Recurring Surfaces:
Architecture in the Experience Economy
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Architecture today is split. Arrayed on the one hand are varied, intelligent, and often provocative investigations into the making of form. New materials, new design processes, virtuoso manipulations of irregular geometries, whole new metaphors for the generation of form, surprising borrowings from unlikely sources: each of these characterizes some of the most innovative design thinking of our time. Equally, architects working with self-imposed formal constraints and strict spatial orders have brought minimalist modernism to new levels, while others speculate on the future of architecture in a world increasingly dominated by visual media and virtual flows of information.

On the other hand, and set against such vivid imaginings, is the vast majority of building today: the dreary landscape we spend much of our adult lives unconsciously trying to screen out, a nation of functional footage costumed in the abridged populisms of PomoLite. Just look out your window. It arises from those expedient and often unquestioned conventions that help each of us get through yet another day at work but, in the case of architecture, remain on the surface of the earth for decades and decades to come. There is really no malevolence in its making, just indifference, but the result is a built environment so bleak even those who have profited mightily from it race to live elsewhere.

Between the two stands a gulf. Architects and builders looking to wrap up another project, limited by budgets and client expectations, crowded out from their own initial design dreams by the sheer difficulty of getting anything built at all—let alone a good building—can lose patience with theoretical challenges or, more often, ignore them altogether. Indeed, many of the more thoughtful designers today see themselves operating against a backdrop of banality and tired acquisitiveness, a tsunami of indifference about how we build. At the same time, an especially inventive area of current commercial practice is the trend toward the creation of themed environments, from resort parks to restaurants, from offices to shopping malls. Relying on the creation of atmosphere through images, whether painted, built up in relief, or projected on screens, themed environments are, for all their visual evocations, literary allusions; they refer to another place. However romantic or thrilling, they are not about building or form. Thus, such work, whether lame or cunning, represents not just a diminished degree of design energies, but appears downright antagonistic to a premise of formal development or to the expression of new materials and methods or new processes of design.

This essay contends that both commercial-populist and avant-garde practices today may be gathered under the big tent of theming, despite evident and substantial differences in their design agendas, despite often contradictory motivations in their pursuit, and against all appearances to the contrary. Both coordinate sensory cues within a given place to achieve a consistent set of symbolic expressions; both aim self-consciously to convey specific meaning with form. Both aim as well at target audiences; the goal is not a utopian reconfiguration of society but meaningful communication with a group defined in part by its ability to read the symbolic cues presented.

That this is an overly broad definition for theming is agreed: nearly any design large or complex enough to engage cultural and environmental factors could with this definition be considered an example of theming. This observation, however, only leads to my central claim that the very proliferation of themed environments betokens an emerging mode of architectural reception: serial immersion in narrative environments, itself an effect of an emerging experience economy. We—that is, "the public"—have in fact already become expert at reading a symbolic landscape, one bristling with referential content; we have come to expect this condition and, as a result, we look for it everywhere. Theming, in this sense, has become a common way of understanding architecture. As such, it deserves examination as a means of interpreting architecture, as a means of relating architecture to the culture that produces it. This essay looks at the 1970s debate between the Whites and the Grays as one progenitor of today's split and, by placing that debate within the context of a cultural search for authenticity, argues that both White and Gray positions participated equally in the formation of a new paradigm for the reception of architecture: theming.
The morality of style is one of the permeating myths of architecture. Within the professional trade journals, the house by Richard Meier, regarded as an elegant statement of the tradition of early modern architecture, "la iguana."

Formal analysis of the composition certainly renders a similarity with Le Corbusier's Five Points of 1923. Its iconicographic motif, such as the free facade, the articulated staircase with two different banisters and the round columns set in a shallow space behind the window plane, extends the building well within a professionally orthodox style.

However, the recent appearance of several advertisements relying heavily on employment of this building begs the question of further iconological interpretation. At a point in time some forty years later than its paradigm, such proposals can only seem slightly improbable, if not, at least questionable, the relevancy of the style altogether. Being used to push a plush stereo unit through suggestions of extremely sophisticated good taste, and investment in a financial corporation by suggesting a future life. Meier's house appears to possess a schizophrenic symbolic content. Through a softening of the revolutionary overtones of its sources, it must appear inevitably as another form of packaging one either currently available to a corporate capitalist elite or one to be aspired to. The dialectical tensions of Le Corbusier are gone, and the International Style stands before actually being recognized as a "découvert de la vie."

Peter C. Papademetriou
We Have All Been Here Before
We Have All Been Here Before

Following spirited critiques of modernism in the 1960s, some architects began to seek new goals for architecture. These goals went off in various directions, but two of the more distinct ones soon found themselves at odds with one another. Five Architects and Learning from Las Vegas, both published in 1972, are the leading documents for these two directions, pitting an athletic formalism against a cheerfully compromised conviviality in what was soon deemed a “debate” between “Whites” and “Grays.” Less an opposition than a dialogue, as Robert A. M. Stern noted, Whites offered a kind of aesthetic withdrawal, an inward focus on the operations and motives of form-making, whereas Grays proposed an engagement with contemporary social life that could be so complete as to make it nearly impossible to tell high and low apart.1

An impetus for both positions was the recognition that the Modern Movement, to whatever extent there had actually been one, was over. It was not that modernism suddenly disappeared or even that it was waning. Indeed, at just this moment architects steeped in modernism and at the height of their careers launched a number of architecture schools that remain to this day marked by their founding ideals. It was more a matter that, as Colin Rowe put it in his introduction to Five Architects: “The intensity of [modernism’s] social vision became dissipated. ... and hence, with deflation of conviction, there followed divergence of interest.”2 In other words, with modern architecture’s utopian fuse extinguished, the time had come to propose directions towards a new architecture.

