"About Magic," Preface to *CENTER 16: Latitudes (2011)*
by Michael Benedikt

To the casual observer, *modernism* in architecture means only a few things: large areas of glass, open plans, ever-taller skyscrapers, and general sleekness in design. To the specialist—to the architectural historian, say—modernism means many things, perhaps *too* many things, this as overlooked buildings and architects are discovered and as ever deeper intricacies of description and theory are plumbed.

Practicing designers on the other hand can adopt neither of these perspectives as they daily confront the terrors of building *production*. "Modern" is simply what they do—must do. Why? In part, as I will note again, because the entire construction industry is geared that way, not to say the entire economy.

But first, there is the design process itself, which is rather like playing chess or composing music. There's not much for an outsider to see. But inside the designer's head there's turmoil, war, rapid evolution, the facing-down of (or is it facing-up to?) a growing tangle of problems and opportunities brought into being largely by the (earlier) decisions. To make matters worse, success, the target, is always moving. Some forms "work" and others don't for reasons that are hard to make explicit. And then there are "moves," those rule-bound pseudo-physical transformations, unfoldings, and clarifications of form that are replaceable by, but unmixable with, other moves bound by other rules, which generate other forms, which are (frustratingly) just as good… It's no wonder, then, that convention settles in, no wonder that eras develop styles that become entrenched by the construction industry, and no wonder that architecture firms develop design "signatures," sought after by clients, that can be reliably carried out by assistants, consultants, and contractors.

Indeed, for economic reasons broadly speaking, designing in "the modern style" has today become as natural as breathing for practicing architects world over. The battle against modernism waged by the neo- and post-modern classicists of the 70s and 80s has been lost. Today, with the cyber-biological metaphor in ascendance, buildings are self-evidently and scientifically "systems." These systems are made of components like "skins" and "frames" and "environmental services." Most walls are there to "modulate" sound, and light, and need bear no loads (lest they need to be moved someday) while roofs whisk rain quickly away. Some buildings, true, are being braided by architects into extravagant science-fiction book-covers (I am thinking of the coast of Dubai and the pages of *Evolo*), while others (mostly at resorts) seek to manifest a sophisticated primitivity (real thatch!), but most workaday and institutional buildings have returned to International Style Modernism with a vengeance, just as the young Philip Johnson said they would. Give or take a few CAD-enabled bends and twists, "uniting inside and

outside" is still unexamined Good Idea it has been for a hundred years. So too is "capturing views" (rather than making them, which is much more expensive). Skylit "atria" have been a plus for at least fifty years. Ditto ramps with open rails looking into these skylit atria…all instant but empty drama. And what is a building's human program? Why, it is to "create environments." What kinds of environments? Ones that "work" "bring people together" so that they can "interact" in positive ways. Nothing to object to about *that*, is there?

Clichés abound; simplifications. But among architects over 40, shadows linger, old words and old worlds: the pleasures of pre-modern cities with their arcades and squares and powerful typologies richly variegated at the scale of the hand; the pleasures of buildings with rooms and windows and galleries next to gardens, of buildings with names and pointedly civic or business purposes; of sun and shade and sun again. High in air-conditioned office building, surrounded by white laminate, the architect today leans back from his screen and dreams: he dreams still of oceans and stone, of wind-blown curtains and wood, of buildings that develop rather than erase the difference between indoors and out, that embrace and defend and locate and dignify; he dreams of buildings that have bodies not just bones, that gather up the land rather than perch upon it, that generously serve the generations, waiting to reward being noticed rather than leaping into view...

In short, as reduced as their vocabulary has become, and as narrowed the scope of their practices, modern architects still long for their buildings to perform the kind of *magic* that only fine, and confident, and deeply complex buildings can perform, and did: those quiet miracles of place-making that make us want to stop, dwell a while, and bask in the gift from Time that they are.

