

an introductory analysis - The Wexner Center for the Arts

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preface:

This analysis was done from a considerable “distance” in that my knowledge and experience on Wexner have been influenced through the eyes and work of others. Although a site visit was not possible during the research for this project, it holds potential to confirm, deny or expand the findings here.

The essay is a brief discussion on three modes of analysis for Peter Eisenman’s Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. These modes include stereotomic, architectonic, and representation. While all three terms are touched on, particular focus is dedicated to grid and axis and the implications of this representation in its application for the Wexner Center.

The essay also attempts to apply these terms with respect to their possible application in describing Wexner but by no means includes an exhaustive entomological study of the terms upon which to make an absolute case. Thus, it is recognized that the reading provided here is at best, an introduction to a more comprehensive study.

stereotomic considerations:

The building and its accompanying site mesh with the earth rather convincingly in several ways. However, these attempts seem somewhat disassociated. This is in part by way of those involved but also seems to be an objective of the architect. A large part of Eisenman’s design is set underground which works well for about 60% of the internal visual arts program. (plate 1) Other facets of the site which include raised landscaped platforms divided by sunken walkways that rise and fall to grade and building. On foot, these design elements might appear random and isolated, but when one takes a birds eye view of the site, they are visually and physically in league with the architecture. These raised earthworks according to Eisenman, “can be read as prehistoric artifacts heaved up out of the earth, or as references to the Indian burial mounds in the nearby town of Chillicothe.” (6)

To the south of the south façade of Wexner, a small and informal amphitheater opens to the University’s oval mall open space and is cut from a built terrace-platform much like ancient Greek theaters were carved from hillsides to face an approaching audience. (plate 2) Yet hardly an environment for anything more than people watching and informal meeting place (with a sidewalk stage and scene of campus traffic), this amphitheater is a connection to the

campus field and is a generous threshold to the Wexner Center or alternatively, to the Columbus community beyond.

techtonic significance:

Several architectonic observations are made, primarily of the towers and façade of the main entrance. “With its delicate craftsmanship and playful slices of tower, arch, and wall, in its Disneylandish caricature of the earlier structure [armory]. The fetishised structures are wittingly emptied of their history and rendered nothing more than cheerfully manipulable images ...”. (4) These towers pay tribute to and represent the historical armory that once stood on the same site. However, this representation is not without historical weight as the socio-political conditions under which campus armories were built and maintained is a disturbing time in our county’s history. The memory of these solids and forms, reconstructed and cut is an interesting stereotomic and architectonic manifestation to contemplate. (plate 4)

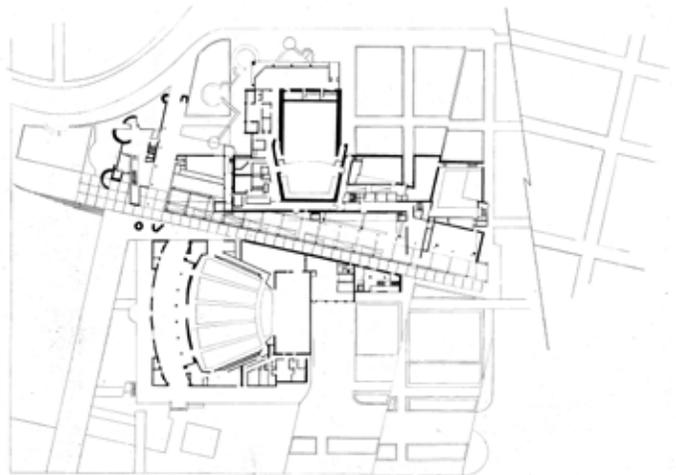
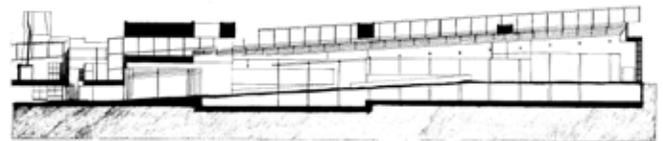


plate 1: section and plan (1)

Davis in his book, *The Museum Transformed*, remarks on Wexner: "The poetics of the construction and application of these materials calls attention to the contents of the building as an ever-changing program or process rather than a static archive. Also, the literal transparency of this spine attempts to attract the entire public, rather than just those inside, making the building's primary design concept an evocative symbol of the times." (plate 5) (1)

Construction and detailing was managed well by Eisenman's partner, Richard Trott, himself a well-respected Ohio architect and Ohio state alumnus. Further, he was primarily responsible for the whimsical reinterpretation of the armory which was an image of his student years. (8) Inevitably, a timely renovation was announced in 2001 –twelve years after its inauguration, which instigated criticism. "Peter Eisenman has never been concerned about the way things are put together," Alexander Gorlin says, "It's one-dimensional architecture concerned only with form and not function, and the best architecture has always been concerned with both." (5)