While these future directions were far from settled, the charges leveled against modernism were often aimed at its positivist spirit: its fixation on function, its insistence on formal accord between the manufacture of its parts and their final assembly on the site, and, in general, the sense that a technological or instrumental rationality had eclipsed other values. Critics charged that this tendency to define architectural and urban problems narrowly along their technical dimensions was responsible for modernism’s indifference to place and human scale, a trait increasingly apparent in urban-renewal projects of the time. Modernism had lent aesthetic legitimacy to many postwar projects but had also become embroiled in the all-too evident failure of such developments to address a host of other factors. Worse, perhaps, was that the evacuation of humanist content in design thinking had been conducted in the name of improving the human condition. Many of the critiques that followed in the 1960s sought to get beyond what more and more appeared to be the limited scope of modern architecture.

Some of the attacks leveled against architectural modernism were in the same terms as criticisms that were also being brought to bear on the whole of American society at this moment. Since the 1950s, critical analyses of American society—its intoxicating postwar economic expansion and its new global swagger—had focused on a people who’d lost their bearings: who, in the rush for the suburbs forgot their fellow Americans left in the city, as well as their own ethnic roots; who, in their lusty acquisition of goods, had lost sight of life’s larger purposes; who, in their quest for filling up every square inch of leisure time, had forgotten the meaning of work and good deeds; and who, in their efforts to fit in, had lost touch with who they were themselves. Authors like William H. Whyte, David Riesman, and Paul Goodman argued there was no center within the shell of well being that Americans had built around themselves. Daniel Boorstin, in his 1961 book The Image, described the “thicket of unreality which stands between us and the facts of life.”3 These critiques often focused on new technologies that seemed to be put in use before their implications could even be questioned, let alone understood. Herbert Marcuse’s central argument in One-Dimensional Man, for example, was that technology influenced thought widely, transforming multivalent social issues into merely technical problems.4 Many suspected, moreover, that new technologies were foisted on the populace merely to increase corporate profits; this was a central theme of Vance Packard’s popular writings.

No single episode in the 1960s conveys this apprehension better than “plastics,” the post-utopian, one-word treatise uttered at a nondescript backyard party in the 1967 film The Graduate.5 For the protagonist, Benjamin Braddock, and for viewers as well, the term conjured the subordination of matter to the shaping interests of profit-making, along with the molding of consumer preferences to the same end. It was the material from which American society minted its think-alike citizenry, and it was Benjamin’s looming cultural inheritance, replete with notions of phoniness, cheap creativity, and a non-reactive nature. “Plastics” and the seductions of bourgeois middle age were exactly what Benjamin ended up fleeing from, although, as the film’s final scene makes clear—with the camera centered on the receding past—he had no idea where he was going. Indeed, the final scene unfolds as a veritable tableau of Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history”—facing the past and being blown backwards into the future—as we, the viewers, looking back, are driven forward by a tempest of anger from the prior scene—twisted mouths, shaking fists of those whose unsensed self-deceptions Benjamin (the character) rejects—and onward to something unseen either by us or the film’s protagonists, who face forward but stare absenty. In short, just at the point they started their journey to the heavens, Americans were never more anxious about what it meant to inhabit their piece of the earth.
"The Real Thing": Authenticity and Architecture

The responses to this anxiety were many, and the consequences are still debated. But perceptions of falseness and inner potential withered by social expectations energized a search for something more honest, more "authentic," a term that comes to have enormous significance at this time. Marshall Berman, for instance, describes coming of age in the 1960s and his generation's "search for personal authenticity" as preface to his history of "radical individualism" in Western society. Literary critic Lionel Trilling, also, in a series of lectures from the end of the decade said: "That the word [authenticity] has become part of the moral slang of our day points to the peculiar nature of our fallen condition, our anxiety over the credibility of existence and of individual existences.**

The search for authenticity took many forms and led to enterprises both noble and trivial. On the one hand, antagonism toward the growing might of global corporations found inspiration in the allegedly un-self-conscious behaviors of everyday life and the possibility that popular culture might be, if not contrary to commercial interests, at least unpredictable and annoying to them. A number of studies from the 1960s, such as Russell Nye's The Unembarrassed Muse and Susan Sontag's Against Interpretation, argued the validity, or at least the vitality, of popular culture. On the other hand, a search for fullness led to the radical individualism described by Berman at the start of his book as "a dream of an ideal community in which individuality will not be subsumed and sacrificed, but fully developed and expressed."** In this dream, the individual opts for a demanding personal morality rather than yielding to social pressures to fit in, even when such a path points toward discomfort, confrontation, or violence. Though hardly unique to this moment, both the celebration of "the people" as bearers of authentic culture and the call for individual liberation were staple preoccupations in the 1960s. Indeed, the decade's greatest political achievements bring together these concerns, as, for example, with the Civil Rights movement, which joined its awareness of inequity and oppression with a mandate to nurture every human's inner potential.

At the same time, as critics of all political persuasions have noted, populist ideals dissolved readily into masscult and indulgence of the banal, while liberation of the self sometimes turned to solipsism, with transgression becoming an end in itself. Equally, both attitudes were susceptible to exploitation by the commercial interests they had set out to escape. One need only think of the wildly successful advertising campaign for the Volkswagen Beetle, which combined the people's car with an appeal to non-conformism, and all toward the end of selling more stuff. In fact, probably nowhere was a self-consciously counter-cultural ideal of authenticity more promulgated than in the very commercial culture so many were seeking respite from.*

However admirable in their heyday, architectural modernism's various goals had become freighted with industrial imagery, which was simply too close to the industrial capitalism that by 1970 was believed to lurk behind environmental degradation, insidious social controls, and a cruel and otherwise paranoid war in Vietnam. Further, as Rowe claimed, the spread of modernism as built fact had devalued its "ideal content": "The building became no longer a subversive proposition about a possible Utopian future. It became instead the acceptable decoration of a certainly non-Utopian present."** Utopian thinking generally, I would add, was more or less usurped in 1968 with another film event: 2001. A Space Odyssey.** With a scope encompassing human evolution itself—from ape to near-perfect artificial intelligence to starchild—Stanley Kubrick composed a hopeful (if opaque) message, and he did so in a stunning visual format that consequently revolutionized visions of humankind's prospects. Thus, with utopian visions more vivid elsewhere, architects cast about for other sites of architectural enthusiasm.

