Generating Perpetual Time

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Part I

collecting identity -
cultural valuation and the desire for the object

Historically, cultures are defined retroactively—by objects, persons and places which make up the complex interrelationships amongst political, social and economic structures. As well, aesthetic tendencies, technological advances and cultural institutions form the basis from which symbolic descriptions signify a culture's legitimacy and identifying power. The desire to collect, catalogue and store the 'objects' which best represent cultural values further generates distinctions between specific and collective references. "If collecting is meaningful, it is because it shuns closure and the security of received evaluations and instead opens its eyes to existence—the world around us both cultural and natural, in all its unpredictability and contingent complexity." [1]

An awesome belief has developed in the collection's power to become a reality complete in itself, a replacement for the original and a truth to be realized. Gustave Flaubert for example, warns of the Museum's power to create this false notion of reality as "... the set of objects the Museum displays is sustained only by the fiction that they somehow constitute a coherent representational universe. ...Such a fiction is the result of an uncritical belief in the notion that ordering and classifying, that is to say, spatial juxtaposition of fragments, can produce a representational understanding of the world." [2]

As objects are continually collected, archived, warehoused and marketed; they are destined to become more and more sacred for having been chosen to rest within sanctified domains, to be revisited again and again by tourists, or more appropriately termed; pilgrims. The pilgrimage to city centers gives value to the new urbanity, the new waterfronts, the renewed lower downtowns, and establishes the *raison d'être* for inner-city commerce other than religion, trade or industry. Yet, as these modern pilgrims arrive in droves, each object begins slowly to degenerate into a pure commodity and may begin to suffer the 'illness' that Michel Foucault refers to in his analysis of "modern institutions of confinement–that of the asylum, the clinic and the prison–and their respective discursive formations—madness, illness and criminality." [3] However severe this statement may seem, it addresses the emotional and psychological components attached to the act of collecting and the potential compulsions which develop from an obsessive need to possess, harbor and retain.

These itemized collections signify the way in which a society of diminishing means convinces itself that there is a future, because of its inextricable connection to its past. "Collecting is classification lived, experienced in three dimensions. The history of collecting is thus the narrative of how human beings have striven to accommodate, to appropriate and to extend the taxonomies and systems of knowledge they have inherited." [4] Valued are memorabilia which one can grasp, hold, covet and desire. They are reminders of successes and failures, reminders of lineage and origins, reminders of mortality. They convince us that we still exist, convince us that we must have value because we possess so many objects that have been determined to have value. Werner Muensterberger describes various types of known collectors and the respective manifestations of psychological upheaval that they attempt to resolve through their collections. Whether the collector is obsessed with a specific class of objects d'art or whether he/she is undiscerning of quality but specific about a period of history or functionality, the desire to accumulate may stand as a reward, statement of belonging, or as an attempt to ameliorate and correct a past event. [5] On the other hand, the objectification of the collection may serve as a platform for rebellion against an oppressive upbringing. Interpreted in this way, the object itself becomes representative of a cadre of human emotions experienced throughout one's lifetime. The collection becomes a symbol for one's ability through a series of associative mnemonic episodes to reiterate again and again the ongoing effects of the original event.

Yet, as an object's consumption, objectification and personification may ultimately lead to its purification—the collection's rightful meaning is even further controlled and displaced within a contemporary context. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, in *The Cultures of Collecting*, describe what may be the ultimate consequence of the desire to determine and control the collection within the 'myth of objectivity'.