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In this volume of *CENTER,* we watch sixteen contemporary modern architects grappling with these shadows, these dreams, even as they accept the major premises and *modus operandi* of the modern style. All are practicing architects, known for their design prowess. Two or three generations removed from the Modern Masters, they are also architects who have emerged from the labyrinths of postmodernism (1970–1990, RIP) and re-committed to Modernism pure and simple. All focus, as they were asked to focus, on a few emblematic buildings in their *oeuvre*: the ideas behind them, their finer points, and their—the architect's—experiences with clients, builders, and locales. All speak the language of *production*, which as designers they must speak, and which we asked them to speak. But, if we listen carefully, we will hear how laced their pragmatism is with pathos, with a longing for an architecture that they themselves might not be in a position to produce, or for which "the modern style" might not yet have the formal resources, even after a hundred years of evolution. We will want to talk about *magic*. But first:

All sixteen architects are also, continentally speaking, *Americans*—North-, Central- and South-. Hence the title of this volume of *CENTER*: *Latitudes*, and the titles of the two symposia that it documents: "Latitudes 1" and "Latitudes 2," held April 2009 and 2010 respectively.

Why only Americans, thus defined?

Because the organizers had wondered if there were not something American about modernism itself, distinguishable still, or more distinguishable in, the Americas. We need to recall that, for all its European heroes, modernism in the arts was arguably "made in America" at the outset. Certainly, through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, admiration of (almost) all things American was endemic to the artistic intelligentsia of Europe, as was travel to America. Gertrude Stein (of Baltimore) moved to Paris in 1903, sure (as Hegel was) that the future belonged to America and that what she was bringing to the *refusés* of Paris was American seed. And it was Picasso who averred that while the French provided the cradle, modernism was the product of Spaniards and Americans.

In the world of architecture during this period, one might recall Adolf Loos's sojourn in America (1893-6), or Frank Lloyd Wright's in Europe (1910-22), or Le Corbusier's trips to North (1935, 1954) and South America (1929, 1936, 1939, 1947 and 1950), or Mies van der Rohe's and Walter Gropius' settling in Chicago and Boston both around 1937, there to amplify and purify the American pragmatism they had known from afar. One might even go so far as to say that it was American *pragmatism*—not social idealism anywhere—that finally put pay to Neoclassicism, the architecture of aristocracy, everywhere, with two world wars "helping."

It's risky to argue that modernism is/was largely American, and it's quite beyond this writer's scholarly expertise to prove it. But it's safe to point to the constant traffic in books, art, movies, music, and creative people between the cultural centers of the Americas—from Boston to Buenos Aires—and the major cities of Europe that characterized the period 1880 to 1960, and argue that influence had started to go both ways instead of just the usual one: Europe to the colonies.[1] Today it's quite clear that the influence is two-way almost entirely.

"Latitudes," the organizers also thought, might refer to the *freedoms* individual architects are able to exercise wherever they were geographically, freedoms with respect to unwritten norms of design followed by their peers (and established by local architect-heroes), as well as with respect to local building codes, local construction procedures, and local patterns of doing business.

[1] For an intriguing if brief account of the "traffic," see Malcolm Bradbury, "The Nonhomemade World: European and American Modernism," *American Quarterly*, 39, 1, 27–36.

In the 1980s, critic and historian Kenneth Frampton coined the term "critical regionalism." This was his way of formulating the tension between the universalism inherent in the modernist project and the uniqueness of regional cultures, geographies, and climates. Which would be the default position, and which the modifier, the resister, the "critical" force? Where was the latitude in all this? It was clear that by the second half of the twentieth century, modernism had become the default style, with local factors acting as the modifier/resister/provider-of latitude. During the first half of the century, it had been the other way round, with only architects like Aalto being able to meld the two perfectly ambiguously. To speak about "latitudes" today, then, is certainly to speak about regionalism—even "critical regionalism"—in terms of climate and geography. Which is well and good. But "latitudes" in the sense of freedom(s) puts us in mind of the existential situation of every mid-career architect struggling to make his or her mark. Here is their task: to create an architecture that is personal, *and* local, *and* universal, using up-to-date technologies, in the language of modernism and avoiding, as though they were poison, the techniques and ideals (and certainly vocabulary) of classical architecture and urbanism.