Both Gray and White positions emerge in this larger context of a crisis of authenticity. The Gray position emphasized a need to communicate with the users for whom a building was intended, along with a complementary challenge to speak to those users in a language they already knew well. More often than not, this language entailed the commercial vernacular that design elites typically disdain. By referring to vernacular architecture, Grays appealed to a notion of cultural legibility and thus revealed a faith in the authentic sensibilities of the people, however debased by commercial manipulations. By claiming an "iconic detachment" from their sources, Grays implied they were somehow refining that mettle of authenticity from its commercial dross. Architecture would benefit as well: the authors of Learning from Las Vegas suggested that the commercial vernacular pointed toward new horizons for architecture, just as pioneer modernists learned from the industrial forms of factories, grain silos, and steamships. Similarly, just as many modernists had hoped to get beyond historicist architecture—that is, architecture inauthentic with respect to its own era—so Grays tried to get beyond a mechanistic mindset that had become a source of inauthenticity in their own time.

In contrast, the eponymous Five Architects fixed themselves within the high formal quality of the work presented, which was intense, self-aware, focused on its own means, and steeped in admiration for the peerless plastic masterpieces of modernism: Le Corbusier's villas of the 1920s. Focusing on the irreducible operations at the heart of any and all design—that is, manipulation of form—Whites redefined

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themselves to aesthetic precepts of modern architecture. John Hejduk, for example, suggested that Corbusier had already sketched in the grand panorama, and his own work merely elaborated aspects of the scene, attending to possibilities that had gone unfulfilled. Whites emphasized in particular what everyday buildings usually lack: formal austerity along with spatial richness, a combination that might be said even to characterize modern architecture. Their projects advertise their commitment to the plastic, not the symbolic imagination; Whites were unblushing beside their exclusively formal preoccupations. After so many calls for form to serve social agendas and for architects to submerge aesthetic aspirations to an unremitting concern for function, apologetic attention to form itself was liberating.

Certainly, neither White nor Gray should be understood monochromatically, so to speak. Whites included the elaborate theoretical explorations of Peter Eisenman alongside the nearly elemental cubic forms of Richard Meier’s beach houses; the muted murals and backyard additions of Michael Graves beside the paintings and poetry of Hejduk. Charles Gwathmey even protested his being painted white. Grays ranged widely as well, including besides Venturi and Scott Brown and Stern, Charles Moore and, as Vincent Scully argued in The Shingle Style Today, Romaldo Giurgola, Frank Israel, and even Louis Kahn. The Whites even had an operative historian in Colin Rowe, similar to Scully for the Grays. Besides introducing Five Architects, Rowe’s later book Collage City (written with Fred Koetter) might be understood as a further working out of two opposed impulses, one based in the technological preconditions of art, which modernism at its most moralistic hoped to elevate, and the other rooted in the “half-truth” uncovered by Moore regarding Disney World: people like it. “Do the sewers validate the Opéra or does the Opéra validate the sewers; which has priority, the servant or the served?” Collage becomes an aesthetic device to accommodate urban modes that, although interdependent, refuse to be reduced to one another.

These positions should not be considered mutually exclusive, and neither attitude toward form-making should imply a specific political orientation. Grays eagerly made their case for formal legitimacy, and Whites were highly communicative, albeit in regard to a smaller and more carefully defined academic audience. Although White architects are more readily seen pursuing what would soon be described as an “autonomous” architecture, Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour were careful to reserve their high-style credentials by claiming their ironic distance from popular taste. Similarly, although Grays are explicit in their references to the past, Whites are no less interested in “history,” though sympathy with the notion of type as the spatial or, more loosely, formal template designers begin their work with, and, frankly, by drawing from designs a half-century old. Indeed, in this literal sense of history, Gray and White are distinguished not by whether they return to the past, but how far they go, whether they stop in the 1920s or skitter back a bit further to the 1880s (though, to be sure, the break in aesthetic thought bracketed by those years is nothing to be skittered over). With utopian futures closed off and notions of progress discredited, it is perhaps not surprising that architects would believe the past was ripe for redevelopment.

Still, despite their overlaps and distinctions, White and Gray positions may be characterized by an introspective concern for self-actualization and an explicitly populist program. Writing in the aftermath of the 1960s, Christopher Lasch identified this polar pair as a hallmark of the “culture of narcissism.” In either case it involves discontent with convention—Lasch’s “devaluation of routine”—and an embrace of formerly forbidden pleasures: on the White hand, the hedonism of absorption in internal doings and, on the Gray hand, melting individual identity into the everyday material from which it arose, a swooning surrender to either the self or the setting. Further, explicit justification of one’s position, frequent for both White and Gray, often led, Lasch wrote, to a “banal pseudo-self-awareness.” In this context, the democratic overtones of the Gray position may be seen to represent a middlebrow, large-print polemic, while White navel-gazing reflects the 1960s turn-on-tune-in-drop-out flight to heightened consciousness that was as far-out as it was self-involved. Both sought authenticity, that is, a sense of ontological virtue: one at the still white-hot, white-walled heart of formal invention and the other outside in a social sphere, or, more precisely, at the very threshold where the social becomes the architectural. But for all their careful delineations, Gray ironies were, for the less attentive, lost in the celebration of commercial excess; refined incongruities did not translate well into casino colloquial.
Theming: Literal and Even More Literal

