City of Culture of Galicia – Spain. All photographs are courtesy of the Foundation for the City of Culture of Galicia. Aerial photos are by Paisajes Espanoles - Building photos (interior and exterior) are by Manuel Gonzalez Vicente.
Eisenman Architects
Peter Eisenman

Notes on Rhythmic Affect
Eric Goldemberg

The notion of pulsation owes its relevance in this book to the Eisenman Architects project for Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain. On many levels, the City of Culture is a testimony to the indexical theory first championed by Rosalind Krauss in her essay “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America”. Even though Eisenman’s work has a strong legacy of indexical operations, one can argue that the oversaturation of layers and the blurring of figure-ground relationships, the multi-referential traces recorded on sensual surfaces, the pulsating rhythm operating at different scales, and the compositional effect of “serialism” project this forward as a case of hyper-indexicality, going beyond process to challenge the notion that affect is separated from the sensual or the erotic.

The City of Culture was originated at the end of the ’90s, coinciding with the waning of indexical architecture and its formal premises, from Le Corbusier’s five points in the early twentieth century all the way to Colin Rowe’s reinterpretation of the modern diagram in the 1960s, which has dominated the last fifty years of architectural discourse. At the beginning of the digital millennium, the pursuits began to change in search of something new based in the potential of new representation, new construction methods, fabrication, and consequently the desire for a new aesthetic. What digital technology has allowed is the ability of exacerbating the architectural indexes in the production of a new hyper-indexicality, opening up an entire new sensibility that supersedes the object/subject separation. Peter Eisenman suggests that today the subject of architecture is a subject of information and images, a subject of the spectacle, and a subject that architects seem not yet to fully understand. The object of architecture today is indisputably iconic and disseminated to the public as visual spectacle. Eisenman argues that “the process, which included the trace, codes, and other reading strategies, could be understood as part of the affective experience of the architecture. However, the mediated context that is now so totalizing of experience makes it necessary to rethink these ideas of close reading and writing.” Eisenman reframes himself within this new context by saying that the possibility of affective process even in the most critically formal architecture, his own, still exists.

The synthesis of a diagrammatic combination between three types of traces (the medieval plan, the Cartesian grid and the topography of the hillside) generates a temporal palimpsest, a complex rhythmic system that allows the articulation of every surface of the project following a criterion or “code” that informs how structural grids, slab edge profiles, enclosures, interior surfaces, and the variable depth of the poché behave affected by a matrix of three-dimensional “deformation lines” that interfere with and morph the other two-dimensional sets of traces.

The notion of serialism is critical to understanding the impact of the topological armature derived from the interpolation of the profiles of the Mount Gaia topography with the ambiguous figural condition of each one of the six buildings of the complex (Rare Books and Periodicals Archive, Library, Opera, Administration, Museum of the History of Galicia, and Museum of New Technologies); the upper topography of the shells is synchronized to produce a continuous profile only dislocated where the pedestrian access roads separate and link every pair of buildings (a reference to Michael Heizer’s “Double Negative”). No building can be subtracted without affecting critically the perception of the entire ensemble, and the six masses emerge from the ground as natural “eruptions”, diving down into a valley-like plaza that interconnects all programs. The deformation lines are traced upon the surfaces of the exterior shells and interior “carcasses” that shroud the programs, scoring a variable rhythm of striation across the predominant vector of direction of fluidity. The tension between the exterior shells and the interior carcasses is sustained by the wrapping of technical and support spaces within this pulsating, animated poché. The most spectacular interior spaces expose the spectacle of the rhythmical progression of the scored surfaces, allowing for the affective perception of a beat that traverses the entire City of Culture and produces a kind of awareness of a rhythmic language that is attuned to respond to each building’s programmatic exigencies.