The question to which this volume of *CENTER* devolves is this: have North Americans, Central Americans, and South Americans taken to this task American-ly? I leave it to the reader to come to some conclusions about this. I have offered so far that *pragmatism* is the American ingredient, or at least, the North American one.[2] To that I would like to add an ambition visible not so much in the polemics of modernism, but in the buildings as actually built. These reflect what architects *really* want to do, and always have wanted to do, regardless of "style." I spoke of it earlier: it is to make their buildings *magical*.

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Much has been written about "magical realism" in Latin America, a literary movement centered on writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Luis Borges. This is a literature characterized by a taste for the uncanny manifesting itself in ordinary life, a literature interested in portraying worlds in which characters think it unremarkable that, on occasion, fate would laugh, the dead would visit, or the laws of physics would suspend themselves. How neat it would be, I thought when preparing for this preface, to argue that *magical realism* was what South American architects uniquely brought to the modernist sensibility: the designer as novelist, as world-maker, in whose hands the fantastic would appear straightforward and the straightforward fantastic.[3] Perfect! And it

[2] There is also the simple availability of *space*. Indeed, one of things most exciting to European artists and architects, was America's surplus of land, of frontier, of wilderness. This theme deserves a treatment of its own.

[3] For an exploration of this theme, see Sheryl Tucker de Vasquez, "Light is Like Water: Barragan and the Question of Magic," in *CENTER 15: Divinity Creativity Complexity*, 2009.

seemed to work well with what I heard at the Latitudes symposia. "Pragmatic realism" could be North American, and "social realism" could be European, and "magical realism"…a book!

Alas, such a tidy division does not hold. As this volume of *CENTER* will show, the longing to create magical architecture lies not just in the Catholic Latin heart, but in the Protestant Norteño's too, all the way up into Canada. Nor is pragmatism confined to the Northern latitudes. The two motivations—pragmatism and magic—are inextricably mixed with the motivation to do at least *some* social good. Maybe that says something about architecture as a profession. So setting social realism aside, and on the assumption that the pragmatism of modern practice is well appreciated, I should like to turn to *magic* for the remainder of this Preface. Does magic not have features too? Characteristics? Aspects?

Turns out it does—but the subject of magic is not well theorized. "Magic" may refer to sorcery and alchemy, to clairvoyance, telepathy, and other superhuman powers, indeed, to all sorts of paranormal-supernatural events if and as they are brought about by (some) person's intentional action. See God as the agent, and you have miracles. Go to the movies and you will see plenty of magic simulated.

More productive for us, however, is to look at magic in a modern framework, which is to say, on the knowledge that supernatural feats are really natural ones, involving deployments of unknown or superior technology, sleights of hand, or demonstrations of unusual strength or powers of observation—all of which it is the job of magicians to produce in the cause of amazement and entertainment. But there is more to magic than amazement and entertainment. Done well, magic also serves to unsettle our certainties about How Things Work or Should Look. Replacing monotony with marvel, magic—even magic that we *know* has a rational explanation—lets a light shine from the deed or thing that makes us feel oddly fortunate to witness it, to *be* there, in its presence.[4] And *that* effect is truly magical.

A visit to Wikipedia yields a handy list of what professional magicians call "effects." Here they are (lightly edited):

> **Productions**: The magician produces something from nothing: a rabbit from an empty hat, a fan of cards from thin air, a shower of coins

[4] It's dismissive to call this brand of magic "illusionism" and the people who practice it "illusionists." It's not that it isn't or that they aren't; it's that from the observer's point of view, knowing that something is an illusion doesn't much reduce the marvel that he or she naturally experiences. It helps not a whit to know that a magnetic field is making a steel ball hover in mid-air (what is a "magnetic field" anyway), or that the dove was in the sleeve all the time, or that the amputated faucet gushing water into a bowl is actually being fed by a thin upward jet of water centered in the downward-flowing outer shell. When we see a long bar of a building "floating" in space, it hardly helps to know, rationally, that this is a cantilever, that a deep steel truss has been worked into structure. Of course it has. But look!

from an empty bucket. Or the magician him or herself appears in a puff of smoke. All of these effects are productions.