> To collect up to a final limit is not simply to own or to control the items one finds; it is to exercise control over existence itself through possessing every sample, every specimen, every instance of an unrepeatable and nowhere duplicated series. It is to be unique... Absolute control is only realized at the pitch where it can actually extinguish that which is controlled. [6]

Fig. 1. collection devices

Simply by sequestering as an event these symbolic referents—heightening and elevating them to significant and often amplified proportions—a process of distillation so removes them from their original context and diminishes their actuality that they become condensed into a state of virtuality. Their accessibility becomes, to borrow Jean Baudrillard's term, 'obscene'. "The obscenity of the commodity stems from the fact that it is abstract, formal and light in opposition to the weight, opacity and substance of the object."[7] This implies a transparency of the object as an obvious and univalent entity. And, herein, lies its transformation from the 'specific' to the general—from the timefull to the 'perpetual'. The acts of coveting and possessing link them into a closed-ended system. The creative social body may then become locked into a pre-determined set of conditions where free association and multivalent interpretations available within open-ended and oscillating systems of stasis and momentum; infinity and resolution; expansion and compression are curtailed.

nostalgic resonance -
film imagery and popular media

Nostalgia is often fostered by a re-visitation to the *fin de siècle* through film, literature and fashion. From the sometimes lewd references to decadence and sensual promiscuity, to the valuing of the mystique and the human spirit, and to the openly accepting stance towards an optimistic and unlimited future we are allowed views into worlds full of symbolic representations, compressed and preserved on celluloid and paper. Frederic Jameson refers to nostalgia's ability to "... satisfy a deep, repressed, longing, ...to be able to gratify a deeper and more properly nostalgic desire to return to that older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artifacts through once again." [8] Films such as *Little Women*, with its reference to Transcendentalism, *The River Runs Through It*, recalling the rites of passage, and *The Remains of the Day* with its painfully repressed yet admired regard for passion: are all revered with a freshness dampened only by a realization of distance and time past.

Ironically, it has become popular to deny the dogmatism, directives, and confinements of those eras, for they remind us of moralistic standards and authoritarian systemization. Yet simultaneously, these nostalgic resonances recall an entrenchment in the structured environment of traditions, ethics and values prescribing conditions for human behavior which provide for a collective mentality, identity and overall confidence. Infatuation with the images and concepts associated with our past heroes, our loves, our accomplishments and our loses are deemed more grounded and have become more significant somehow, more valid, than the love for aspects of our evolutionary pres-

ence and its potential consequences on our behavior and modes of production. Jameson describes further manifestations, "... the failure of the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment of the past." [9] In such a state, symbolic objects and their historical contexts give one faith and quench the desire to remember, but ultimately procure their existence in the 'perpetual' present.

dystopic euphoria -
technological acuity and the language of the information age

Our rapid-fire production of info-technology and its subsequent and inevitable obsoletism hardly allow us to become attached to something long enough for it to develop distinct meaning. No sooner do we discover the latest and 'best' than do we go on, immediately, rather than savoring, appreciating and developing a richer affect. A society devoid of newly meaningful symbols, where people are almost completely visually oriented and rely almost solely on assumptions and stereotypes—where 'image' is everything from fashion, to entertainment, to personality profiles—ever more determined by the media—has aligned the 'spectacle' in relation to the 'image' and disconnected from sensual experience. More recently the virtual ubiquity of the internet suggests an equalizing through an adherence to the objectification of communication and accessibility to information. This perhaps augments a false collectivity and connectedness or perhaps, more optimistically, a newly emerging mental conceptualization of personal space, creativity and access amongst a more vast and rhizomatic diagram for cultural commonality.

Joseph Pearce, in *Evolution's End*, discusses the potential of human intelligence and warns that cultural sterilization resulting from an over-reliance upon technological advances—distinguished by cultural validation, may lead to a deterioration of the potential for overall intellectual acuity, abstraction and creativity. [10] What will be the claim of a generation of computer literate toddlers who rarely see the light of day, rarely converse with a newly defined family structure around a dinner table, and rarely create from the soul of their being rather than from a desire to replicate, own and master?