Pulsation here operates at the level of the smooth and striated geometries that articulate the physicality of the spaces, and more importantly at the level of perception, regulating an expressive language that results from the abstract code of supple, folded surfaces in combination with the deformation matrix acting upon it.
Peter Eisenman

Bio

Peter Eisenman is an internationally recognized, award-winning architect and educator. Eisenman Architects' current projects include a one-million-square-foot cultural complex, the City of Culture of Galicia in Santiago de Compostela, Spain (two museums, two libraries, a performing arts center, and a research center); two railroad stations in Pompei, a masterplan for the waterfront of Pozzuoli, Italy, and a media center for the Polytechnic University of Valencia in Gandia, Spain.

Among Mr. Eisenman's award-winning projects are the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts and Fine Arts Library at The Ohio State University in Columbus and the Koizumi Sangyo Corporation headquarters building in Tokyo, which received the National Honor Award for Design from the American Institute of Architects (AIA). The firm's Aronoff Center for Design and Art, the University of Phoenix Stadium for the NFL Arizona Cardinals, and City of Culture of Galicia (in construction) have each been the subject of hour-long television documentaries. The firm's work is also the subject of a number of books, including the recent monograph, Tracing Eisenman: Complete Works (Rizzoli, 2006).


Mr. Eisenman is also a dedicated educator. His academic career includes teaching at Cambridge, Princeton, Harvard, and The Ohio State Universities. He was the first Irwin S. Chanin Distinguished Professor of Architecture at The Cooper Union, in New York City, and is currently the Charles Gwathmey Professor of Architecture at Yale.

Mr. Eisenman holds a Bachelor of Architecture degree from Cornell University, a Master of Science in Architecture degree from Columbia University, and MA and PhD degrees from Cambridge University (UK). He holds honorary doctorates of Fine Arts from the University of Illinois, the University of Chicago, Pratt Institute in New York, and Syracuse University. In 2003, he was awarded an honorary Doctorate in Architecture by the Università La Sapienza in Rome.
City of Culture of Galicia

Project Description by Peter Eisenman

Architecture has traditionally been a semiotic system expressing a defined expansion of matter. Today, however, due to the oversaturation of media and information technology, we are moving from a time of liberation and explosive release of energy into a phase of implosion and social inversion. This implosion marks a shift from a representation-obsessed semiotic culture—with its overabundance of information—to another sensibility.

This post-semiotic sensibility is not dominated by easily consumed imagery of signs and signifieds, but rather is understood as a series of traces, marks that produce an alternative condition of figure and ground. The City of Culture evolves from the superposition of three sets of traces. First, the plan of the medieval center of Santiago is placed on the hillside site, which overlooks the city. Second, a Cartesian grid is laid over these medieval routes. Third, the topography of the hillside is allowed to distort the two flat geometries, thus generating a topological surface that superposes old and new in a simultaneous matrix.

The original center of Santiago conforms to a figure/ground urbanism. The buildings are figural and the streets, residual. Through this transformative mapping operation, our project emerges as a warped surface that is neither figure nor ground but both a figured ground and a figured figure that supercedes the figure-ground urbanism of the old city. Santiago’s medieval past appears not as a form of representational nostalgia but as an active present found in a tactile, pulsating new form.

The six buildings of the project are conceived as three pairs: the Museum of Galician History and the New Technologies center; the Music Theater and Central Services building; and the Galician Library and Periodicals Archive. Visitor’s experiences of any given building will be affected by its relationship to its immediate partner.

As a condition of the implosion of contemporary secular culture, and as a deliberate gesture against obsolete explosive models, the City of Culture generates a powerful new figure/figure urbanism. Rather than making a series of discrete buildings—the traditional form of figure/ground urbanism—here the buildings are literally incised into the ground to form a figure/figure urbanism in which the buildings and topography become merged figures. The secular center thus takes a different form from the religious pilgrimage center below, yet expresses the trace of the old city as its foundation.
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Study models (top)
Competition model (bottom)
Study models (top)
Volumetric Rhythms (bottom)
Sectional model showing the relationship between interior and exterior topological surfaces
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City of Culture of Galicia – Library - Spain
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Museum of New Technologies - Galicia, Spain