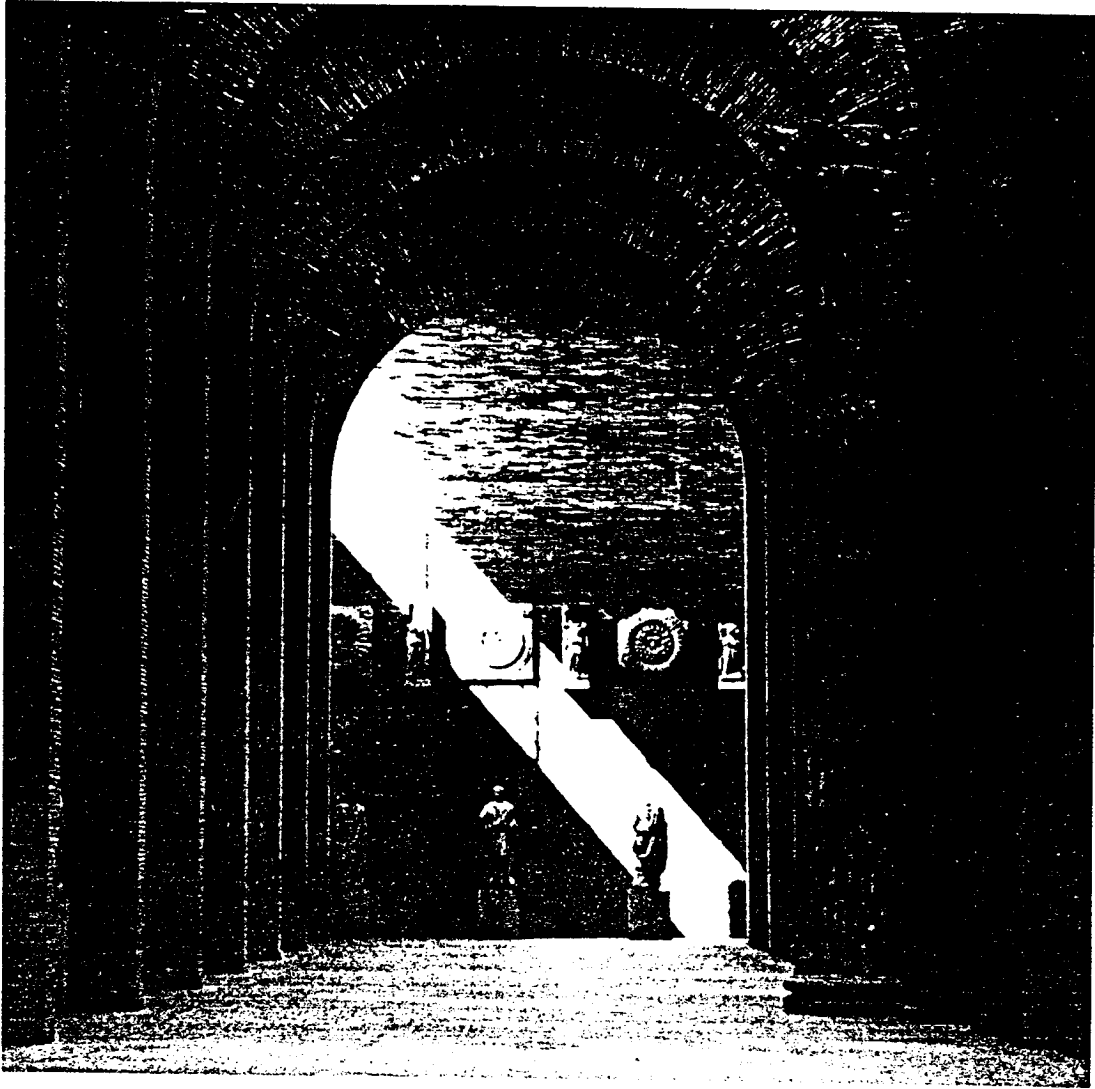


Perpustakaan 24  
1988



# The Idea of Lasting

## A Conversation with Rafael Moneo

Editors

*We would like to open this talk by recalling a comment you have made on a previous occasion concerning the nature of architecture in history. You have said: "I see the buildings of the past conveying another reality which I would like to reach. I am pushing to think about what this reality is as the first theoretical question of today." This is an intriguing proposition. What do you suppose constitutes that reality, and why does it seem absent from our present world of construction?*

