Richard Meier Atheneum
Charles Jencks describes Richard Meier’s works as liminal space; a space that is magical and disorienting and where surfaces continually wrap over areas eliding experiences into a seamless web.¹ These are strong words spoken by a (quintessential) postmodernist regarding an architect that encompasses the theories of Modernity, and are testament to the lyrical discourse Meier has created throughout his career.

It is important to place Richard Meier within the timeline of the Modern movement. He graduated from Cornell University in 1957, thereby fully exposing him to the explosive impact of Le Corbusier’s dictum. It is no secret that Corbusier has had a profound impact on Meier’s thinking of space; some have felt Meier has been able to achieve the qualities Corbusier had hoped for and even exceeded Corbusier himself.² Yet it is equally important to acknowledge the impact of Siegfried Giedion’s writings. As a student, Meier accepted Giedion’s position discussed in the Architecture of Space with no skepticism, deeming it appropriate and valid for the 1950s and onward.³ Giedion cast a theoretical foundation for Meier in the midst of architecture’s evolution towards postmodernism.

The Atheneum, constructed from 1975-1979, is situated near the banks of the Wabash River on the outskirts of the historic town of New Harmony. Reactionary criticism to Modernity was rife at this point, labeling Modern architecture as alienating and sterile. However, the Atheneum’s success as not only an architectural icon, but also a cultural icon decades after its conception has elevated the project past such critique.
The three storey building serves as the center for visitor orientation and a place for community cultural events. The building is cast as the marker for the town’s entry, acting as the place of arrival and initiation; its architecture is conceived as such. The Atheneum links the ideas of architectural procession and historic journey. Furthermore, it was nominated by Peter Eisenman for a Twenty-Five Year Award as it is “a wonderfully pure example of the recurring themes among [Meier’s] substantial oeuvre; it is a classic ‘Meier’ design.”
Richard Meier is an architect that consciously asserts architectural theory in his work, relying on influences that had a heavy hand in shaping the Modern movement. The Atheneum is an exemplary translation of Modern theoretic discourse relating to space. Sense of place, plasticity in architecture and spatial experiences relating to a moving observer may be delineated by their definition and time of inception, but the Atheneum harmonized these concepts so that they became intertwined, enabling the understanding of one through the existence of the other.

“Places are goals or foci where we experience the meaningful events of our existence, but there are also points of departure from which we orient ourselves and take possession of the environment. A place is something that evokes a notion of permanence and stability in us.”

This quote from Meier is not unrelated to Heidegger’s theorem that dwelling is ultimately part of building, or asks how can “mortals bring dwelling to the fullness of it essence? This they accomplish when they build out of dwelling, and think for the sake of dwelling.” It can be argued that Meier’s beliefs are related to, if not an evolution of, Norberg-Schulz’s thinking where he determines that architecture’s ultimate goal is to give man a place to dwell, or rather, elucidate a sense of place. At the onset of any project, Meier will consistently ask himself, “what is it that makes a space a place?” He answers this by claiming notions derived from an architecture of plasticity connect a building to its environment, where the connection between plain geometry, layered definition of spaces, effects of light and shade, factors which link the
building to its past and factors which emphasize the building in its given environment must be present for a space to be a place.  8

As a threshold building, the Atheneum is conceived as an architectural promenade. Using the idea of space-time, or spatial experience centered around a moving observer, the Atheneum procession begins long before the viewer is in physical contact with the building.  9 The visitor arrives by boat and comes upon a path at the edge of the dock. The path leads through a field toward the building that is seen standing alone, sculptural and elevated in the landscape.

At this point, it should be understood that the entry procession is a designed acknowledgement to the visitor’s individual connection with the building and the historic city beyond. In plan, the pathway is a symbolic extension between the town and water, interrupted only by the Atheneum’s intervention and its purpose as the physical threshold of arrival.

Formally, this arrival is also greeted by an archetypal gesture; a 3-storey plane is set at a forty degree angle to the podium, aligned with the pathway axis. This distortion also confers an additional degree of complexity upon the plan. The project’s primary Cartesian grid references the organization of the city, fostering a connection between building and context, yet the entry procession’s disposition responds to the skewed edge of town and the river bank.