Thus, an architectural analysis is facilitated by understanding the architect and his intentions for this particular project. Eisenman's multi-faceted design reflects a multi-program proposition. This is statement is substantiated from his own words, "The Wexner Center gives you a constantly fluctuating space." "There is no static space, no repose." Further, the primary topic and focus of this inquiry, Eisenman's external grid is to symbolize a permanent scaffold to indicate that the Wexner "is about a building forever coming into being."(6)

symbolic representation

The grid and the axial relationships it implies is the most apparent design concept of Wexner. It exists in many forms. Upon approach, visitors are first introduced via an external three-dimensional grid-frame that partially envelops the building. The self-representation of the grid is undeniable and as one looks deeper into the site, the use of the grid borders on the obsessive. What else might this three dimensional grid represent? A site plan evaluation reveals much - an effort to resolve the difference between the grid of the city with the grid of the campus. This 12.25-degree grid-shift resolution is graphically demonstrated (plate 6), but the notion is also supported by Eisenman himself:

"The extension of the Columbus street grid generates a new pedestrian path into the campus, a ramped east-west axis. The major circulation spine of this scheme, a double passageway – an asymptote extending from the central oval of the campus – wracks out of the ground, and runs north-south. This passageway – one half glass-enclosed, the other half of which is enclosed in an open scaffolding

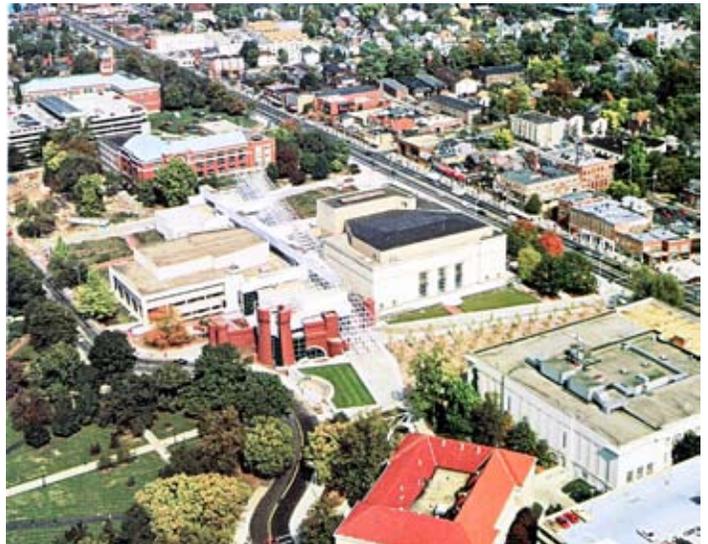


plate 2: arial photograph of south facade (1)

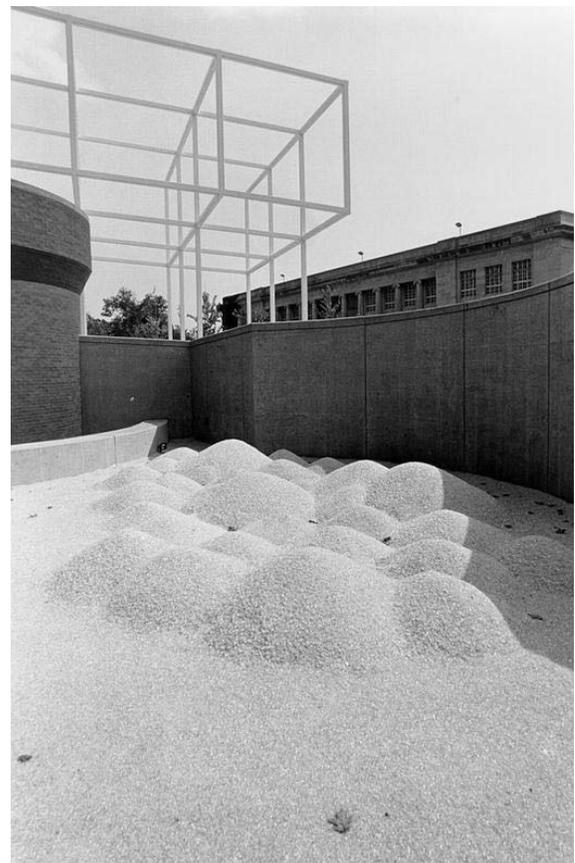


plate 3: Groundswell (<http://www.sculpturecenter.org/oosi/sculpture.asp?SID=839>)