Moneo

I realize that there is a lot of ambiguity concerning the idea of *reality*. When I say that the buildings of the past are conveying another reality, I am referring to a *consistency* that those of today do not possess. Such a consistency is far from the concept of reality as a simple imitation of known models of architectural types. It relates to the existing coherence between built form and image. In the past, the act of construction itself was conveying – or implying – the form and image of the building as one. That provides the feeling of authenticity – a concept that parallels consistency – that I believe I was alluding to when I spoke of this reality.

Editors

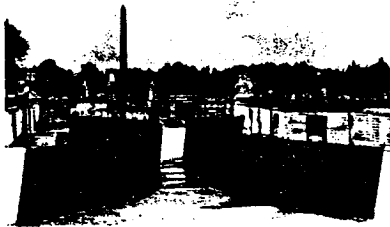
*Perhaps we should address this problem through a consideration of both materiality and abstraction. How might these two issues be related? How do they manifest themselves in buildings of the past as distinct from those of today?*

Moneo

The kind of abstraction that architecture suggests always implies materiality. This does not mean that materials always carry the same importance. In a Gothic cathedral facade, for example, the problem of material is secondary, I think, to matters of iconography. The way in which this iconography is captured in stone is, in the end, much more important than the stone itself. I think that perhaps today we are so concerned with materials because we feel that their importance escapes our world somehow. It may be that we have lost contact with their meaning. This procedure involves, perhaps, a certain nostalgia for an architecture in which materials would play a more important role. Therefore, my wish to give buildings a consistency that derives from their materiality is a deliberate response to a development that almost inevitably affects our work today.

On the other hand, when buildings enter into the realm of materiality, they become much more unpredictable; there is always some degree of unpredictability effected by material in the work of the architect. In this moment the transference occurs that brings buildings from drawings to reality. I think this is one of the more exciting moments for the architect.

The museum at Merida suggests something of that experience for me. In this particular project, the choice of the brick was fundamental to its nature. It would not be the same in another material. I don't believe that the walls of this museum would be placed at the same interval, with the same distance between them, had we chosen to execute them in concrete as opposed to brick. In this sense, distance – or if you prefer, the sensation of closeness – depends on material. I experienced this phenomenon vividly at an exhibition of Richard Serra's work in New York not long ago. Serra's sculpture depends on those very large sheets of steel. A purely visual critique of this work would conclude that its substance – its most important effect – is exclusively the spatial reality that has been created by their placement. Of course, if all those sculptures had been built with cardboard, they would not be the same at all. These pieces depend on their weight and the particular qualities of steel to achieve their reality. Similarly, I could not have done the museum at Merida with a material other than brick. I believe the correct distance between the walls has been achieved. This means that the intended material of the building must be present at its conception.



2. Clara-Clara, Paris (1982-83), Richard Serra.

There are other architectural aspects of the brick as well. At first glance, it may seem that the fabric evident in the walls of the museum is extremely literal. One thinks that I am referring to the Roman walls on whose foundations we have built by way of a process that is unequivocal – that offers only a literal reproduction of Roman precedent. I would say that this is not the case at all. It is, in fact, exactly the opposite. Roman fabric work, for example, would be fundamentally different in terms of the nature of the joint between bricks. Roman brick work always exhibits a much thicker mortar joint than I have pursued at Merida. I have worked very hard to do away with this joint altogether. It isn't simply for the pleasure of doing so; it reflects the wish to get away from an apparent literality. This lack of a joint makes the museum's wall much more abstract. At the same time, this wall provides a support for the archaeological pieces, a wall which is much more beautiful being, as it is, less