Once the visitor has crossed the threshold of entry, the compressed entry space directs him past adjacent pockets of space to the foot of the circulation ramp. The interior ramp is the experiential spine of the building that regains the five-degree offset of the secondary grid; it interweaves through the overlaid Cartesian systems, resolving the two grids in plan and section, and in doing so, induces experiences of “spatial compression at certain points, tension at others; as one circulation path inflects toward another, one feels spaces narrowing, then opening up – of grids almost colliding.” 10 The building is set in motion.
Both grid systems are expressed in plan and engaged by vertical and horizontal planes.
Multiple prescribed routes have been composed.
Visitor is engaged with both grid systems via angled and cartesian circulation routes.
Using the path of circulation as the building’s primary spatial protagonist is reminiscent of Banham’s position that interior spaces of Modern architecture “are to be experienced as a series of partitions of infinite space by an observer moving through them.” Meier’s response emulates this as he eliminates the duality between the interior and exterior of the building, using light and visual extensions to create a oneness with the town, providing an interpretation of infinite space. (Jencks coined the particular space of the Atheneum as Oiside space.)

The architecture dissolves with Meier’s artistry of light. Light penetrating from skylights flood the circulation ramp, dematerializing the shifting wall planes and rendering changing ceiling and floor heights in relief.

Multiple routes exist within the Atheneum, capturing views that express the interconnectivity of interior spaces, or linger with vistas of the landscape. One route exists at the second floor, where the ramp refers back to the entry and back to the landscape. On the second level, a lounge intersperses glazing onto a flowing wall, allowing for the contemplation of the river. An exhibition space on the third level presents the user with an understanding of the route travelled as well as what lays ahead. Interior windows frame the heart of the building while views across the river terrace “continually refers to and refracts the landscape.”

“Up the circular stair and across a bridge, the visitor finds himself confronted with the town. A panoramic view, as if from the prow of a ship, awaits. This small roof terrace is both culmination and anticipation. [...] it watches over town, while it reinforces the ideological axis that joins [the city]. The long stepped ramp then becomes the final exodus; a single manifestation of the idea of the building being its dynamic relationship to the town.”
Example of interconnected volumes that extend in vertical and horizontal overlaps on a Cartesian grid
Interconnected volumes of space extend visual sightlines and create connections between interior spaces, as well as between interior and exterior spaces.

Opposite: Light dissolves walls and ceilings; spaces blend together.
Views and glimpses that connect within to without (all plans overlaid)
Richard Meier’s quest for illuminating sense of place is a culmination of his studies and beliefs rooted in founding theories of Modernism. He has evolved a reverent understanding of an architecture of place, and applies his beliefs rigorously and eloquently to his work. On the grounds of such theoretical definitions, it is easy to recognize the harmony of the Atheneum tapestry yet impossible to extract a design strategy employed for only one purpose. It is under the influence of Modern theory that the Atheneum’s spatial relationships, created from a rational play of forms, are multiplied into transcendental and quintessential experiences framed by and interlaced with the landscape.

2 Ibid, 33.
3 Ibid, 34.
8 Ibid, 117.
12 Ibid, 16.

Images taken from:
In the evolution of architectural ideological thinking, a preoccupation with naturalism and architecture is a prevailing concept. The influence of surrounding forms and processes is undeniable. The sublimation of the natural world is present as carved florets upon Corinthian columns or expressed as horizontal lines in Frank Lloyd Wright’s prairie houses. However, Wright moved beyond a literal translation of natural form, relinquishing a preoccupation with preconceived typologies, and accorded a more holistic understanding of organic systems. He believed that architectural form was a reinterpretation of nature’s principles and that all facets of the architectural model should exist in harmony.