Some thirty years later, both positions also share something else: an affinity with a new mode of architectural reception that, still unnamed at the time, is reflected in the growing trend today toward themed environments. Theming may be defined as the creation of material forms, ranging in scale from a room to a district, that rely for effect on symbolic references to cultural narratives. Of course, symbolic reference is nothing new and such a general definition excludes little. Adrian Forty, for example, questions whether the royal palace and gardens of Versailles might themselves constitute "a political theme park." But the primary trait distinguishing earlier symbolic uses of space from those of the present day is, as Mark Goddien er puts it, the recent "melding of material forms and commercial culture," along with popular culture and mass media serving as main sources of imagery. With the sheer ubiquity of commercial culture today, and with expectations for technological (rather than architectural) solutions to functional issues in the built environment and, furthermore, granting a growing tendency to understand built environments largely through their symbolic references—which is this essay’s main proposition—that at least some of that generality is warranted.14

Encompassing a broad range of places and uses, themed environments coordinate sensory and symbolic cues to evoke a general mood or, more often, a time or place removed from the local context. A rainforest in a shopping mall or a railroad suburb along a remote stretch of the Gulf Coast would be fine examples. The illusion need not be perfect, merely sufficient to create a steady reference. The interior of Nortel Communications’ headquarters in Toronto, for example, is very clearly not a city street, but it effectively communicates an image of “city life.” The references actuate an individual’s internalized narratives, gleaned over a lifetime from various media, and thus help fill out the visual cues with knowledge of suitable and expected behaviors; the visual cues, in other words, point to a larger narrative framework upon which to organize one’s impressions. Of course, such narratives are selective. Nortel’s "city," for example, reads as a place for casual conversation and the convenience of nearby personal services rather than, say, a forum for political debate, or an edgy friction between diverse populations.

Already rooted in reference, a Gray position, with its emphasis on image and allusion, is easily judged to be the low-relief precursor to today’s environments of reference. Stern, for example, imagined buildings that told stories and spoke to a public in meaningful terms, while Scully demonstrated the inevitability of referentiality even in the freshest works. Favoring purposeful prosaic signification over modernism’s plastic forms, Grays readily acknowledged difference to other issues, even to space itself. As Venturi was quick to point out, a focus on symbolic communication flattens space: Gray space is rendered as the distance of transmission, how far a signal travels before being received.15

Theming, or, less ambitiously, characteristics of theming are also evident at several levels in the White program, despite its being usually understood as contrary in character to the Gray program. Most apparent is the Corbusian palette. The reappearance of formal traits like smooth white walls, flat roofs, and conspicuous contrasts of solid and void is precisely what Rowe tries to explain away in his introduction to Five Architects. Frampton as well, in the same book, suggests that visiting these projects is akin to traveling in time. The manifest anachronism, however, is recast as a kind of equi- or trans-chronism, that is, modernism’s aesthetic promise, forgotten during the long winter of Depression, WWII, and dizzy postwar consumption, is, finally, to be fulfilled. Convincing or not, the claim emphasizes the book’s architectural ambitions and prevents our reading it as a document of stylistic revival.

Another level involves the careful delimitation of a conceptual and perceptual context. This is most evident with Eisenman, who, as Stern notes, wrote the White theory. His writings, which focus on formal moves, usher in his designs and further focus the reader’s attention in specific ways. He precludes our reading of programmatic accommodation or familiar formal relationships, since these would distract us from seeing the project as a purely geometric operation. Context is cropped, not unlike the extraordinary attention paid in theme parks to screening one period attraction from another: focusing the viewer’s attention on the proper objects of perception and providing a privileged narrative for deciphering the given environment are methods used to generate a successful “reading” of the environment in question. Our understanding is, in this way, scripted; professed as a pair, setting and script trigger each other. The script structures experience of the building; indeed, since actual experience of somebody else’s house is limited, the script stands in for experience. It directs experience toward the architectural. In fact, Eisenman’s conceptual framing of an otherwise familiar formal vocabulary is exactly what Rosemarie Bletter thought was the most interesting aspect of Five Architects when she reviewed it.16

Related to this is Eisenman’s particular concern with linguistic notions. Explicit about trying to control denotation and connotation, and referring to Chomsky’s generative transformational grammar, Eisenman implies that signification is, indeed, the larger context for his work. Adamant about the non-referentiality of his projects, he ends up something worthsay about non-communication. Still, the reader who invests the time to follow Eisenman’s account is rewarded by an intense conceptual journey through a syntactic structure, with few familiar landmarks. Again, though, the effect parallels an effect of themed environments, which aim to take us away from convention and engage us in a narrative adventure that exceeds our everyday routine. In this case, the script not only creates a textualized object, it also functions as a kind of conceptual buffer zone, a theoretical perimeter to screen out both context and banal interpretations.
Further, the explicit script regarding design generation is itself underpinned by two implied scripts. One repeats an essentially psychoanalytic premise, that is, a latent process has given rise to a present organization. To understand that organization fully, then, one must make the latency manifest; the goal is to tell a story of the object’s coming-to-be. The narrated design process becomes central to the greater project as Eisenman’s text-and-object performs an unveiling, a presentation of a buried truth. Reading the script makes the object-in-the-present transparent to its process of becoming. As in psychoanalysis, this is not a nostalgic exercise but represents real work on the present condition. It is, as well, based on the notions of a tenable substrate that explains and authenticates the present configuration of an object. Eisenman’s success in actuating this script may be measured by the extent to which he leads us to see the object through the tale of its generation. The space of a project like the Barenholz House becomes a theater of revelation.