The impersonal sanitization of a technological society has lead to a resurgence of spiritual quests for identity, connection and belonging. However, what used to be considered a private and inward journey has become the agenda of radical Supremacist groups and fanatical religious factions who collect the passions and energies of a disenfranchised youth in a quest for political power and monetary gain. The Mind/Body connection becomes a means to an end rather than a journey. These endeavors curtail the creative process as foreshortened and immediate gratification subvert the potential for individual genius and collective optimism.
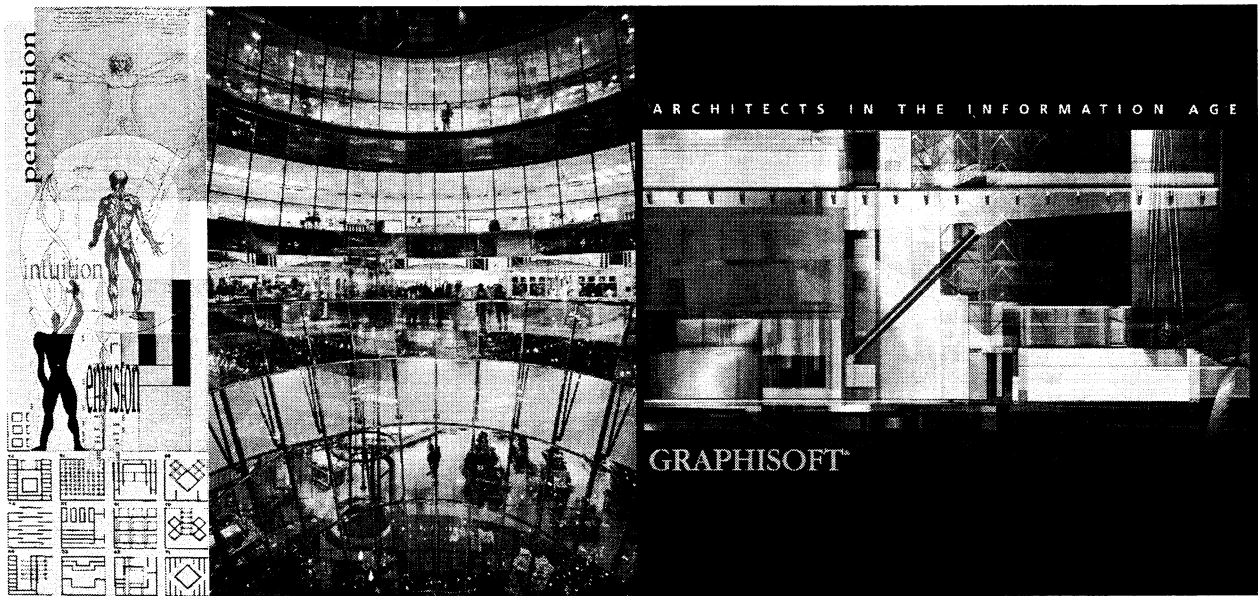
Fig. 2.compression in the space of the 'body', 'architecture' and 'technology
(L to R): ACSA Nat' l Conf. Poster, Barbara Ambach; Gallerie Lafayette Dept. Store, Jean Nouvel; Graphisoft, Advertisement

compressing the image -
translucency of meaning in the virtual environment

The means of production through technology, materiality and the media in general are increasingly two-dimensional. They exist on a screen, suggesting a translucency of meaning through the juxtaposition, layering and superimposing of dots, light and pigment. The homogenized effect is highly specialized and distinct, abolishing the notion of language as a grounding mechanism, a connective devise for cultural richness and depth—an environment in which we are both immersed as subject and divorced as creator. New and increasingly specialized vocabularies—verbal, visual and physical—are devised, signifying a generation associated with progress and change in a 'perpetual' continuum.

However, at the same time, this sort of graphic delineation encapsulates the infinite potential for variable translation and interpretation. Projected onto the tableau of the flat screen, alternative and multi-dimensional readings of infinite correlations are continually regenerated and transformed. The media's use of superimposition and simultaneity to capture the subtleties of inference and innuendo assumes a literacy and public acceptance of an ever more complex collage of message and context.