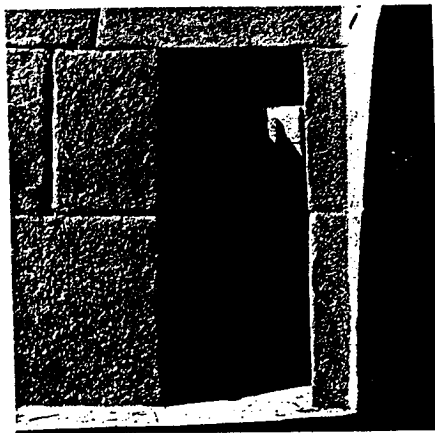
contaminated by the presence of the joint. In essence, then, I wanted to achieve two things: first, to be more abstract, and thus more distant from the Roman; and second, to use brick in a way that allowed a better appreciation of Roman archaeological fragments. When someone interprets these walls as literal reproductions of their Roman antecedents, I believe this to be a very incomplete interpretation. The wall is not as literal as it may seem. The conscious use of material allows a much more complex and rich architecture. I try in my work to take advantage of this.

### Editors

*Could you define abstract in terms of material? The concept of abstraction is often used to mean that there is no expression of material. You seem to be saying that abstraction is, or has to do with, the lack of a joint.*

### Moneo

Yes. Using the brick without a joint – or, more precisely, a dry joint without the presence of mortar – secures the *brickness* of the material, keeps the brick in a more pure state, and allows the wall to remain as an almost abstract architectural element, without becoming the kind of agglomeration that these walls tend to be. I believe the abstract use of materials depends on our attempts to keep their own identities alive, without dissolving them in the reality of the architectural element.



3. Lower Temple of Chephren, Giza (c. 2600-2500 B.C.).

*Editors*

*There is another aspect to the spatial and formal configuration of Merida that we find compelling in terms of this issue. It is apparent that the museum has not been structured in the manner of its Roman predecessor. One finds here a series of parallel brick walls without the perpendicular complement that traditionally generates the cellular masonry building. The presence of those perpendicular walls would be necessary to complete the image of the Roman building. At Merida, this brick construction is used in conjunction with a counterpoint slab system, the two combining to produce a fundamentally different concept of space than that generated by the cellular plan. Merida is certainly related to its Roman antecedent in many ways – the presence of the brick alone suggests such a relationship – but remains distinct from that model in very fundamental ways as well. The method of design, then, seems to be one of original investigation as opposed to appropriation.*

**Moneo**

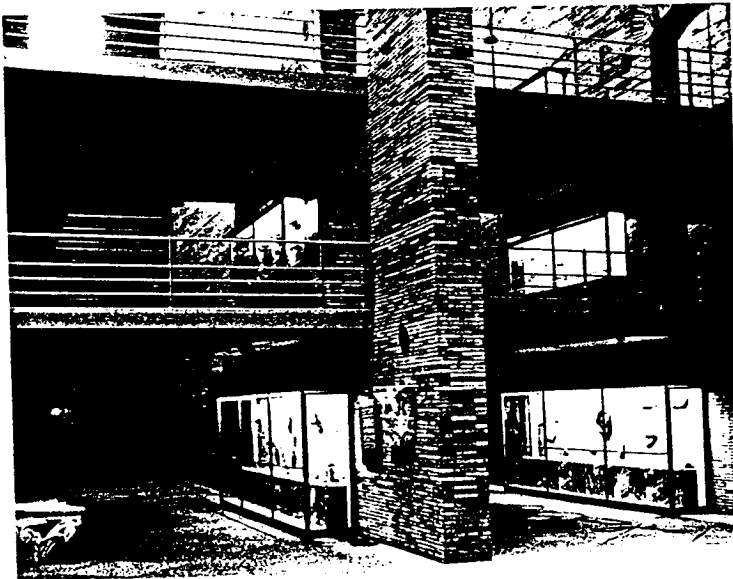
I think that is a rather accurate reading of what occurred in the museum. The literalness of the Roman wall construction is distorted by the way in which we used the concrete slab. This interweaving of an old technique with a new one avoids the possibility of the museum being literally “Roman.” From this point of view I believe that the museum could only in a very superficial reading be connected to the Roman past. It keeps something of the Roman atmosphere, but of course it strongly conforms to the reality of the construction itself. I refer to this “construction itself” as the acceptance of the weight and presence of the slabs. Both elements together – the brick walls and the concrete slabs – constitute the material substance of the building. The constructional reality of the museum is defined not only by these brick walls, but also by their relationship to the actuality of the continuous slab.

