



Building After Auschwitz

Jewish Architecture and the Memory of the Holocaust

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“When patterns emerge [in your work], do you ten or fifteen years later sort of categorize these things and find reasons for them?” He replied, “You’re really cynical!” but then noted, “Yeah. Well, I find reasons for them. Maybe these were reasons that finally came out.” Certain skeptics might interpret these remarks as proof that Tigerman’s talk about Jewishness in architecture is mere rhetoric disconnected from his actual work. Others could point to Tigerman’s classically inspired buildings from the late 1980s as proof that he has never fully lived up to his allegedly principled opposition to classicism.¹⁸ Yet the fact that Tigerman would later draw on many Jewish ideas in designing his Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Skokie (discussed in Chapter 10) shows the sincerity of his Jewish architectural turn.

In the end, the diversity of Tigerman’s output shows that Jewishness in architecture is more about pluralism than purity. It also reveals that architectural Jewishness is less about aesthetics than ideas. The fact that Tigerman followed Eisenman, Libeskind, and Gehry in framing his architectural rebellion in Jewish terms confirms how certain Jewish architects were willing to seek creative inspiration in their heritage in the postmodern era.

Eric Owen Moss

The opposite is true of the work of Eric Owen Moss, whose career casts a different light on the Jewish dimensions of deconstructivism. Moss has frequently been called a deconstructivist, although, like most architects, he dislikes labels.¹⁹ His buildings have nevertheless displayed a deconstructivist bent in rejecting both postmodern historical reference and modernist abstraction in favor of a sculptural aesthetic of instability. Moss has also exhibited deconstructivist tendencies by citing factors outside of architecture to explain his works’ sources of inspiration. Yet, in sharp contrast to Eisenman, Libeskind, Gehry, and Tigerman, he has refrained from justifying his work with references to Jewish history, culture, or identity. The absence of Jewish themes in Moss’s writings and buildings confirms a point that bears repeating: deconstructivism has no *inherent* connection to sources of Jewish inspiration. Indeed, the fact that a Jewish architect like Moss could embrace a deconstructivist approach without linking it to his Jewish identity shows that an architecture of alienation could easily be rooted in a mindset of assimilation.

Moss enjoys an international reputation, but most of his realized work has been centered in his home city of Los Angeles.²⁰ After receiving his master’s degree in architecture at the University of California at Berkeley in 1968 and a second master’s at Harvard University in 1972, Moss opened his own firm in Los Angeles in 1976 and quickly gained attention for housing designs that exhibited quirky traits, like those of Frank Gehry. His 708 House (which he built for himself in 1979–82) displayed incongruous features, such as a false gable and a protruding glass-paneled “flying door” supported by a sharply angled “flying buttress” made of steel, while his Petal House (1982–84) featured an anti-roof that, like a flower, seemed to be unfolding and opening to the sky (fig. 109). Moss’s best-known buildings have appeared since the late 1980s in a formerly derelict industrial warehouse district in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Culver City, where he has built and renovated numerous buildings for the developers Frederick and Laurie Samitaur Smith.²¹ These buildings display many deconstructivist features: colliding volumes, disjointed forms, and the juxtaposition of diverse materials, such as wood, steel, stucco, and acrylic. Many of his designs also qualify as parabuild-

ings, in that they were renovations of existing buildings, the original structural elements of which (wooden bowstring trusses, sawtooth roofs, and so forth) were gutted and exposed in a kind of architectural autopsy.

Moss's Culver City buildings all exuded instability. His early works, like Gehry's, employed angled beams, struts, and columns to suggest the possibility of structural collapse. His Paramount Laundry building (1987–89), for example, featured a portico supported by columns made of vitrified clay pipe, one of which was bent at a sharp angle and appeared ready to fall. A similar mood of unease was communicated in the street facade of the Gary Group office building (1988–90), which displayed faux boarded-up windows and a voided wall segment tilted backward, as if poised to topple into the parking lot behind it (fig. 110). Later works radiated a more enigmatic aura of uncertainty. His Samitaur office building (1989–95) was a three-hundred-foot-long structure, elevated fourteen feet above the ground on steel girders, whose facade bore jagged, protruding, and slashed features, including the uncanny visage of a smiling jack-o-lantern (fig. 111). Not far away, a warehouse renovation known as the Beehive (1996–2001) was a cylindrical, steel-clad structure featuring a surrealist roof composed of three ascending and descending staircases reminiscent of M. C. Escher. Finally, other buildings displayed hints of trauma, such as his bruised and bulging "What Wall?" warehouse renovation (1996–99), and his Umbrella Building (1996–99), which looked disemboweled (fig. 112).