Vanishes: The magician makes something disappear: a coin, a cage of doves, milk from a newspaper, an assistant from a cabinet, or even the Statue of Liberty.[5] A vanish, being the reverse of a production, may use a similar technique in reverse.

Transformations: The magician transforms something from one state into another: a silk handkerchief changes color, a lady turns into a tiger, a random playing card changes to the spectator's chosen card. A transformation can be seen as a combination of a vanish and a production.

Restorations: The magician destroys an object, then restores it back to its original state: a rope is cut, a newspaper is torn, a woman is sawn in half,[6] a borrowed watch is smashed to pieces—then they are all restored to their original state.

Teleportations: The magician causes something to move from one place to another: a borrowed ring is found inside a ball of wool, a canary inside a light bulb, an assistant from a cabinet to the back of the theatre. When two objects exchange places, it is called a *transposition*: a simultaneous, double teleportation.

Escapes: The magician is placed in a restraining device or death trap, and escapes to safety. Examples include being put in a straitjacket in an overflowing tank of water, and being tied up and placed in a car being sent through a car crusher.

Levitations: The magician defies gravity, either by making something float in the air, or with the aid of another object (suspension). A silver ball floats around a cloth, an assistant floats in mid-air, a scarf dances in a sealed bottle, the magician hovers a few inches off the floor.

Penetrations: The magician makes a solid object pass through another: a set of steel rings link and unlink, a candle penetrates an arm, swords pass through an assistant in a basket, a saltshaker penetrates the

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[5]Wikipedia®, The Free Encyclopedia, March 2011, "Vanishing the Statue of Liberty," 15 Aug 2011 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanishing_the_Statue_of_Liberty>

[6]Wikipedia®, The Free Encyclopedia, March 2011, "Sawing a woman in half," 15 Aug 2011 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sawing_a_woman_in_half>

table-top, a man walks through a mirror. Sometimes referred to as a "solid-through-solid."

Predictions: The magician predicts the choice of a spectator, or the outcome of an event under seemingly impossible circumstances: a newspaper headline is predicted, the total amount of loose change in the spectator's pocket, a picture drawn on a slate.

Effects! How can we apply that word to architecture without hurting the feelings of the committed modernist? For is modernism not committed to the credo of non-deception, of *honesty* of material and structure*, truthful expression* of structure and function, *plainness* of communication? Is talk of "effects" not more appropriate to discussions of postmodern architecture, and before that, of Mannerist and Baroque buildings with all their tricks of perspective, sky-like domes and ceilings, spilling stairs, flowing stone, and marble facings, and before that of Gothic, with its re-creations of natural atmospheres (e.g. the cathedral/forest, bone-columns, "flying" buttresses) and of Greek (consider the Ionic and Corinthian orders)? The answer is no.

But this is not news: twentieth-century architects were as committed to effecting magic—to pulling off *effects*—as architects ever were; and twenty-first-century architects may be more so, armed as they are with computers and Arup's engineers. Go back. Consider the immense interest in the effect of *levitation* in Frank Lloyd Wright's oeuvre, from Johnson Wax to the Guggenheim and Falling Water. Mies van der Rohe's iconic Barcelona Pavilion was a veritable compendium of magical effects: *levitations* (the entire roof plane, the up-down symmetry), *vanishes* (the columns, the glass wall), *penetrations* (as outer walls run clean through glass ones to the outdoors) and *productions* (the statue in the pool, light from a wall). Think of Le Corbusier's, from the Villa Savoy's *production* of a roof on the garden, not to mention *levitated* living floor, and *transformation* of the house, to the chapel at La Tourette, both the main, all-but-occult space and the side chapel with its three floating altars and undulating walls. Or Ronchamps.[7] Or Kahn's vaults-that-aren't at the Kimbell.