## Editors

*Might it be true that the introduction of this counterpoint material suggests an experience of brick that is abstract? We might then abandon the notion that abstraction is a property of the object itself. Perhaps this thing we call abstract is, alternatively, a condition of the viewer. Accordingly, our experience of Merida has been abstracted from the traditional and anticipated experience of Roman construction.*

## Moneo

I think that the issue you have raised has to do with the manner in which architecture is produced. Very often we see through the history of art how much our method of working is the result of some procedure that subtly changes the way in which materials are used, resulting in the creation of an entirely new object and an entirely new being. I think that one should not be troubled by seeing one's work as a procedure of hybridization. Architecture often proceeds from other architecture by means of this unexpected use of materials, transforming something familiar into something fundamentally changed by way of this new intervention.



4. Museum of Roman Art, Merida (1980-85), interior.

*Editors*

*Do you believe that a successful work of architecture must limit itself to a minimal palette of materials?*



5. Propylaea, The Acropolis.

**Moneo**

No, I don't think so. It is true that there is marvelous architecture that relies on the presence of only one material; the Greek temple sets the most satisfying example of such an operation. But one could consider many other examples of an architecture in which the richness of materials and their plurality of composition produce the most astonishing effect. At the church of San Marco, for instance, you will find quite fantastic architecture composed of many different materials, many different elements, many different iconographic subjects.

There are many ways to achieve a satisfying architectural experience; I don't believe it is simply a matter of striving for the highest rhetorical levels by means of a relentlessly edited palette. I think that this attitude has a lot to do with Modern architecture – and perhaps more do to with what followed Modern architecture. In the 1950's and 60's it was not uncommon to see such an emphasis on this possibility for abstraction through a process of material reduction – a process that reduced the experience of architecture to the appreciation of a single material presence, such that it remained devoid of any other presence that could in any way distract. This has to do with the moment in which architecture tries to be only a formal event.

My most recent experience as a builder took place in Seville, a very beautiful city characterized by a complexity and richness in both visual and spatial atmosphere. In this context any stylistic abstraction one might attempt would pose a great danger of "schematicity." I tried to overcome this difficulty by working with a very rich and textured building of many different materials. These materials were then joined in such a way that it became possible to address even the smallest scale of the city. I pursued this strategy in the hopes of creating a work that might live with repose in the city. When you are trying to achieve such a repose among existing buildings – without creating the problem of a radical encounter – you are brought into providing this kind of richness and variety characteristic of the Sevillian atmosphere. I attempted to achieve this by working with brick and concrete and marble and wood and cast iron and ceramic tile, collectively textured in such a way as to stand in a comfortable situation within the existing building circumstances.

## Editors

*In working with these various materials, is there an assigned "value" or meaning fixed for each component in the composition?*

## Moneo

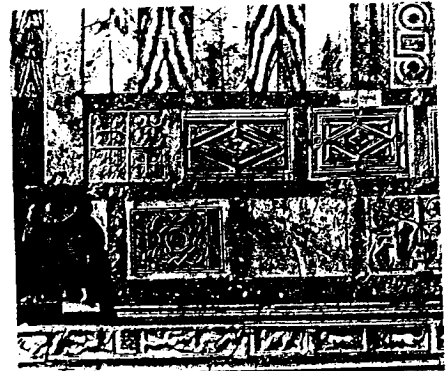
When you are working with different materials, the texture itself – the construction of the texture – becomes the crucial issue. That was, in this case, the solution for giving interest to a wall that wanted not to be just a mute wall, but something able to live together with its surroundings. This attempt did not involve the indiscriminate use of a variety of materials, but an investigation of elements and combinations to achieve the condition of a wall that wanted to be continuous unto itself.