While these principles had a hand in shaping the Modern movement, Manfredo Tafuri suggests that the unification of Reason and Nature also had a profound influence on the ideologies that Richard Meier would come to follow in the future. It was this rationalism that likened nature to a machine; “the laws of production came to form part of a new universe of conventions explicitly posited as ‘natural.’” Or rather, form was now “understood as the logic of subjective reactions within the objective universe of production.” The architect’s role shifted to that of master planner. He no longer gave form to singular objects within a system or endeavored to design simple prototypes. Instead, the architect was now meant to organize these cycles and allow form to be born from within. In Le Corbusier’s words, the architect is an organizer.
Richard Meier has sought this harmonious, “organic” relationship with his work, where all parts are interrelated and dependent upon the site, program and each other. I believe he justifies this principle by engaging the Cartesian grid as his tool, or as Meier has put it, the grid as “an architectural device, a three-dimensional, organizing system.” Adhering to the grid allows the architect to eliminate the formal “center” in architecture, allowing for a range of formal possibilities. However, Meier has also shown that he is not a slave to the grid, and that a break, change, or modification is possible as long as legitimized by a reason. Conceivably, the grid acts as the formalized field that needs to exist in order for the sublimated break from organization to occur.

The Atheneum uses a five foot grid as its organizing module. It is established in relation to the existing site conditions and references the New Harmony city grid as outlined in the previous chapter concerning “Space”. A deviation from the grid marks the entry procession inspired by the wave of the river. This deviation informs the three-storey high, formal architectural gesture. A wall responds to the differentiation via a 45° shift. Dissonances from the Cartesian plane are not limited only to rational angles; a loose interpretation of the river is expressed through the curved wall and corresponding views toward the vista, giving the architecture unexpected formal interest.

Perhaps it is important to expand on Le Corbusier’s objectives regarding the Modern form, given that Richard Meier is his fervent ideological pupil. Le Corbusier strove to absorb the multiplicities of the urban machine, temper the improbable with the certainty of plan, reconcile organic structure and disorganization by intensifying the dialectical relationship between them and exploit the articulation of form in order to engage the public as an active and conscious user of the architecture. In the previous Space chapter, I made clear that Richard Meier relied on the architectural promenade of the user to carve space in relation to light, yielding cinematic and complex spatial collisions. This user centric experience also informs the formal properties of the Atheneum. Entry and circulation are considered in relation to the grid, and subsequently, the other formal aspects of the building as well.

This consideration of the grid and the visitor is also rigorously approached in the Z-plane. The heights of the functional spaces are direct responses to the user’s path of travel, as is the expression of the sloping façade.
These parti diagrams illustrate the relationship of program, structure, enclosure, entry and circulation to the established grid; parts from one diagram may need to be represented in another, illustrating the integrated relationships.
Floor slab - one grid unit thick

Transitional space - three grid units high
Combination space - three to nine grid units high

Gallery space - five grid units high

Section through entry foyer facing east

South Elevation
Entry procession affects formal expression of elevation
As Le Corbusier delved deeper into the means of production and distribution, Meier’s philosophies begin to break away. Le Corbusier wrote “the Plan is the generator. The plan proceeds from within to without.” Adherence to the plan is essential, as is relying on the great primary geometric forms and their proportional properties that were without ambiguity. This method of relying on geometries can be seen as overtly elementary and over-rationalized, and risk being reduced to a set of typologies and simple combinations. Richard Meier has often remained ambivalent on this matter, choosing to speculate on quality and the relationship between program and site, volume and light, as proponents of form. However, analyzing the Atheneum has led me to believe that Meier does indeed subscribe to these principles of geometric, proportional measurements whether subconscious or not. That being said, I do believe Meier’s interpretation speculates upon the experiential qualities of space opposed to Le Corbusier’s challenge with rationalized geometries in relation to the quantitative aspects of production.

The Atheneum establishes a harmonious dialectic between the building and site, structure, program, enclosure, entry and circulation. The building embraces the Cartesian grid in its adherence and deviation from its delineations, capturing a rational, easily understood form, yet also exploring the sublime through the interesting spatial consequences of its formal anomaly. As with most of Meier’s work, the Atheneum is embroiled in its roots of High Modernity. Yet Meier’s high attention to detail and deliverance of spatial quality establishes his work in permanence, rendering it applicable and well understood even today.