At first glance, the similarity of Moss's destabilized designs to those of other deconstructivists strongly suggests that he was committed to an architecture of alienation. Many critics interpreted Moss's work in this way, asserting—as Anthony Vidler did in 1996—that his buildings' evocative "half-ruins and fragments," their "shattered wholes," and their "violence . . . against geometry" were linked to the "present fin-de-siècle and its formal and social disruptions." Moss himself seemed to support these interpretations in his writings and interviews, as in 1991, when he affirmed that his buildings were part of a "social and political commentary on the world and the way it works." To be sure, the specific nature of Moss's commentary remained abstract. In declaring his desire in 1996 to "build instability . . . [and] then obviate it," he opaquely explained that "instability is related to an unsteady psychological state in . . . the culture. Architecture should look at that condition and say something about it." He added in a 2002 interview that he was "interested in communicating some-



Figure 109. Eric Owen Moss, 708 House, Los Angeles, 1979–82. This house features supergraphics on its facade (now faded), a false gable (top right), and a protruding glass-paneled "flying door" supported by a steel "flying buttress" (lower right).



Figure 110. Eric Owen Moss, Gary Group office building, Culver City, California, 1988–90. This building in an industrial part of Los Angeles displays faux boarded-up windows (left) and a voided wall segment (top) that, when viewed from the side, appears tilted and ready to fall backwards into the parking lot behind it.

thing of [the] intrinsic uncertainty and unknowing [of life]” and concluded that the “power of . . . not knowing can be communicated in architecture.”²²

In advancing these ideas, Moss revealed the influence of post-structuralist thought. His declaration that “there’s a perpetual fight between trying to know and understanding that you can’t know” expressed his resistance to the idea of singular truth. And his remark that “the ideology ought to be that there’s no ideology” reflected his rejection of all-encompassing metanarratives. The architectural implications of this outlook were clear. In contrast to the modernist goal of creating a style of universal validity, Moss spoke of “making something and then contesting its validity.” Rather than pursuing the goal of architectural “resolution,” he preferred to pursue “articulate irresolution.” In his embrace of indeterminacy, in short, Moss exhibited deconstructivist tendencies.²³

These tendencies found their most systematic expression in Moss’s highly personal book *Gnostic Architecture* (1999). Touted as the “definitive statement” of his “design theory,” the book provided a

new package for Moss's embrace of architectural indeterminacy. For Moss, gnostic architecture was defined by the recognition "that there are always useful contradictory points" within any world-view and by the notion that "[any] paradigm has to include suspicion of itself." For this reason, Moss further wrote that "gnostic architecture is not about faith in a movement, a methodology, a process, a technique, or a technology. It is a strategy for keeping architecture in a perpetual state of motion." Yet gnostic architecture was not solely about skepticism. It was also informed by the individualistic



Figure Figure 111. Eric Owen Moss, Samitaur office building, Culver City, California, 1989–95. This elevated 300-foot-long structure displays jagged, protruding, and slashed features, one of which resembles a grinning jack-o-lantern (left).



Figure 112. Eric Owen Moss, Umbrella Building, Culver City, California, 1996–99. The building, which was originally designed as an outdoor performance space for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, appears to have been disemboweled.

quest for the elusive idea of gnosis, or transcendent knowing. Crucial to this goal was Moss's idea of the "dialectical lyric." This hazy idea referred to what Moss termed the "lyrical resolution" of the "intellectual dialectic" in built form. As he wrote: "The dialectic locates the tension. The lyric subsumes it. The process of making a building is the process of making that cerebral subject matter tangible as the experience of the building. If you can sense that contradictory quality instinctively without . . . dealing with it in an intellectual way, then it's there." While it is difficult to attain, he continued, the possibility of "rendering the dialectic so sharply . . . that a transcendent lyrical experience becomes available in . . . architecture" was a worthy ideal to pursue. The resulting poetic experience would lead to the essence of gnosis: a kind of "tentative understanding that would be forever tenuous and . . . arrived at personally." For Moss, the poetry of architectural form could somehow resolve the dialectical tensions that he hoped to preserve in all of his buildings.²⁴