– is perpendicular to the east-west axis. The crossing of these two ‘found’ axis is not simply a route but an event, literally a ‘center’ for the visual arts, a circulation route through which people just must pass on the way to and from other activities. Thus, a major part of the project is not a building itself, but a ‘non-building’. Scaffolding traditionally is the most impermanent part of a building. It is put up to build, repair or demolish buildings, but it never shelters. Thus, the primary symbolization of a visual arts center, which is traditionally that of a shelter of art, is not figured in this case. For although this building shelters, it does not symbolize that function.” (2)

Upon initial inspection the order of the grid would read intuitively to the user. Yet immediate comprehension is not a condition of Eisenman’s grids at Wexner, which not only exists both inside and out, but also penetrate, come together and create contradictions in the very order one might expect from a grid. This complexity comes from the superimposed grids of Ohio, Columbus and the campus, overlapping, coming together and resolving within Wexner. (plate 7) The contradiction is suggested due to the rationalization of the grid to order, in other words - without chaos, yet the grid in Wexner is not an instrumental device for order. In attempts to understand Eisenman’s use of the grid further, which is observed in other Eisenman works, one of his influences was researched.

Eisenman, encouraged by his advisor Colin Rowe, studied Giuseppe Terragni, the Italian rationalist who also worked with grids, cubes and their transformation. Compare Terragni work, such as Casa del Fascio in Como Italy, where grid and cube manipulations are not easily read and reveal little about their spatial conditions. (4) In Eisenman’s essay entitled ‘Terragni and the Idea of a Critical text’ he recognizes that Terragni’s space remains strangely unmarked by the buildings notational systems. (3) This is contrary to the blatantly obvious and forced communication of the grid at Wexner. Thus, as Eisenman is not carefully revealing his grid within the structure, a conclusion might be that he is prominently displaying it, as if the building and the site are functioning as a base for architecture as sculpture.

Worthy of comparison, this grid-frame highly resembles Sol LeWitt “structures” (plate 8). While the outward physical resemblance between Eisenman’s grid-frame and Sol LeWitt’s sculpture structures is compelling, it seems just as feasible that the grid happens to be a visual synonym for vastly different meanings and artistic intentions. Further, Eisenman’s architecture at Wexner has been characterized as idiosyncratic and ornamental, further distinguishing it from the more universal, lasting and platonic ideal conveyed by Sol LeWitt. (7)

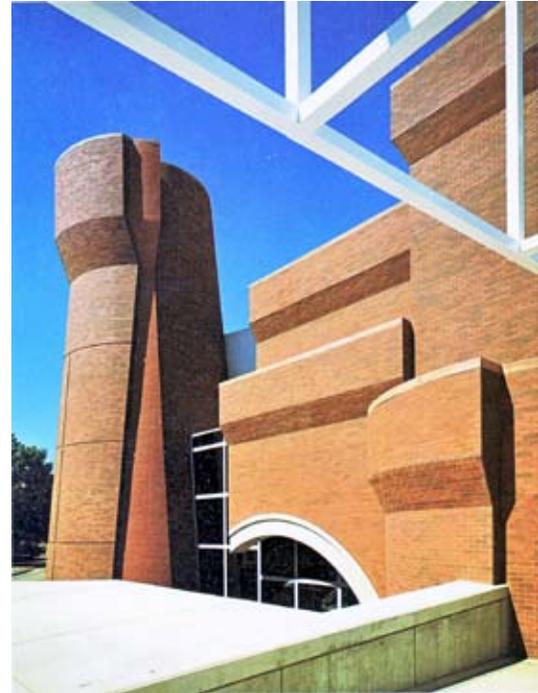


plate 4: south facade detail (1)