Images taken from:
Yeung, S. Sketchup Model of the Atheneum

Geometries found in plan
Program spaces and floor plans fit within the prescribed geometric spaces. Simple forms are extrapolated to form a complex whole.
Body

“You cannot have form in architecture which is unrelated to human experience; and you cannot approach an understanding of experience, in terms of architecture, without a strongly sensuous and tactile attitude toward form and space.”

Richard Meier

Richard Meier is established as the unabashed Modernist in his approach to spatial and formal construction. In the previous two chapters, I have disclosed the foundations of his methodologies to be rooted in the writings of Giedion and the works of Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier. Once again, I cannot emphasize enough the impact of Le Corbusier’s ideologies on Meier’s principles. However, as I delve deeper into the relationship between Meier’s work and the notion of the body, I’ve begun to place him in an area beyond the pure Modernist sensibility and into a realm more akin with post structuralism and Deconstructivism.

At face value this may seem absurd; Meier’s work, formally, does not bear much resemblance to the jagged and dynamic building types we have come to associate with Deconstructivism. And after all, I’ve demonstrated that the Atheneum was considered around a rationalized Cartesian grid system and romanticizes le Corbusier’s definition of the ‘promenade architecturale.’ However, the embrace of the posthumanist, complex, fragmented and decentred body experience are concepts shared by Meier’s work and Deconstructivism’s seemingly different ideology. Furthermore, this concept is given more credence when one considers that the Atheneum was constructed at a time when the pure rationality of Modernism was be-
Meier has always been a proponent of the user's spatial experience as being integral to architecture, with the Atheneum being a prime example. The architectural promenade of the visitor as he approaches the building, filters through it, and experiences multiple spatial transitions in relation to his body is a key feature of this project. Meier does not believe in the visual preoccupation or visual anthropomorphism that Renaissance architecture or Postmodernism employ. He has taken a Posthumanist stance, stating that “Anthropomorphism has become a denial of the whole spatial notion of architecture” and questions “Why should architecture be made in an image of man? I make architecture primarily in what I conceive of as the mind of man.” In this respect, Meier echoes Anthony Vidler’s definition of the Modernism approach to the body. Vidler posits that the abstraction of space, where half-closed eyes are used to “see lines more vaguely, in favour of unlimited space and the ‘elusive magic of light’” are moments of opportunities seized by Modernists. The resultant architecture “mirrored all the states of a regenerated and healthy body, but also corresponded to a similarly healthy mind.”

Perhaps the term of “healthy body” is where Richard Meier begins to distinguish himself from the pure Modernist definition. In the Atheneum, Meier has introduced a note of doubt into the Enlightenment architecture of reason, viewing the body concept as less than ideal. Charles Jencks has described this doubt as being conveyed by the rhetorical figure of “imperfect perfection,” an oxymoronic figure of doubt that challenges the complacent simplicities of a strictly rational Modernism, the same challenges that faced the Deconstructivists. It is here that I draw comparisons with Eisenman’s call for a new rationalization of space, or a higher order in which the user can no longer conceptualize experiences in space but senses an ur-logic beyond our visual awareness. Meier’s use of the endless grid arguably attempts this higher order; the various grids relate to site, building
As one proceed along one of the routes of the architectural promenade, spatial transitions become complex and the interweaving of volumetric geometries is experienced.
and spatiality as a whole rather than to the human body specifically. “We are defined to live in the fragmented interstices of the world and my basic ordering principle has to do with such interstitial structures.” Here Meier acknowledges the fragmented realities of the world that earlier Modernists may have ignored. The resultant interstitial spatial experiences are complex collisions of space, conceptually similar to that of the Deconstructivists.

Meier does not necessarily investigate Eisenman’s folding of space, but does explore a spatial decentering and fragmentation. In the Atheneum, no figural shapes, circles or rectangles are finished. Any overriding hierarchical organization is avoided, where key functional areas are linked by multi-storey spaces, axial vistas and the directed flow of light. The building is pervaded by reminders of the coexistence of transitory phenomena, where light flows from everywhere to the extent that one is unsure of its source. The multiple routes within the building blur the distinction between the beginning, middle and end, a notion that is characteristic of Renaissance architecture. It removes the need for anthropomorphism and centredness, key concepts in Eisenman’s argument about “loss of centre.”

