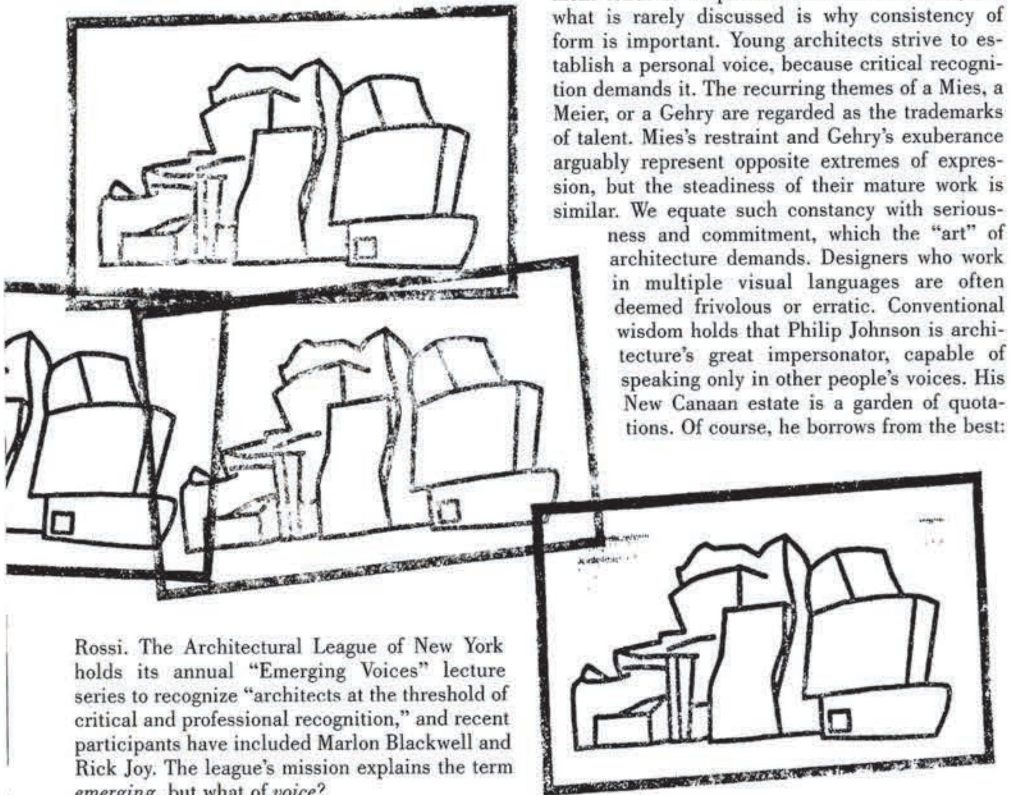
Perspective

Hearing Voices

By Lance Hosey

Establishing an artistic identity may be essential for an architect, but it doesn't always result in better architecture.

When architecture speaks, the architect is said to have a clear voice. Critic Russell Fortmeyer calls Will Bruder "a singular voice in architecture." The term has been applied to figures as diverse as Rem Koolhaas, Christian de Portzamparc, and Aldo Rossi. The Architectural League of New York holds its annual "Emerging Voices" lecture series to recognize "architects at the threshold of critical and professional recognition," and recent participants have included Marlon Blackwell and Rick Joy. The league's mission explains the term *emerging*, but what of *voice*?



Damian Chadwick

Although use of the word is widespread, the intended meaning is vague. Architectural discourse relies heavily on such metaphors, often borrowing ideas from other disciplines. *Voice* comes from literary criticism, where it suggests the unique aspects of a writer's work that are consistent enough to be recognizable. The term harks back to oral traditions in which the speaker's voice influenced the listener as much as the story itself. But to apply it to architecture is to focus on the designer's personal expression, implying that *what* is said is less important than *how*.

It goes without saying that architectural judgment tends to emphasize form over content, but what is rarely discussed is why consistency of form is important. Young architects strive to establish a personal voice, because critical recognition demands it. The recurring themes of a Mies, a Meier, or a Gehry are regarded as the trademarks of talent. Mies's restraint and Gehry's exuberance arguably represent opposite extremes of expression, but the steadiness of their mature work is similar. We equate such constancy with seriousness and commitment, which the "art" of architecture demands. Designers who work in multiple visual languages are often deemed frivolous or erratic. Conventional wisdom holds that Philip Johnson is architecture's great impersonator, capable of speaking only in other people's voices. His New Canaan estate is a garden of quotations. Of course, he borrows from the best: he did a great Mies impression and now does a passable Gehry. (A sure test of a clear voice is the ease with which it is parroted.)

Surely Johnson's reputation has suffered from his versatility. If during the last half century he had produced the same quality of work with a less derivative vocabulary, he may have been hailed as a visionary comparable to the architects whose work he emulates. Yet if *voice* refers not to language but to the way it is spoken, then Johnson's voice is very clear. Regardless of a project's idiom, his sensibility has been more consistent with massing, proportion, and scale of detail than that of many architects, and the effort to construct graphic images defines all of his work.