In pursuing the idea of dialectical tension in architecture, Moss seemed to follow Tigerman, whose idea of the unsynthesized dialectic was central to his work in the early 1980s.²⁵ Yet unlike Tigerman, Moss refrained from invoking Jewish sources of inspiration to explain his version of the idea. Moss was not reluctant to cite factors outside architecture to explain his architectural philosophy, as was shown by his reference in *Gnostic Architecture* to the novels of James Joyce, the sculptures of Henry Moore, the music of John Cage, the Heisenberg principle, the Mayan temple of Chichén Itzá, Mars's moon of Phobos, Kyoto's Ise Shrine, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the military thinking of Carl von Clausewitz, Greek mythology, Edgar Degas's paintings of ballerinas, and many others. Given the range of Moss's sources of inspiration, it is notable that none of the factors invoked by other Jewish deconstructivists — the role of antisemitism, the idea of Hebraism in architecture, or Jewish outsidership — appeared at all. Most significant was the absence of references to the Holocaust. Especially because Moss's affirmation of indeterminacy owed its existence to post-structuralist ideas that themselves were partly related to the Holocaust's legacy, his failure to invoke its significance is surprising.

Moss's silence on Jewish themes was largely due to his assimilated background. Born in 1943 in Los Angeles, Moss was the son of educated, left-leaning parents. His mother was a long-time representative of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, and his father was a writer for the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*. Moss describes them as having rejected "sectarian allegiances" and recalls that they did not keep him out of school for Jewish holidays. They were not entirely secular, however. Because his parents "thought it was important to acknowledge [Jewish tradition] in a cultural and historical way," they hired a Hebrew teacher to come to the house. By all indications, however, this experience left little impression. "I remember it being a pain in the neck," Moss says. Another factor that contributed to his ambivalent stance on Judaism was his father's philosophical orientation. Moss had a very close relationship with his father, Morton Moss, a man whom he describes as having embraced a radical skepticism and a kind of "existential hopelessness" in his general outlook. A voracious reader who maintained an "astonishingly huge library," the elder Moss was deeply committed to studying "profound philosophical questions" throughout his life, mostly through poetry, which he wrote on the side under his nom de plume, Moss Herbert. His resulting universalistic orientation precluded a particularistic commitment to Judaism. While Moss describes his father as the "most religious man I ever met," he adds that "he didn't sign up with anybody" in

the sense of giving his allegiance to a particular faith. It was small wonder that the younger Moss became a religious skeptic. This mindset was reflected in his Petal House of 1982, which included a garage/guest house with a “sort of rose window” that Moss called the House of the Holy Mercedes, adding that it was sacrilegiously meant to “[abuse] religious symbolism.” Moss’s observation that “sometimes it’s hard to believe in the idea of believing” further shows that his world-view was unlikely to welcome traditional Jewish religiosity.²⁶

Yet Moss has not completely disavowed his Jewish background. In a 2008 interview, he admiringly observed that “Jews [have been] . . . a tough, fascinating, resilient, and extraordinary group of people over time. . . . I don’t think there’s anything comparable.” He further noted that his friend, the Austrian architect Wolf Prix, of the firm Coop Himmelb(l)au, has frequently referred to him as a rabbi “in terms of [my] talking.” He added that he was “disappointed” that his father (or grandfather, he does not know who) shortened the family name to Moss after arriving in America several generations ago. “I was hurt that [my father] didn’t tell me about it,” he declared. “It was never discussed with me.” If presented with a similar choice today, Moss affirms, “I wouldn’t change my name, [even] if it was Gazakowatsky” — a claim that reflects a willingness to embrace his ethnic identity (and that contrasts with the actions of the young Frank Goldberg/Gehry). In the end, however, Moss has resisted most conventional forms of Jewish identity. Believing that “Jewishness is . . . bigger and deeper than any ability to describe it,” he has avoided any direct connection to it. As he concluded in 2008, “I’ve always been reluctant to assign any of the things I’ve done [in my career] to a particular allegiance, either a religious allegiance or a political allegiance. . . . It’s not so much that I’d have to convince you about it, I haven’t convinced myself about it.”²⁷

Beyond his secular upbringing, Moss’s assimilated identity is also explained by his lack of exposure to antisemitism. Although he recalls an episode in the early 1960s when his then-girlfriend’s parents lamented the possibility of having Jewish grandchildren, anti-Jewish prejudice played little role in his life. Moss thus differed substantially from Eisenman, Libeskind, Gehry, and Tigerman, all of whom directly experienced anti-Jewish prejudice and came to view themselves as outsiders. It is true that Moss has long viewed himself as an outsider, saying, “In a psycho-therapeutic sense . . . I’ve never felt quite like I fit [in].” Yet, he hastens to add, “I don’t know that it has anything at all to do — even in retrospect — with being Jewish.”²⁸