I have not intended to diminish Meier’s work in the realm of Modernity or begin to claim that he is a Deconstructivist. But the challenges that he faced were the same issues which plagued the post structuralists and Deconstructivists during their conception. In the true spirit of embracing the era’s zeitgeist, it was most likely unavoidable that Meier’s conceptual responses would parallel those of the Deconstructivists. However, where Deconstructivists are sceptic by nature, Jencks labels Meier as a “doubting optimist” who seeks to find the patterns behind fragmentation, not the fragments behind unity. In comparison to his counterparts, Meier does not insist on a predetermined disintegration, nor does his formal actuation respond with as much force or violence. Instead, Meier seeks continuities that create an aesthetic conjunction of forms, creating new complexities that are grounded in a traditional approach caught in perpetual transition.
The changing qualities of light affect the interpretation of space. The user is reminded of transitory phenomena and unsure of where light sources are located; it appears to flow everywhere.

In plan, or in major functional spaces in section, no squares, circles or other pure geometries are completely finished.
Meier seeks patterns between different grid systems and the interstitial fragments that occur between them. He formulates space from the experience of the body without projecting the modular body onto his work.
If what Alberto Perez-Gomez says about architecture in his chapter, “Introduction to Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science,” is true, then Richard Meier finds himself in a time when an architectural shift in perception is occurring. Perez-Gomez asserts that contemporary architects (of 1983) are becoming aware of the limitations of functionalism and formalism and the impossibility of reducing architecture to decoration, sociology or psychology. Perez-Gomez accuses Modernist architects of losing sight of poetics in architecture as they are stubbornly bound to rationality and truth. Those that do recognize the affinity between architecture and the realm of art are unable to reconcile this transcendental meaning; they are caught up in playing formal games.¹

Once again, one cannot place Meier directly in the midst of Perez-Gomez’s generic definition of a Modernist architect. While Meier engages in “formal games” through his adherence to a grid system, he embraces the perception of the entire body as the method for human experience. In the previous chapter, I identified Meier’s exploration of the fragmented interstices of the world and how he seeks and creates an order within them.² I asserted that the Atheneum’s language is heterotopic. It calls into question the modern esteem for rigid and uniform geometries, and a fluidity and plasticity of space begin to take shape through the fragmentation of geometric spatial volumes. Meier refines his design by interlocking these principles with color, tactility and materials with methodology and the art of construction.
Collages arise from the traces of everyday life. It is a technique based on found materials versus the sterility and artificiality of material offered in supply stores, a notion that parallels the design philosophies outlined above, and unsurprisingly, a favourite pastime of Richard Meier. Meier gathers scraps from his travels, favouring a direct link between what we live with and what is applied to our art. His collages offer high contrast, Constructivist juxtapositions of pure colour, and his compositional sensibility recalls the Atheneum’s floorplans based on grid shifts in relation to the edges of site. Free form curves allude to Corbusian bulges, such as the curved Atheneum wall that reflects the river, and contours suggested from the loose layering of papers resemble incidents or spatial collisions that develop within the interiors. No single collage documents a particular episode in Meier’s life; each is a combination of remnants, a diagram of fragmentation. Meier’s architectural work and methodology draws much from collage and the idea of montage.

One technique that is prevalent in both his architectural and art work is the use of colour. While large blocks of colour are inherently obvious in the collages, Meier is renowned for working almost exclusively with white in his building projects. He views the colour as such:

“White is the most wonderful colour of all, because within it, one can find every color of the rainbow. White is in fact the colour which intensifies the perception of all of the other hues that exist in natural light and in nature.”

