

Moses/Mitchell Studio  
Boston Architectural Center  
Fall 2005

**"Almost Nothing": The Limits of Minimalism**

*There are valued times in almost everyone's experience when the world is perceived afresh: perhaps after a rain as the sun glistens on the streets and the windows catch a departing cloud, or, alone, when one sees again the roundness of an apple. At these times our perceptions are not at all sentimental. They are, rather, matter of fact, neutral, and undesiring – yet suffused with an unreasoned joy at the simple correspondence of appearance and reality, of the evident rightness of things as they are.*

Michael Benedikt, *For An Architecture of Reality*

*Do you see O my brothers and sisters?  
It is not chaos or death -- it is form, union, plan -- it is eternal  
life -- it is Happiness.*

Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*



Reports of Mies van der Rohe's death are premature. He lives in every *Design Within Reach* catalog we receive in the mail. Who would have guessed that the Eames lounge chair would still signify sophistication, wealth, and taste after fifty years? Postmodernism failed to drive a stake through the heart of the Modern Movement: it seems to have come back from the grave like a zombie. And like a zombie, today's modernist is a pale imitation of the original: with all of the white, but none of the heart. How ironic that a great reformist tradition is relegated to the bathroom magazine stack.

Despite, or because of, our apparent national fondness for 'moral clarity', America is as economically stratified, socially polarized and regionally isolated as it ever has been. It appears that architects have responded to the mighty challenges of our epoch with warmed over versions of the Barcelona Pavilion. The previous century's proposition that architecture could, at its best, embrace the complexity of life, respond to our needs, all the while inspiring with insight and grace, has been abandoned for a fin de siecle notion of style and status.

Aren't the veneer plaster wall and stainless steel escutcheon low aspirations? Is there an architecture that can respond to human needs, propose a background for alternative social dynamics and provide a breath of fresh air into the culture in which we live?

As a means to begin addressing these questions, this studio will investigate the opportunities of designing in cast-in-place concrete, following a rich modern tradition informed, in part, by the desire for monolithic construction, where structure and enclosure are a single entity.

As building materials have become ever thinner and lighter and construction schedules more compressed, the quality of architectural concrete work has diminished, along with the number of workers capable of achieving it. (Were Adolf Loos alive today he might be tempted to wonder aloud if there is a correlation between the depth of today's typical wall section and the cultural influence of, say, FOX News. The trappings of 'modern' life may be as thin a veneer as Sir Norman Foster's techno walls.) David Pye's 'workmanship of risk' is rarely more evident than in the design and execution of architectural cast-in-place concrete, where the opportunities to make corrections are scant.

The interest in exploring the character of concrete as a building medium is not nostalgic. It is, however, critical, potentially challenging the hegemony of style over substance; aesthetics over meaning; the marketplace as final arbiter of value. One of the great shortcomings of contemporary architecture, and spatial practice generally, may be its lack of social engagement, a vigorous correspondence between design and reform. We believe this is an essential aspect of the development of an architecture that engages life.

The semester will be divided into three parts: prelude (case studies, reading, writing), short project, and long project. As always, success will be measured by engagement, improvement, and accomplishment.

Recommended reading: *For An Architecture of Reality*, Michael Benedikt

\*Mies van der Rohe