Moss’s assimilated identity may explain why he was disinclined to reflect deeply on the Holocaust in his work. Without feeling a specifically Jewish sense of outsidership, he did not feel drawn to the subject like his deconstructivist colleagues. That said, Moss’s stance remains puzzling. Not only was Holocaust consciousness spreading throughout America at the same time he was developing his signature style, it had become increasingly important within his own family. In the early 1980s, Moss’s father wrote an epic poem entitled *Holy Holocaust*, a passionate indictment of Christian antisemitism. This fact alone suggests that the architect was likely aware of the Nazi genocide’s increasingly prominent legacy. Moss’s active role in getting the poem published after his father’s death in 1991 — and the fact that he took the book’s cover photograph of the Mauthausen concentration camp’s infamous “stairway of death” — provides further evidence of Moss’s awareness of the Holocaust. Finally, the father’s dedication of the book to his son suggests the importance of the Nazi genocide to both. Nevertheless, that importance remained limited for the younger Moss. In 2008

he acknowledged that the Holocaust was “horrendous,” but quickly added that he was also horrified by the Soviet Gulags. Moreover, although he asserted that he relates to the Holocaust “as a Jew,” he hinted that he is unwilling to exploit it for particularistic purposes, saying he is “not interested in my side against your side in terms of . . . religious insight.” Perhaps most revealing is Moss’s blunt explanation of why he visited the Mauthausen concentration camp in the mid-1990s: “I needed to go to a concentration camp. I probably needed to go forever.” These pregnant remarks suggest that Moss, like Gehry, may possess unresolved feelings toward the Holocaust and simply prefers for them not to affect his work.²⁹

That these feelings could not be kept entirely silent, however, was revealed in 1996, when Moss submitted a design for the Jewish Museum of San Francisco. By this time, museum officials had abandoned Peter Eisenman’s proposal for the adaptive reuse of the Jenny Street substation and were searching for new options. Moss responded by drafting a plan, entitled “Recollecting Forward,” which was notable for being the first in his career to be influenced by Jewish considerations. The project’s title referred to Moss’s longstanding practice of producing new spaces through the incorporation of older ones, but this time the architect gave it a Jewish spin, noting that his combination of the old and new echoed the idea of “Judaism as . . . dialectical/a dialogue.” In practice, Moss’s concept of the museum’s spaces “as dialogues between spatial alternatives” revealed few clear Jewish influences. Although he proposed transforming the plaza in front of the museum into a “plaza of Abrahamic ecumenicism,” its architectural expression remained unclear. The same was true of Moss’s brief invocation of the Holocaust, which he alluded to by mentioning his 1996 visit to Mauthausen’s rock quarry stairway and asking how it might be possible “to incorporate that experience . . . in the conception of a building that says life goes forward.” Moss may have elliptically tried to answer his own question by quoting a line from Franz Kafka’s novel *The Trial*, about the “inextinguishable radiance of light,” and noting that he planned to use the museum’s existing skylights to symbolize “optimism, but not a naive optimism.” If so, then Moss may be seen as borrowing Louis I. Kahn’s strategy of using light as a response to the Holocaust. In the end, however, Moss’s efforts came to naught, as disagreements with museum officials prevented the design’s approval.³⁰

On balance, Moss remains a brilliantly inventive but enigmatic architect. Because his sources of inspiration are so broad, it is impossible to identify clear lines of influence in his work. No doubt Moss prefers it this way, even if critics occasionally have faulted him on his laundry list approach to explaining his designs.³¹ What is apparent, however, is that Jewish sources of inspiration have played little overt role in his career. While his architecture suggests a mentality of alienation, the roots of this sentiment have little to do with his Jewishness. Moss’s professional ascent testifies to the possibility of combining a radically unconventional architectural practice with a conventional personal stance of assimilating into mainstream American society. In the final analysis, he represents a postmodern version of the early postwar era’s many non-Jewish Jewish modernists.

Architects of Assimilation: Greenberg, Stern, and the Classical Tradition

By contrast, a more consistent model of assimilation, merging the personal with the architectural, is offered by the careers of Allan Greenberg and Robert A. M. Stern. While Tigerman and Moss