'perpetual time' ~ 'specific time' -
oscillations along the continuum

The speed and propulsion with which we move, the availability of information, imagery and contact across the wires has propelled the appreciation and acceptance for natural rhythms and cadences determined by what I will refer to here as 'Specific time', into a perpetual motion of swirling and vertiginous activity. A constant quest for something other, for acquisitions and claims of ownership, have replaced moments for reflection, stillness and solitude—the fundamental determinants of 'Specific time'. The aspect of dream and fantasy, of pondering and proselytizing have been falsely unified with a model for continuous

production. 'Perpetual time', by contrast, seeks to mimic 'Specific time', not as a metaphorical construct, but as a replication of imagery and ideology. Paradoxically, 'Perpetual time' spins its wheels without progressing through space. It is ever-present and incessant. 'Specific time', by its nature, undulates, transforms, interprets and reflects. It adapts and evolves as that of a living force. It has quality and character specific to its place, inhabitants and structure.

'Perpetual time' has replaced the pause for the consideration of alternatives—with that of the measurement of nanoseconds generating a fear of stasis akin to death, dysfunction, and unproductivity. Each person is given relative value dependent on what he or she *does* how much, and how often. These dangerous dissolutions of 'Specific time' and the increased acceptance of 'Perpetual time' bring the concern for the object ever closer to the abyss of indifference—where the action and the meaning are one and the same, where, as Jean Baurillard states, "... nothing separates one pole from the other, the initial from the terminal: there is just a sort of contraction into each other, a fantastic telescoping, a collapsing of the two traditional poles into one another: an IMPLOSION– ... an implosion of meaning." [11] The black hole of implosion may actually become the 'oblivion' into which we dissipate through our incessant action. In the discussion of Keiji Nishitani's book *Religion and Nothingness*—Norman Bryson notes that "like Sartre and like Lacan, Nishitani's aim is to dismantle the anthropocentric subject, 'the cogito—where the (Cartesian) subject conceives of itself as universal center, surrounded by the stable plenitude of an object world... where both subject and object exist in a state of mutual confirmation and fixity.'... but his (Nishitani's) critique differs from theirs in his insistence on the term sunyata, translated as "emptiness," "radical impermanence," "blankness," and "nihility." ...the object is found to exist as part of a mobile continuum... as entity"—"Meaning in a sense never arrives; and in the same way, for Nishitani, being never arrives." [12]
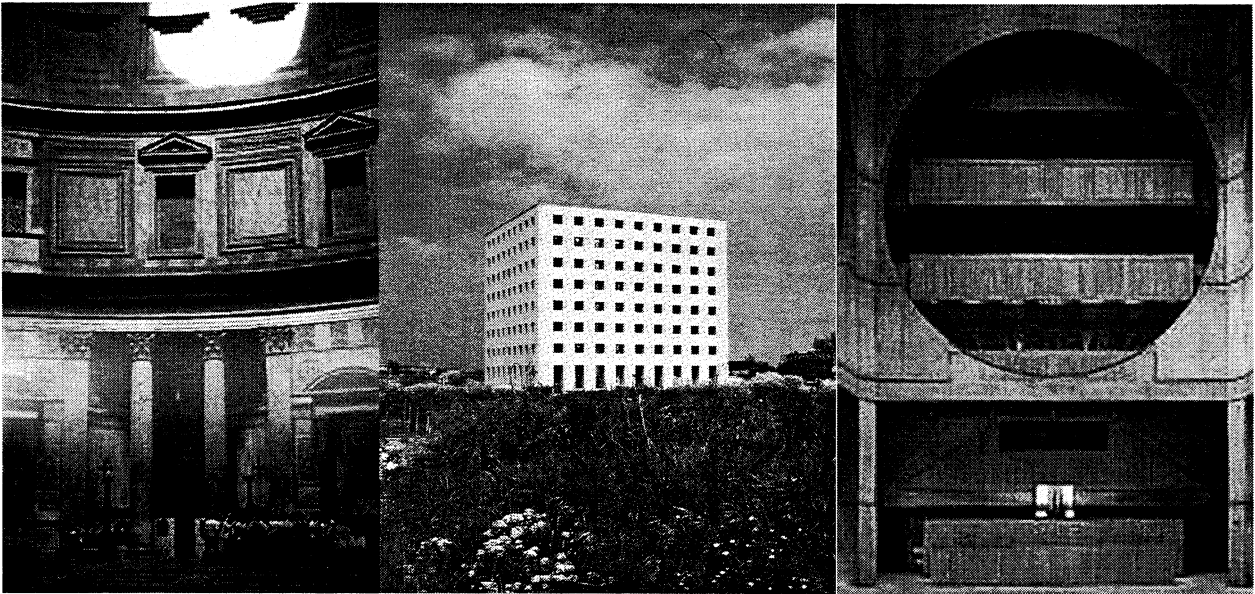
Fig. 3. formal containment
(L to R): Pantheon, Rome, 128 AD; San Cataldo Cemetery—Colombarium, Aldo Rossi, Modena, 1979; Exeter Library, Louis Kahn, New Hampshire, 1967-72

