. A closer examination of some of the houses, such as the Berma House (1962), reveals some other regularities. You discover a cubic envelope distorted in order to adapt to the site and the desires of the client. You can see repetitions, amplifications, and some axial dispositions. But, overall, you can see the movement from composition to anatomy, from formal visual rules to experiental empirical constructions. Esherick states again and again that the clues for the design are already in the site and in the needs of the users. You should be able to read these clues if you are a good architect. This is not easy. The best architects can be wrong in one place and right in the next. So students should not be depressed by some failure. Everybody fails sometimes. Nobody is always right.

A rhetorical analogy to painting can be significant at this point. Esherick feels that the obsessive connection of the works of Mondrian with architecture has not helped modern architects to build good buildings. Goya and Turner could have helped much more than

1 **Metcalf House.** Front view sketch by Joseph Esherick in 1984.



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2 Sea Ranch Cottage. Joseph Esherick's 1985 sketch indicates the "spiral promenade" and the accommodation of the cottage to the site.

Mondrian to organize the new places that society needs. Esherick learned from painting that any boundary organizes simultaneously internal and external space; it does not only separate the facade from the inside.

With these anatomical design strategies in mind, we can understand why Esherick's rehabilitation projects are so powerful, most notably the Cannery in San Francisco and the aquarium in Monterey. The old and the new in both cases are so interconnected that it is impossible to disentangle them without destroying the buildings. Sometimes, as in the Cannery, only the outside walls remain of the original construction; yet its industrial flavor is retained. The anatomy of the new structure has been assimilated into the old, as in a modern medical grafting operation. The old skin works perfectly with new bones and new organs; sometimes it is the other way around, where the old bones and organs accept new skin. Here the anatomical metaphor works exactly in the way that the important French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has described it: as a healthy and lively transformation and invention of architectural meaning.[4]

As Esherick pointed out in a recent lecture at Tulane University, this combination of modern and old images was described by Lewis Mumford in 1949 in his introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition held at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. He wrote

> . . . the main problem of architecture today is to reconcile the universal and the regional, the mechanical and the human, the cosmopolitan and the indigenous. No manner of building that exaggerates the local at the expense of the universal can possibly answer the needs of our time. . . . it is just for the opposite reason that the Bay Area Regional architecture is significant. Here the architects have absorbed the universal lessons of science and the machine and have reconciled them with human wants and human desires with full regard for the setting and nature. . . .

These arguments and others by Lewis Mumford were at that time strongly rejected by the leaders of the Modern movement as a step backward to historicism, academicism, and eclecticism. Today we can view this matter with less prejudice. Lewis Mumford himself stated that he admired the Modern movement and that his arguments were not against *it*, but against a narrow and dogmatic attitude toward what the Modern movement was about. Now we are talking again of regional trends in our post-Modern architecture, and we are able to understand, I hope, the complexity of architecture and not only the simplification of one or several "styles."

To sum up my critique on the work of Joseph Esherick, I would stress his empirical expressionism. He admires today sketches with vibrant lines from the Viennese expressionistic period with the same enthusiasm as when he discovered them at the very beginning of his career. Sensuality and technology are not contradictory in his way of thinking about architecture; on the contrary, they work together. If forms are what things are and what things do, we need to think of man using and living in space and not think of a building as a thing in itself. We cannot isolate forms from context and from content, walls from the space between them, construction from dwellings, expression from matter and reality, composition from the thing that is being composed. We cannot differentiate ideas from sensations in architecture without killing the specificity of architecture, that is, the "being" of the form, the place. Perhaps by chance we arrive at a perfect correlation between Berkeley as a real place and Berkeley as an English philosopher with a precise theory of the mind and the body, of the sensations and ideas. "Forms are what things are."

NOTES

1 This and other anecdotes in this article are extracted from personal conversations I had with Joseph Esherick from November 1984 to January 1985. I am very grateful to him for his kindness.

2 "Architectural Education in the Thirties and Seventies: A Personal View," in S. Kostof ed., *The Architects* (Oxford University Press, 1977).

3 "Form Is What Things Are," *Progressive Architecture* 45 (May 1964).

4 Paul Ricouer, *La Metaphore Vive* (Paris: Seuil Publications). The recent English translation, *The Rule of the Metaphor*, has, in my opinion, a very bad title. It completely changes the meaning of Paul Ricouer's book.