Such a method may be contrasted to a sequential system of "structure" and "infill," where one layers through the construction the secondary elements of enclosure, inhabiting what at the very beginning would be the structure of the building itself. I was not, in this case, interested in such a reading. I preferred here to achieve a continuity between the different elements and materials that have been used, not allowing for the association that is always implicit in "filling up" the structure of a grid.

It should be understood, however, that advanced techniques of construction very often favor the "schematicity" of visual character that I have here tried so hard to avoid. There is great pressure exerted on today's architect to provide a schematic answer. Economy, in its broadest sense, requires schematic solutions, as do all the factors that economy implies – speed, industrialization, repetition of elements, ease of transportation – such that the entire process of building has been transformed. Mimetic figuration is very often the mark of much schematic thought.



6. Church of S. Marco, Venice (1063-85), view from Piazza.



7. Church of S. Marco, detail.

Editors

*Do you think that the problem of materiality is different in recent architecture than it has been in the past?*

Moneo

Yes, I believe so. I am very concerned about that. Not in the sense that it makes me sad, but rather in the sense that I am ready to accept that architecture can become something different from what it has been in history. I have the impression that buildings are going to last less well than they have in the past. This is not simply a matter of lack of solidity. There is a widespread yet largely unarticulated belief that buildings are going to disappear, and I share this sensation as well. Architecture is now prepared for being an ephemeral art. That is very evident in this world – particularly the United States, where the society is so sensitive to changes and advancements in building technology. That is one of the reasons why architecture today so frequently appeals to the superficial image of its predecessors; today's society does not believe in the lasting condition of its own creations. The initial impact of the building is what counts, not its long life. My point of view, however, is that this durability – this condition of being built to last – is very powerful. One must still fight for that. Of course, I understand that I am going against the mainstream in this, but I believe that from many points of view, it would be favorable to have more stable cities, more stable architecture, more durable and less ephemeral constructions. I realize that being against ephemerality is a very difficult issue, but that is the position which I have taken, with the awareness that I could be mistaken.

Editors

*Could you explain what you mean by “ephemeral”? A literal definition might suggest that it refers simply to a condition of “not lasting.” Since very few architects would advocate such a position, we assume you mean something different. Are you speaking of the ephemerality that concerns the world of ideas – the notion that architecture should somehow transcend the physical, or refer to an idea that is ostensibly more critical or of a higher order than the lasting quality of the building itself?*

Moneo

I would say that in other times, ideas were realized through the building itself. Now it seems that these ideas don't exist except in a description of the process, and that once the building has been completed, it doesn't deserve to last. For those architects who believe that the most important issues at hand concern their own ideas, the problem of ephemerality is of no importance; you simply keep records of those ideas in other media. Others would argue, however, that by defining a project, you are providing life to a building, creating this new being that is going to be itself. Then the idea of lasting – the idea that this being must support itself – means that you are connecting the idea of permanence with the idea of architecture. If you believe that you are providing life to something that did not exist before, you are naturally trying to provide the longest life. From this point of view, I would say that I am trying to provide a long life to the buildings I have conceived. The idea of permanence has for me a value. Architecture is not simply the brilliant expression of an idea. After the architect has finished his work, the idea which motivated it is somehow dead, and at the same time, kept alive by the reality of the building. I believe that this reality of the building idea transcends into a new thing that should be sustained by itself.

It should be remembered that when we are speaking of buildings and ideas, we are exaggerating relationships. I would be in absolute agreement with the notion that buildings are charged with theoretical content, but I don't know exactly what kinds of ideas a building conveys. It is certainly true that buildings are done with ideological commitments, but I don't think buildings are mere translations of ideas. Sometimes you will find a particularly clear solution to the problems posed by a given building, but there are few that do not at least approach this condition. This is the contradiction we face: the more our buildings are about specifics, the more they can be submitted to ideas. However, people who speak about ideas in building do not want to consider their specificity in the contention that architecture conveys ideas.