The other script is the story of modernism’s passing. To ascribe a state of non-referentiality, using elements of a formal language that was in its own time meant to describe a utopian vision of a transparent society, at the cusp of the decline of that vision and the simultaneous rise of various populist languages, and to do so by employing analytical tools of semiotics that try to explain the syntactic and referential mission of those languages is, from the perspective of today, the stuff of high tragedy: it is a gesture rich in meaning, with an abiding sense of loss and a corollary heroic attempt to restore a faded Camelot. Erased meaning returns as metaphor. The implied moral is that autonomous geometric manipulation, like a rightful hereditary line, is the proper engine for continued avant-garde production.  

At the same time, the White position must be distinguished from other sorts of theming for several reasons. First, the link with commercial culture is not a primary trait, although obviously the idea of resisting or stepping outside commercial culture may easily be construed as one. Second, the narratives being referred to are not pre-given, that is, the particular set of references employed—the geometric manipulations in Eisenman’s case—are determined by the architect. They are invented, not selected. The story is not about an idealized past or a zippy future; it is, rather, a story about making architecture. Eisenman’s houses, along with the texts nailed to their doorposts, refer directly to the process of design, if they are themed, the theme is the stuff of architectural invention—the design process itself—and its readers are those committed to rethinking design. The script is a concern shared at that moment by other architects as well, including Rem Koolhaas, who worked as a scriptwriter before venturing into architecture, and Hejduk, who suggested that continued architectural invention will require new, and not necessarily functional, “programs.” Scripts foster absorption in the work, setting up an idealized field that creates meaning after the collapse of commonly held modernist values. Third, the designs end up exceeding their scripts many times over; they cannot be reduced only to a script. The continuing attention gathered by key White works is due less to subsequent influence—whether formally (limited influence) or in terms of encouraging the creation of text/objects (tremendous influence)—than to their formal integrity and richness. Like the best architecture, they are open to and encourage multiple readings.

**Oppositioning the Multiplication of Choice**

A far more important contribution to theming, though, than either the Gray or White position, is the fact of both of them. Although there might have been conviction within one camp or another, both sides were frank about their own limits and, indeed, undemanding about greater acceptance of their terms. With each position offering unique attractions, and with neither claiming a moral imperative, architects were free to choose. Rowe stated directly that the dissolution of a modernist program had created a “context of choices.” The simultaneous appearance of functionally equivalent aesthetic alternatives is, in effect, a kind of pluralism; the proper response to pluralism for practitioner or client, eventually, is a choice. Further, choice is one of the more vexing issues of postmodern society: critics on the right mourn the loss of social imperatives that once placed limits on personal choices, and so fostered social cohesiveness. Critics on the left worry that although choice proliferates, it is only within the marketplace, making the actual difference between choices insignificant. Choice—as an architectural
possibility, as a class-based demand—has yet to receive sustained theoretical investigation, perhaps because of its connections with both consumerism and a seemingly inauthentic eclecticism.

In the business world though, where affecting choice affects survival, the matter was taken up rather carefully. A context of choices was exactly the condition identified as a new problem for industry by Jack Trout and Al Ries, two marketing agency principals, in a series of articles published in Advertising Age in 1972 and elaborated in a book several years later. The authors argued that technological advances and faster design-to-market cycles had led to a situation where products were less differentiated in functional terms. This meant, they said, that manufacturers needed to find other means to distinguish their products. The authors proposed that the answer was not in the design of the product at all. Rather, it was in discerning an appropriate mental category, an as-of-yet unrecognized personal need or market niche. Conceding theoretical pronouncements about the presence of absence to the French, Trout and Ries advised advertisers to “cherchez le cerveau,” that is, to find a “hole” in the consumer’s mind and exploit it. With this, they announced “The Positioning Era”: “positioning is not what you do to a product. Positioning is what you do to the mind of the prospect. That is, you position the product in the mind of the prospect.” Commercial success, in other words, was no longer about making things, it was about framing things, about guiding consumption, not improving production.\(^1\)

This was especially important for those markets dominated by a single brand; inventing choices is one way to actively splinter a market leader’s control, just as a context of choices in architecture signaled the end of ideological hegemony. The authors suggested articulating values that were contrary to those of the industry leader and pointed to examples like Seven-Up’s successful “Uncola” campaign against Coca-Cola, which, along with Pepsi’s youth-culture approach, gave soda-pop a vaguely rebellious flavor. Other examples included Volkswagen’s effective embrace of ugliness amidst the cosmetic gorp of Detroit, and Avis’s profitable emphasis on being second-best. With the prime directive of the positioning era being to multiply choice, the simple fact of opposition could be made a virtue, thus turning the defiant non-conformism of the 1960s into a vast consumer come-on. Positioning, in this sense, requires not new products but fresh scripts.\(^2\)

This is not to suggest that Eisenman, Kenneth Frampton, or Mario Gandelsonas were reading Advertising Age when, in 1973, they founded Oppositions, a journal predicated on, indeed named for, the creation of simultaneous viable alternatives. Rather, I mean only to say that the “climate of opinions” Oppositions’ editors hoped to foster, along with Rowe’s “context of choices,” are settings congruous with contemporary consumer expectations, a society growing accustomed not just to making choices but to having them in the first place. Simply put, choice was becoming a cultural condition.\(^3\) Oppositions created a space for opposing—or just distinct positions—within a larger architectural field, a field that to some degree was being staked out by those positions. The editors assembled views but were careful not to legislate them; debate was fostered, but no consensual voice was sought. Each position was allowed to seek its own audience.