In this regard, Meier’s use of colour is able to clarify architectural concepts. It is against white surfaces that the play of light, form and space can be accentuated, heightening the power of visual form. Whiteness is able to reflect site conditions like an abstract mirror, elucidating site’s ephemeral constructs as they are continually transformed by a modulating sky. It molds a space that has a definition and order related to nature, context, human experience and the culture of architecture, Meier’s primary preoccupation. This technique is reminiscent of Vittorio Gregotti’s address where he proposed that the marking of ground was the primordial architectural tectonic act. Gregotti discerns site geography as the material from which to develop a project, the constructed work operating as a physical representation of history and revealing the essence of the environmental con-
Collage and architectural composition resemble each other through the use of collage technique.
While the Atheneum lacks the apparent colour patches of collage, its whiteness is a more sophisticated interpretation that can be seen as the memory and anticipation of colour, fragmenting and abstracting site conditions and the culture of the time.

Through colour technique and its architectural intention, choices of material become apparent for Meier. Natural, polished silver aluminium, travertine tile, white metal composite panel and smooth white stucco have been explored in projects that have been built before or after the Atheneum’s construction. Each material has a certain quality that makes it appropriate for a particular project yet they all share the same concept of reflectivity and are hard and smooth in tactility. The Atheneum was the first project of Meier’s oeuvre that was constructed with a white, enameled porcelain tile. Its inherent sheen is able to capture the architectural intent of the project and provide ample reflections of its surroundings without fading over time. Its durability, in a square paneled form, also allows the material to be clipped into a thin-skinned wall system, allowing for a unified formal expression for the building. Using square panels ably expresses the planar quality of surfaces and provides a scaling device. As such, detailing remains a critical element in Meier’s architecture. By revealing the joints between panels, Meier is able to express the honesty of construction and craft as being integral to the making of building, reflecting upon Kenneth Frampton’s assertion that building is an act of construction first, rather than a discourse predicated on the surface, volume and plan, citing Le Corbusier’s “Three Reminders to Architects.” The integration of material and detailing in the Atheneum preserves the aesthetics of spatial fragmentation by expressing a formal clarity through well-crafted building components.
Connection details that illustrate architectural concept of unity and construction system. Grid is maintained.
As Ignasi de Sola-Morales stated that architecture is posited as a craft and as the practical application of established knowledge through different levels of intervention, so too does Meier believe that construction and expression are dialectically related to each other.\footnote{Frampton, K. “rappel a L’ordre, the Case for teh Tectonic”, in Kate Nesbitt, ed. “Theo-rizing a New Agenda for Architecture”(New York, Princeton 1996) 524} By exploring collage technique, Meier is able to engage the act of making in his architecture and articulate the art of constructability through an expressed exterior structural system.\footnote{Hartoonian, G. “Re-Minding Richard Meier” in Journal of Architecture Education, Vol.44, No.1 (Nov 1990) 34} Meier’s use of the colour white also aptly communicates an architectural idea that runs itself through all other components of a project, reinforcing Meier’s ultimate goal of an encompassing harmony that can embrace building and site.

5 Ibid, 9
7 Jencks, C. 25
8 Ibid, 25
9 Frampton, K. 520
11 Frampton, K. 524
12 Hartoonian, G. 35
The Atheneum still stands as an icon for New Harmony, Indiana as it approaches its 30th anniversary. It continues to attract over 25,000 visitors annually, a testament to its success as a midwestern icon. Conceived as an architectural promenade, the building elicits a complex synthesis of Modernist principles that extend throughout notions of space, form, body and technique. However, the building also reflects upon the era it was constructed, unknowingly recording the history of the time and the culture of the place as interpreted by Meier. The Atheneum reasserts the power of High Modernist architecture in its contest with emerging postmodern thought in the late 1970s, however, also flirts with a fragmented poststructuralist viewpoint. Richard Meier has managed to bring these components together to form a harmonious whole in both form and in theory and his work cannot be reduced to a one-dimensional Modernist label. As Charles Jencks has alluded:

"[Meier's] world is a gesamtkunstwerk of fractured abstraction. Usual junctures are eroded, customary scale and boundaries are overcome, as with all liminal experience, and the Meier environment is reconstituted as an over-all web of continuous white surface. The confusion of categories is intoxicating. [...] This is the condition of pure art and Meier has provided its architectural equivalent."