Although related to but distinct from style, voice includes all the qualities that together form the unmistakable identity of an architect's work. This emphasis on identity is much like the auteur theory in film, first associated with the French New Wave in the 1950s. "There are no works," went the movement's mantra, "there are only authors." The American film critic Andrew Sarris defined an auteur as a director whose distinguishable personality or "signature" emerges over a series of pictures. Although both fields adopt a literary device to highlight the director or architect, one important difference is that the auteur theory in film was always controversial. Architects, however, rarely question the primacy of the author. It is unthinkable to judge buildings without placing them in the designer's oeuvre. The idea of voice regards a building as a sample from someone's repertoire.

But what is the value of consistency in architecture? One benefit is marketability. Identifiable imagery is the equivalent to "branding" in commercial advertising, and both architects and clients capitalize on recognition. The University of Cincinnati's publicity campaign centers on the expansion of its campus, which according to its Web site is "studded with masterpieces by all-star signature architects." The metaphor of the signature again suggests architects as auteurs, and Cincinnati has formed its own cult of personality.

A subtler advantage of consistent design is that it allows architects to concentrate on fewer issues. Paul Rudolph said that Mies was able to create great buildings because he ignored so many problems. Sarris remarked that the Hollywood studio system, in which producers commissioned movies, forced directors to express their personalities through visual treatment rather than literary content. Architects are also dependent on patronage and cannot always influence factors

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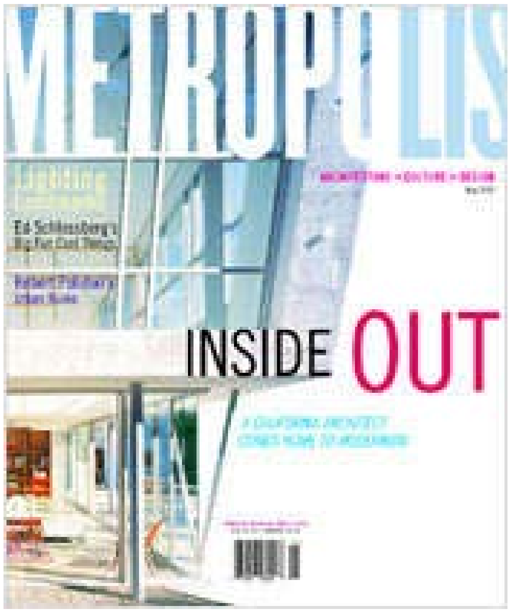

such as program, location, and users, so they focus instead on form, which may be developed independently of specific projects.

None of these explanations of voice necessarily benefits a building's larger community. The Guggenheim's revival of the city of Bilbao would have happened if that building had been a solitary statement in Gehry's career instead of a run-on sentence continuing in many places. And often cities suffer from an architect's pronouncements. A single voice can drown out the unique character of a place and its people. For most of us, the word *Bilbao* is now synonymous with a building, not a city. It makes us think of Gehry, not the Basques.

The clashing of architectural voices can result in cacophony. It has been said that if we were to line a street with all the great houses of the past century, the result would be a very bad street with great houses. Despite a heroic building campaign during the last decade, Berlin is still defined more by the strength and coherence of its nineteenth-century avenues and public spaces than by the din of recent construction. Cincinnati's brilliant campus plan by George Hargreaves deftly amplifies the rolling terrain, but this idea has been virtually ignored by most of the "signature" architects, whose contributions generally could have been built almost anywhere.

All stories are said to follow one of two plots: a hero takes a trip, or a stranger comes to town. The story told in the architect's voice often combines these scenarios: the hero comes to town—and remains a stranger. To arrive at a place with a predetermined aesthetic is arrogant and negligent. This is not an objection to artistic originality, because the problem is not necessarily with architects being artists. Creative skill and ingenuity are invaluable, particularly now, when commercialism threatens more than ever to stamp the world with its cookie cutters. The problem is with architects using their own cookie cutters.

Gehry's recent designs for the Corcoran Gallery, in Washington, D.C., and Case Western Reserve University, in Cleveland, are virtually identical, as are Daniel Libeskind's entry to the Corcoran competition and his proposed addition to London's Victoria and Albert Museum. Like commercial real-estate development, this approach sees each project merely as another opportunity to peddle the same wares. We condemn Wal-Mart and McDonald's for failing to distinguish one place from another, but we applaud Meier and Gehry for the same thing. Gehry's work may be exceptionally beautiful and exceptionally expensive, but its attitude toward place is glorified Starbucking.

When asked about consistency, Mies famously replied that one couldn't create a new architecture "every Monday morning." But why not, especially if every Monday we find ourselves building for different people on a different site with different purposes using different materials? Every project offers possibilities for invention within its individual conditions. Mies thought of architecture as an expression of time, not of place. One is considered universal, the other circumstantial. Of course, the unanimity of cultural values is one of the fictions of Mies's work and of Modernism in general. By definition, the International Style refused to differentiate between places. Although we no longer believe in a single language—architectural Esperanto—our most celebrated practitioners still speak with the same voice everywhere they go.

The AIA recently began promoting itself as "the voice of the architecture profession." But whose voice does the profession itself represent? If architects do not speak for communities, we risk becoming obsolete. In order to concentrate on abstract design, we have already relinquished many services to developers, builders, and other economically driven forces. Given the rising need for responsive and humane environments, architects' tendency for self-expression could result in the disintegration of the profession altogether, unless we rethink our role. T. S. Eliot urged poets to serve poetry by illustrating the capabilities of verse instead of their own personas. If places are to communicate fully through architecture, the architect must fade into the medium. Can we be selfless enough to silence our own voices?