The possibility of choice surely implies as well the exercise of choice, perhaps even a regular exercise of choice. In this light, Michael Graves’ switch from White to Gray is as acceptable as Eisenman’s own absorption with one theoretical outlook after another, as would be the shift in Hejduk’s work from geometric to figural density. An architect of some talent and ambition might easily be forgiven the desire to follow the logic inherent in relative positions, exploring fluid occupation of different viewpoints rather than a sincere but misplaced conviction regarding one position, which when seen in perspective turns out to be little more than a local truth. A nineteenth-century rationale of formal “development” or “progress” would no longer be necessary to justify a change of position. Thus, in the context of explicit debate and in the wake of a dominant ideology, framing one’s work becomes more important, which may be one reason why architectural theory blossoms at just this moment, with the Whites and Grays being among the earliest polemics to take root after modernist hegemony. In retrospect, whole careers were launched in these theoretical waters, including those of Koolhaas, Leon Krier, and Daniel Libeskind, along with Eisenman and Stern.
Architecture in the Experience Economy

Theming is generalized here to the extent it has been—in order to include both White and Gray positions—for several reasons. For one, it may be understood as an interpretive lens, an extension of an essentially semiotic mode that interprets nearly all human activity in terms of signification, or its contribution to the creation of meaning. As such, theming is subject to many of the same criticisms as semiotics, especially when the latter is used to interpret cultural phenomena. In the present case, reducing human interaction with the built environment to a set of encounters with legible signs, failing to distinguish actual from implied responses, reifying formal relations at the expense of affective ones, ignoring the effects of media on the substance of what is communicated, and overlooking intentions that can only be recovered by going outside the object of analysis would all be among the more egregious shortcomings. Such criticisms notwithstanding, theming is also, as mentioned, a goal of much current practice. Thus, it is an appropriate or at least conspicuous viewpoint from which to observe other practices, if only to see how much or how little seemingly antagonistic attitudes overlap. As more and more of the built landscape becomes themed, theming becomes not just an interpretive lens but a proper—or at least a likely—context, even for practices that pursue dissimilar goals.

Another reason to consider theming is that, far from being a hypertrophied strand of our consumer society, it appears to betoken a new phase of economic development. In this sense, theming is an instrument of what has been termed the “experience economy”—an economy where not just symbolic goods are traded but experience itself is the object of processes of commodification. As described recently in an article published in Harvard Business Review, an experience economy finds its highest value in the staging of events, that is, in providing settings and the scripts that actuate them. Its key offering is not a functional object, but a memory. The article’s authors suggest it is a fourth historical stage of economic development, following the extraction of value from farm products in agrarian economies, the concentration of value in tangible goods in industrial economies, and in service economies, the creation of value from the delivery of benefits. In the experience economy, foods, material goods, and even services end up as props for, and souvenirs of, an experience. 

A key factor in the creation of experiences is the rapid development of new media and information technologies. With these, theming advances well beyond earlier symbolic uses of space. More and more, the themed environment is an immersive one, involving the creation of whole atmospheres, often through multi-sensory inputs. Current writing in periodicals like Commercial Building, Chain Store Age, and Visual Merchandising in fact often touches on the “retail experience,” and describes the consumer as a “knowing player” in the creation of sensory and motivational environments that support extended notions of merchandising. Such experiences are intended to parallel, if not exactly simulate, “actual” experiences. “Customers look for cohesive and relative experiences in the retail world, and they seek the same in life,” observes one director of a retail design group. Given improvements in technical means, and the absorption of sophisticated production values, these environments aim toward verisimilitude and can no longer afford to appear cheesy. This was, for example, the message Sony Corporation received when it conducted focus groups in preparation for its new Metreon mall in San Francisco. Residents there censured “kitsch” in their shopping environment and instead “demanded ‘authenticity.’”

A typical day in such an economy involves moving through a number of themed environments: a restaurant, an office, a shop, even one’s home. An individual is immersed in an environment and, as a result, transported along narrative channels to another realm, one more exciting and more vivid than the world of routine and convenience. Such places are designed to be easy, to reveal their references without much anxiety on the part of the visitor, and of course to be both safe to occupy and easy to leave. They usually demand nothing more than some extra money and a willingness to part with it. Negotiating an array of different places and time periods, on a daily basis, is child’s play, literally; immersive technologies are most frequently developed for kids’ games, moving from there to the built environment. In fact, naturalistic visualizations of the physical world and spatializations of abstract data have been leading goals of hard- and software development since the 1980s. Factor in the development of portable technologies—where the “environment” can be virtual and discretionary, that is, entered and exited at will—and everyday experience ends up comprised of not one or another themed environment but a series of them, a movement
within and between immersive, scripted environments. Serial immersion in narrative environments, then, is more and more looking to be the shape of daily life.

As a result, theming emerges as a new context for the reception of architecture in our time. It signals an historical shift from symbolic appeals to cognition toward the creation of diffuse sensory environments that link immediate perceptions with scripts. Already adept at reading symbolic environments, we begin to seek those implanted visual cues we know will trigger the appropriate script, whether the given environment has been designed for one or not. In this way, driving on the highway or riding the subway or walking in nature begins to invite a “reading” of that activity. The given environment begins to appear less like the embodied result of functional considerations and more like a rendition of such considerations, that is, the highway looks more and more like what we imagine the highway should look like. The more success we have in navigating life this way, the more this facility becomes naturalized in consciousness. Daily experience thus takes on a scripted quality, as we seem to watch ourselves starring in the movie of our life. Cinema is not the source of these sensations, but with its naturalistic possibilities, it is the closest metaphor for them. In other words, as theming begins to influence the general perception of architecture, it moves from being an analytic lens to being a popular expectation.