The previous statements are aligned with those of the past half century whose premises accused the Modern movement of stripping bare the richness of centuries of well-established cultural aesthetics and Postmodernism of attempting thinly to represent what had been taken away. By proselytizing the concepts of 'Specific time' and 'Perpetual time', my attempt is not to further argue or defend these criticisms, but to offer reflection upon potential contemporary conditions which are alternative and visionary—promoting an open translation and appreciation of experience and meaning. "The act of appreciation re-enacts the act of creation, and we are (each of us) actors, we are interpreters of it." [13]

Part II housing the relic—a case study

repository of repose -
derivative typologies and the architecture of collecting

The collecting, classifying and storing of symbolic descriptions of cultural contexts, past and emerging, has led to the creation of a series of building forms which for all intents and purposes function as warehouses, i.e.; Museums, Banks, Libraries, Hall's of Fame, Prisons, the Mausoleum and the Suburban Garage.

In the well-known examples of earlier buildings which have been designed to 'house the relic', there is a common theme or geometric configuration. Formal concepts and their supporting volumetric expressions are for the most part symmetrical, concentric and repetitive. Contrasting the implied action and meaning of the object, are spaces highly constrained. Their simplicity, centrality and formal legibility are set to position the objects against the neutrality of the envelope. Light and circulation are deliberate and composed—presupposing a set of controlled experiences, a priori—prescribing an exactitude for the viewer's perspective. The relationship between the viewer and the object

is specified as circumstantial to the event. It distinguishes a predetermined ambulation which potentially impedes upon deeper readings of a physical, sensual and spiritual nature.

More recent work resulting from media-based computer-aided design applications has demonstrated that a newly considered architectural territory may endeavor to seamlessly integrate the quest for knowledge and identity into a 'living construct'—activating, storing, disseminating and generating—a three dimensional habitation of actual and virtual worlds. The physically inhabited environment may incorporate technologies and formal manipulations which allow a more direct accessibility, derived by the desire for individual translations within a collective consciousness. In architecture these approaches have attempted to link together structure and experience; wherein the objects are knit together—woven into—both the logic and serendipity of their confines. In these instances, architecture may become an orienting devise toward more complex and expansive associations.

geometry of containment -
contemporary approaches integrating the referent with the referential