Architects produce drawings of the future constantly, from visions of cities to renderings of next year. Are these not *predictions*, many of which become true? And no sooner does one have tight lot, does the architect not dream up a way to *escape* it.

[7] We take elevators for granted, but they are quite magical; they are as close as architects can come to effecting *teleportation*. Encasing them in glass, and affixing them to atria or on the surface of tall buildings, is well and good, producing as they do the sensation of flight. But more magic awaits designers who keep elevators enclosed, tilting and twisting their shafts, so that the world left-behind and the world emerged-into are even less related!

And so, I think, the matter remains to this day in the world of modern architecture. For example, there is hardly a building built in Brazil today under the rubric "modern" that does not recapitulate either Oscar Niemeyer's taste for unlikely balance and lightness or Paulo Mendez de la Rocha's daringly long spans, the need for which he nearly always found: *levitations* both, "tricks."

Or look at Brigitte Shim's Figures 8, 9, and 10, showing "a porous wooden wall…creating openings that allowed…a glimpse into another world, and making something invisible a present part of the experience:" a *production* involving a great deal of *levitation*, and the *penetrations*: materials coming and going apparently through each other (Figure 31). Compare Angelo Bucci's House in Santa Teresa in Brazil with Maryanne Thompson's Westport House in Massachusetts. Both *levitate*, one by spanning like a bridge, the other floating like a raft. Both have forms *penetrating* each other; both maximize sliding glass and have furniture, sparse, whose relation to the polished floor is rather like waterbugs on a pond, held up magically by surface tension. Paraguay's Solano Benitez is as interested as any in magic, but his use of the inexpensive materials of brick and concrete reaches a pitch that approaches the effect of *restoration:* as though the bricks themselves were found in ruins and reconstituted into an architecture that was there before; but nearby a thin horizontal shell of solid brick hangs precariously by a few pieces of steel, detached on all sides. His father's gravesite consists of four low and floating concrete beams set in a large square in rather casually kempt nature. They are lined on the inside by mirrors. The family enters the square to see itself multiplied as they bend down or sit, with the precinct erased by the echo of nature within the square in every direction. "Here is my son with his feet on the ground, and in the mirrors he is floating like he lives in my dreams," writes Benitez. These words could have been written by Borges.

Some architectural magicians, on the other hand, are nothing if not glamorous; showmen. Edwin Chan's presentation of his work at Frank Gehry's goes to the point. Consider the models of the Louis Vuitton Museum and wonder when the doves will fly out of this glittering scarf, or how the building might cam-bump away like a Transformers doll and become something else entirely with the same parts. (Unfortunately, copyright concerns prevented Chan's paper from appearing in this volume of *CENTER*.)

Let me not go on. This volume's editor, Barbara Hoidn, will write more exactly of this *CENTER's* contents: sixteen architects gamely defining themselves by *latitude* and *American-ness*.

As for this Preface: the reader may or may not be convinced that magic is a legitimate rubric under which to carry out a critical account of modern architecture. In suggesting it could be, I do not intend to be dismissive. *Venustas*—delight—has long been admitted as an equal partner of the triumvirate with *firmitas* and *commoditas*. But *venustas* has

unfortunately been lumped in with *beauty*, which it is not. *Delight* is not to be so easily repurposed, and perhaps this discussion of magic helps us remember why. For delight is a drawing-in of breath in wonder; delight lies in being charmed; and both—wonder and charm—are attendant to *magic* more precisely than they are to beauty. This magic is the magic once commanded by priests and poets and physicians and prestidigitators, and now, let us admit it, by American video-, movie- and computer-makers where FX is the rule. But in the old world—the world of sun and wind and doors—magic stays in the hands of *architects*: productions, vanishes, transformations, restorations, teleportations, escapes, levitations, penetrations, and predictions, all.

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