To the extent that individual subjectivity is conditioned by repeated encounters with environment, we may surmise a new sense of self, one corollary to the emerging shape of daily life. The modern self described by Trilling (following Hegel) is a consciousness deformed by pressures to conform to the opinions of others; the modern self engages in a series of socially acceptable impersonations. It is founded on self-alienation. The resulting sense of detachment is a motive behind the longing for authenticity, or connection, a longing that Trilling and Berman agree is already well formulated by Rousseau. Consumer society adds to this sense of self the possibility of constructing identity through one’s choices in the marketplace. The self is no longer visible only as a set of impersonations in varying social settings but may be built up from commercially available goods and services that facilitate certain activities. To go for a run, for example, does not mean simply to move one’s legs at a pace faster than a walk. It often involves choices regarding footwear, clothing and accessories, scheduling and routing, possibly some preparatory reading, and conceptually framing the run as work or leisure, sightseeing or exercise, routine or occasional. “Lifestyle” is just this, the self-conscious management of one’s choices (for those who have them) regarding activities and acquisitions. From vocational to leisure activities, from dwelling to daily environments, a logic of the lifestyle “ensemble” underpins the construction of selfhood from a range of off-the-shelf products and outlooks. Through such coordinated acts of consumption, the self is articulated and actualized.

As whole environments become objects for consumer choice, the self is transformed yet again. Nowadays, an individual may become differentiated by her or his path through environments. Just as one may assemble a unique set of mass-produced items, so might one trace a unique path through a range of conventionalized experiences. Individualization comes then to be influenced by taste in environmental adventures. In contrast with the industrial assembly line, where workers collectively construct an object moving past them, the self is itself now put together as it moves through a series of themed spaces. As a result, the assumed relation between what is human and what is artifact, or subject and object, is reversed. The environment takes on a shaping agency and the human subject is its chief artifact. Similar to the way the assembly line dehumanized its operators by strictly prescribing their movements, the individual in the themed environment, despite appearing as a protagonist, treads a narrow and pre-figured track.

As individuals take on the roles in which the particular environment casts them, theming may well be seen as a final surrender to the inauthentic. One’s “character” is given by the environment, that is, by the combination of setting and script. Morality, as a shared code, is in turn no longer internalized during childhood and practiced consistently across different environments, thereby creating an individual’s sense of continuity and wholeness. Rather, moral codes are embedded in particular environments and their related scripts, while the socializing process emphasizes the ability to read behavioral norms from ambient visual cues. Different behaviors surfacing from one individual are not just possible but desirable, as the ability to perform in varying environments becomes a useful social skill. Conversely, social dysfunction is newly defined as the failure to change scripts when changing environments. Theming in this sense is the built environment finally catching up with the moral relativism of America—often seen as a 1960s legacy—where incommensurate settings and incompatible scripts are nonetheless adjacent to one another. Reality, as Freud detailed, is read from the environment, whether physical or behavioral. With sufficient legible cues, consistent impressions, and most important, like-minded others, the present series of plausible environments might well grow together to form a new and comprehensive reality that will be even harder to see our way out of. Leonard Zeigl, in Woody Allen’s 1983 film Zelig, assumes a character appropriate to whatever story he finds himself in; his is a personality type of our times.***

Illusion of a Future

Architecture, it seems to me, does not become less important in an experience economy. It becomes, rather, more important. Architecture is already that practice that specializes in the shaping of environments and is thus the necessary setting and substance for the creation of memorable experiences. As tourism has already shown, architecture is both destination and sign of arrival, the record of lofty cultural endeavors and at the same time the very thing to have a stranger squeeze into the viewfinder alongside your own face. Increasingly, atmosphere is the very focus of design, the projected ambient object that will differentiate otherwise equivalent goods and services. More than ever, the spatial setting is the main event itself and can no longer be understood simply to contain events; likewise, rather than merely reflecting social change, this new role for architecture is the change. As Marshall McLuhan might have suggested, extrapolating from his observation regarding two-dimensional media, the setting is the significance.

Admittedly, this is not the architecture you now believe in and probably not the one you had hoped for. No longer a fraction of continuous urban fabric, no more the integer of a freestanding monument, no more the sum of human achievement, architecture appears now as a set of destinations randomly encountered in a web built up from the invisible infrastructure of the information age. With daily life turning into a series of settings and scripts, buildings turn from being more or less neutral backdrops of human life to becoming agents in the actuation of scripts, our intimate escorts for the theatricalization of daily life. Where once, as with the Whites, an economy of formal operations led to a diversity of spatial effects, now a unified visual impression is achieved through diverse constructional and technological means. Consequently, the language of aesthetic valuation will likely drift, from an emphasis on features of things, useful to describe artifacts, to sensation, which is the vernacular of human experience.

In contrast with these developments, the terms currently available for evaluating architecture remain rooted in the productive logic of industrial economy. Enlightenment and industrial change accelerated the collapse of a classical order and replaced its universalizing values with
material ones, generating a set of evaluative terms based on physicality: the materials and processes of making, the structure of the made, and, as a consequence, the makers themselves. This essentially artifactual vocabulary is still with us, leading judgments of architectural quality to bear on the stuff of building. Theories regarding tectonics, for example, encourage our reading material form as a window onto some underlying constructed presence. Tectonic expression directs attention onto internal structure, providing an experience of presence in the revelation of an object. With its materialist bent and model of depth, tectonics consolidates selected material aspects of a building under the sign of making. It reproaches the casual babble of themed places with its own Greater Reality.

In an age of relative values though, tectonics is also a virtue upon which enthusiasts might agree, a community formed around a shared environmental preference. As a license-carrying architect, I can personally attest to the extraordinary power of tectonic moments in architecture, as well as recognize the rather limited appeal of those moments. It is a Greater Reality for a narrowed audience. In the context of an experience economy, tectonics is a case of theming for architects, a symbolic representation of the labors of architecture—and the exquisite delight architects find in that labor—aimed at a relatively small circle of admirers. The same might be said of those attempts to make visible in the finished building the path taken through the design process, in effect thematizing another factor of design. Indeed, admission into this circle is sometimes predicated on the willingness and ability to cherish this limited set of acceptable goals. The problem is not that such architecture is not more popular, but that in our contemporary context it becomes understood as simply the taste of just another consumption community, a market segment that gives its desirable demographics is easily accommodated. In an information age, ontological certainty is just another bit.