In 1998, Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin and Steven Holl's Kiasma Museum in Helsinki, were designed to counter the traditional modes of display. The circulation, light and formal constructs act in and amongst the objects, instigating an experience more fully integrated with the implications and assumptions of well-documented historical references. Thematic subjects and contextual urban issues are knit into the structural configuration, fracturing the distinction between the contained and the container. The museum no longer stands alone to be refilled, reestablished and reacquainted with its contents, but instead, relies on them to create its value and its long term and 'specific' identity.
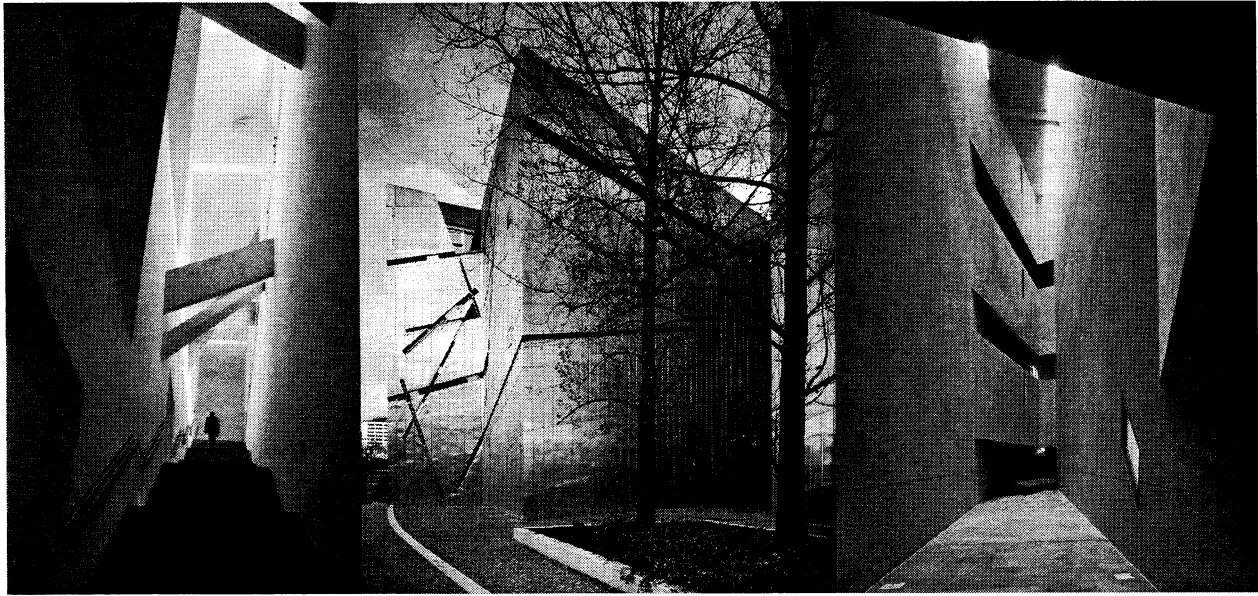
Fig. 4. Jewish Museum, Daniel Libeskind, Berlin, 1998

Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, through ten arduous years of planning, has demanded a new kind of evaluation. A review and critique by James S. Russell in *Architectural Record* (January 1999), describes Libeskind's interest in an open-ended experience which "...should continue in the mind." [14] A discussion of the appropriateness of the museum's focus on the Holocaust digs into the very core of how architecture over the centuries has striven to respond to and manifest occurrences in the social body with a formal permanence. It begs the question of whether or not a devastating event which clearly touched and destroyed the lives of millions of people world-wide should be the place from which a specific; and in this instance, German, identity should forever be acquainted. Does history stay distinct or does it continue to imbed itself in the minds, emotions and actions of the global culture? This question may postulate the necessity of the museum at its very core. Do we continue to revere by display, do we imply a conceptual memory or do we forego the potential for meaning in the message?

Libeskind's museum attempts to record the legacy of the debacle by capturing within a structural framework innuendo and inference. The jagged linear forms configure a series of 'void' spaces accessible from a single and relentless ramp. The notion of the 'void' implies the simultaneous opportunity for wholeness and emptiness. The weightiness of the concrete and steel construction remind us of our brooding and ongoing presence; despite the catastrophic absence of so many lost in the war and displaced by the Diaspora.

Eventually, the journey leads to a tower of substantial and meditative proportions. A single glint of light streams through a sliver between concrete slab walls. While its severity may be a reminder of the harsh and restricted spaces experienced in rail cars and concentration camp barracks, the tower signifies the culmination of an emotional transformation of one's consciousness—toward a hopeful and enlightened mentality for the future of humankind.