When I speak of lasting and permanence – of an architecture that is not ephemeral – I mean only to emphasize the *actuality* of the building as its lasting domain. As one comes to understand that a building conveys its reality through the support of material, it becomes increasingly possible to will the long life of the building. There is no doubt that the work of the architect should be an expression of personal commitment, but once this commitment has been clearly expressed, one should not worry too much if it disappears from the reading of the work itself.

We are speaking of very slippery issues, concepts that each generation has considered, and continues to think about. From this point of view, I see architecture as always addressing the same questions throughout history. Each generation will try to answer this question of meaning in the work of architecture – what we are calling the reality of the building – in its own way. For some, this reality will be found in the fulfillment of perceived functional concerns, for others in the interpretation of program or in the investigation of typology. For others still, the reality of the building will be sought in its lasting tangible presence, which speaks about the architectural principles behind its construction. That is where I would like to be.

*Editors*

*Perhaps this question remains unanswered because it is encountered as if without precedent each time we build; it is experienced in each construction we undertake.*

Moneo

I think so. That is also the pleasure of the builder: to feel, somehow, in the process of making – even in the roughest way of solving problems – that the entire conception of the world is implicit. To experience and understand a building is to realize the continuity it proposes between an idea of the world and the construction itself. It speaks of the builder's understanding of the world – the way in which he *wanted* to understand the world. This communication allows us to appreciate the values and judgments of those who caused it to be built.

*Editors*

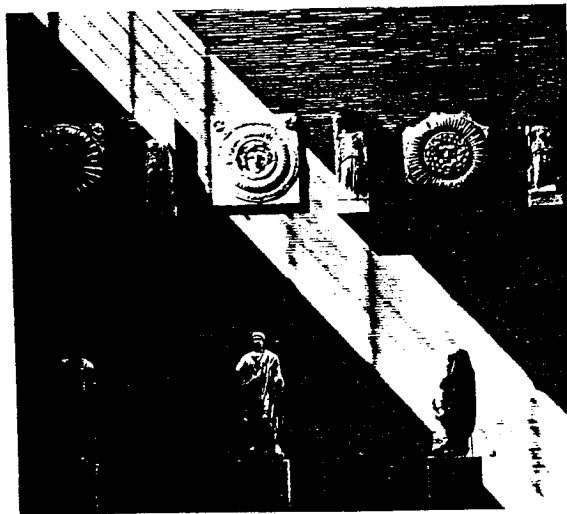
*You mentioned your belief that the questions considered by the architect today are no different than those considered by the architect of the past. Others might argue that modern life is characterized by a loss of imperatives – imperatives governing the technology, scale, place, and meaning of our work. So many things seem now open to choice that surely were not in previous eras.*

Moneo

It is true that we often look at the past as a time when things were well-defined – when it was possible to follow deterministically the suggestions of one's context or *milieu*, always guiding one towards the right architecture. I am not completely convinced of this. I believe that all times have felt the lack of imperatives we feel today. That is the point where a structuralist reading of history would insist that our times are not so apocalyptic as we may think. I would support the idea that our circumstances are not so different than those of an earlier era. When one finally understands a certain period in the history of art or culture, it becomes clear that the turmoil we feel today has, in fact, always occurred.

Architects need to invent these supposed imperatives. That is where this idea of building as a reflection of a particular conception of the world comes into play. The architect will always seek to transgress seemingly inevitable realities – realities that are considered to be unwavering or that seem to be approachable in only one way. Architecture deals with invention, despite these so-called imperatives. They *are* imperatives, but never in the way we are thinking. Imperatives have always been remodeled by the architect in order to find their particular means of expression. It was this process that gave to previous architecture the sense of reality we are now trying to understand. That is where I would suggest that today's architecture is less real. Construction itself – the act of construction itself – was in the last term responsible for the figurative presence that the building had; one was unable to distinguish various levels of reality that we now readily discriminate in today's construction.

This returns us to your opening question about reality. I hope that some of these reflections help us towards an answer . . . . We will try many different times to figure this out.



8. Museum of Roman Art, Merida, interior.