If, however, the greatest intellectual effect architecture can have is to sharpen consciousness, that is, to sponsor consciousness of the self in the world—a self with (ideally) some measure of independent agency or free will; a world with, well, some depth—and if such an effect is thought to proceed from work that opens a window onto its own making, then where in a model of serial immersion in narrative environments might a critical architecture emerge? The question is not a general one, since themed environments aim precisely to loosen one’s sense of self. The former sense of wholeness that one carried across environments, and around which the self might be shaped, is more and more being replaced with a series of temporary allegiances to different activities, such as saving the earth from aliens or buying new shoes. Complete, if ephemeral, absorption in activity leads to an identification with that activity’s goals, resembling the “sincere” state of mind Trilling (again after Hegel) attributes to an earlier phase of society and a less-differentiated phase of psychic development. Themed environments in effect dissolve consciousness of self as anything other than being a protagonist in a script. This is why there is no room in immersive environments for what in filmmaking are called “continuity errors,” that is, lapses in either narrative or scenery that are either out-of-character or out-of-setting.

In addition to filling out experiences, can architecture also direct aesthetic attention onto the ways the mind structures experience and in so doing fulfill a critical function? If tectonics emphasizes presence and certainty of artifacts, might aesthetic vision also be fortified and refreshed by a focus on the contingent judgment and perceptual readiness of observers? Following this, can architecture provide insights into the infrastructure of perception? Would an architecture based in the epistemology of experience, rather than the ontology of being, avert the otherwise likely contraction of architecture into a tectonic sideshow for a niche market of architectural thrill-seekers? With the increasing role of simulated placefulness, will architecture be able to activate more aspects of human potential than the ability to buy souvenirs?

There is a painting by Rene Magritte: a window overlooking a town has in front of it a canvas painted with a scene that aligns perfectly with the townscapes outside. An easel and, in particular, a crank handle hold the painted canvas in its place, precisely aligned with the view. There is overall a tension (or is it an agreement?) between on the one hand the transparent logic of naturalistic representation (a faithful depiction, a representation both accurate and entirely confident in the objective status of the material world) and on the other hand illusion (the anxiety that our confidence is misplaced, that we are unable to know the real from the represented). The painted scene on the small canvas repeats the same tension: two cones—primary geometric forms—identical but for lighting are read completely differently. One is a road receding, the other the roof of a turret, the same abstract shape, but distinct visual roles based on context and representational convention. So ready to find meaning and form in what is seen, so easily duped, so broad-minded, we take pleasure in the deception. The title, Les Promenades d’Euclide (the name of the street below? a series of walks?), likewise evokes the emblematic geometrician, a master reasoner of form, but here caught in a casual, even a picturesque, mood. There is no doubt of a deception, but at what level does it lie? The modest crank—closest to the viewer and uniquely given to the hand—is the key to finding out.

Who is White and who Gray? Euclid the geometer or Euclid the promeneur? Magritte the maker of logical puzzles that invite vertiginous analyses or Magritte the prosaic painter who draws from conventions, directly but with an ironic twist, in the creation of a meaningful canvas? Or is it the perambulating pair on the street in the painted scene,
unknowing of the paradox they are a part of, or the artist standing in the room of the larger canvas, musing on the conventions that create the painting, or the viewer in the museum hall, absorbed in the work for a moment then moving on to the next painting or to the ground floor to pick up a postcard? Is this a convincing, habitable environment, one that flatters our ability to reason abstractly, or is this an ironic pun on the shared conventions that literally make the world available for habitation? What will a critical architecture look like in the coming experience economy? Turn the crank.

Notes
2 Colin Rowe, "Introduction." Five Architects 3.
4 Understanding all social values simply as technical tasks is what flatters human existence, in Herbert Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Man (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).
5 Embassy Pictures Corporation, directed by Mike Nichols.
8 Berman in.
10 Rowe 3.
11 Polaris, directed by Stanley Kubrick.

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10 John Hejduk. Mask of Medusa (New York: Rizzoli, 1985) 129; witness the Diamond House, designed from Le Corbusier, the same year.
16 Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour 8.
17 “Borrowing,” of course, is a charge that could be levied at any architecture, and the mere fact of borrowing should be excluded from a definition of theme.
20 Gottlieber, in The Theming of America, presents a brief history of competitive commercial strategies that shift from functional and pricing improvements to symbolic competition. At a certain stage, symbolic competition becomes a predominant means of influencing choices in the marketplace. I would add to his outline “design” as a strategy for competition, where function and technology remain the same but other aspects are affected, like ease of use, storage convenience, or shelf life, and so on. With functions more or less equivalent, design, rather than positioning or advertising, becomes a greater factor in product or environmental differentiation.
22 David Harvey dates to 1972 an accelerated stage of capitalism he calls “flexible accumulation,” which was paralleled by a cultural embrace of consumerism and a readiness to trade in symbolic capital. David Harvey, “Flexible Accumulation Through Urbanization, Reflections of ‘Post-Modernism’ in the American City,” Perspecta 26 (New York: Rizzoli, 1990): 251-272.
25 The “natural nature” of the Picturesque era, a nature more “natural” than nature is able to conjure unaided, is, along with its subsequent naturalization in the American landscape, a good historical example of this process.
26 Indeed, the climax of The Matrix, dir. Andy and Larry Wachowski, (Village Roadshow Productions, 1999) occurs only when “Neo” learns to read the code that writes the environment. Is this merely a hacker’s fantasy of omniscience or prescient elaboration of present tendencies?
27 Orion Pictures, directed by Woody Allen.