The Kiasma Museum in Helsinki expresses Steven Holl's intention to interpret a rich architectural tradition, well-respected and valorized in Finland. "Chiasma", Holl's name for the initial project, refers to "an intersecting or crossing over." The museum, Karen Stein explains in her article in *Architectural Record* (August 1998), is aptly named Kiasma, the Finnish equivalent, and succeeds as "an intersection of time and place." "It is meant to be viewed not as a discrete object, but rather as a series of views and spatial experiences." 15 The circulation, comprised of alternately expansive and compressive moves, shifts the visitor across thresholds, through walls and along edges. The ceilings sweep gracefully above horizontally attenuated gallery spaces where light is indirect and softly penetrating through gaping apertures.

Fragmented urban views, draw on the ambiguous relationship between inside and outside—they effect Holl's intention to immerse the museum in the urban context, juxtaposing the overall composition of forms against the vastness of the surrounding space. Similarly, the stability of elongated concrete walls, intersecting the translucence of the exterior set up a convoluted yet rich texture of physical and emotive responses.

This case study acknowledges the power of a re-visitation, a re-living and a reorientation amongst the flexing and oscillating realms of the object/experience relationship and their respective and alternative connotations. An involution of the essential and the sublime co-relate in uniquely integrated ways. These attempts represent the revealing of presuppositions, nurturing a pliable navigation through defined and yet undefined territory. The dual and multiple readings inscribe the 'perpetual' and the 'specific' into a freely evolving code of meaning and identification.
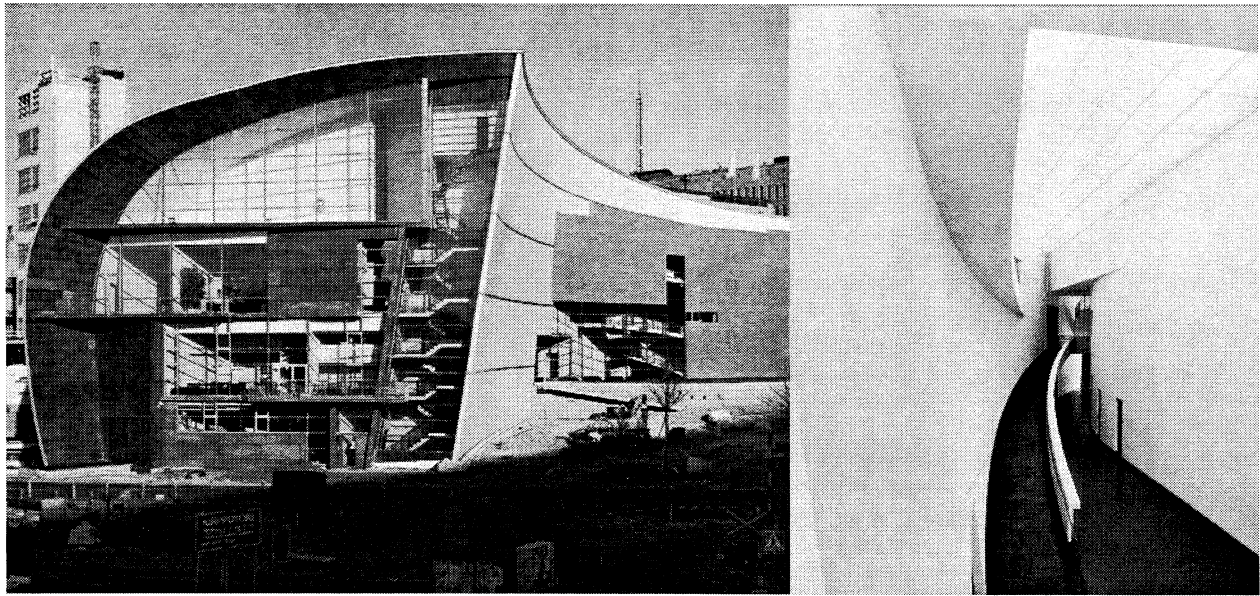
Fig. 5. Kiasma Museum, Steven Holl, Helsinki, 1997

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