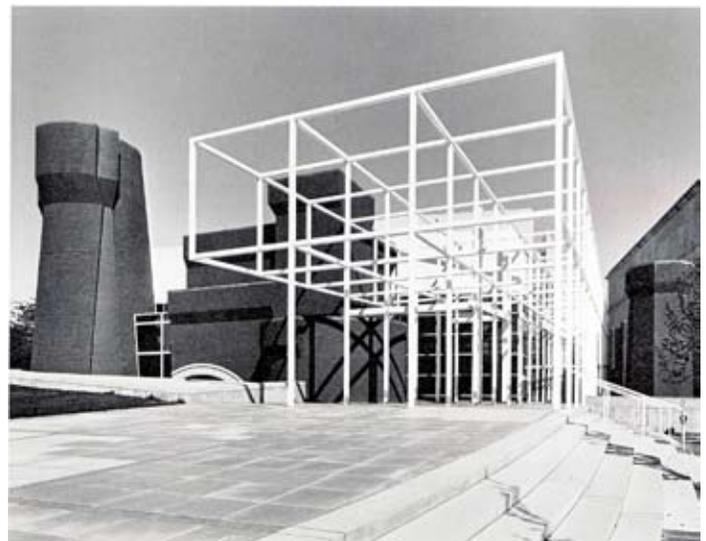


plate 5: transparent external spine

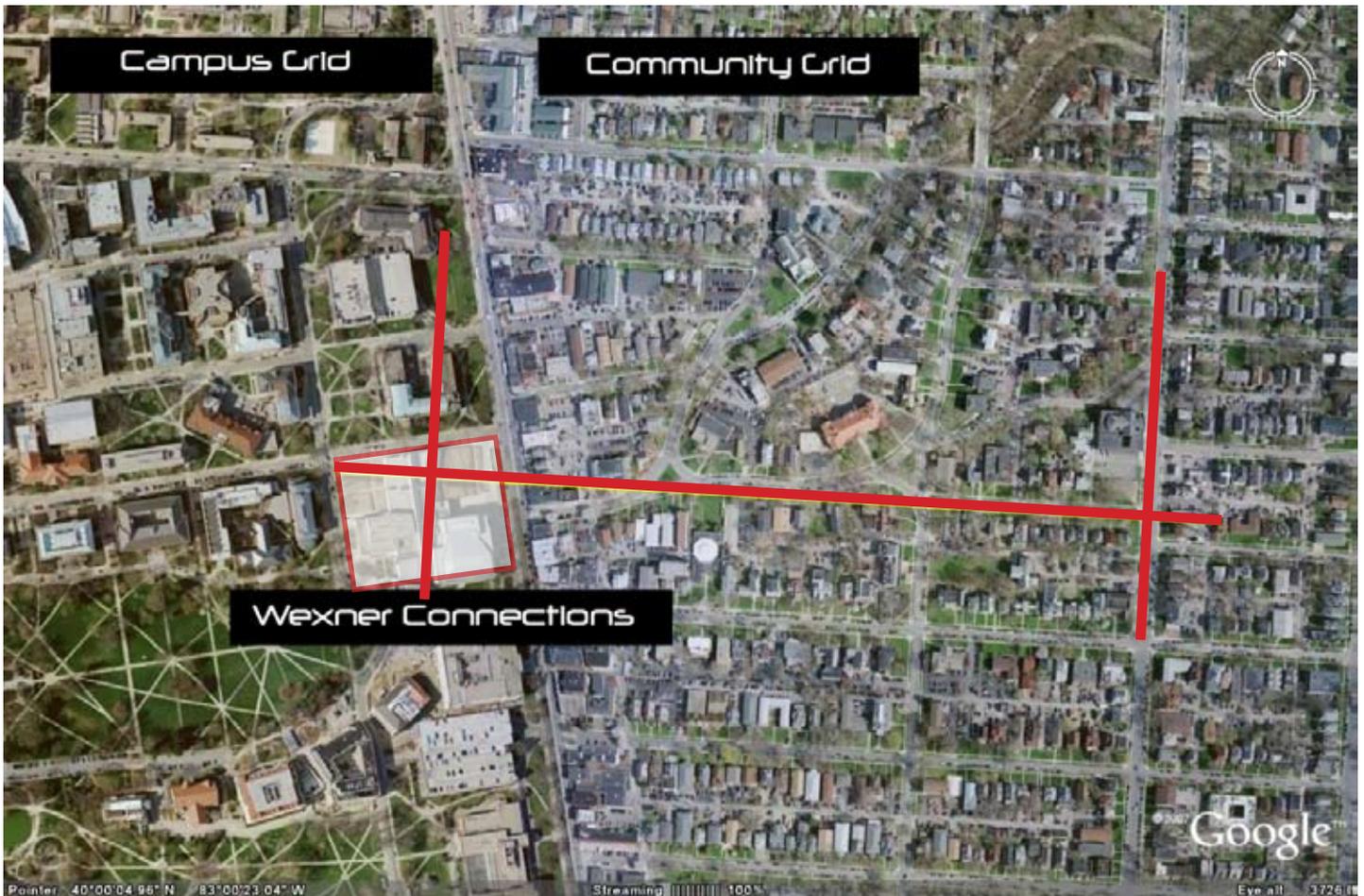


plate 6: Wexner Site Plan (Google Earth Image with campus-community grid connections demonstrated)

conclusions:

With the diversity of moves occurring at the Wexner Center, Eisenman has either expertly predicted its use or created an architecture that has in part, created its own diverse and unique program. Yes, the Wexner Center for the Arts is a building with a formal program – to curate works of visual art. Yet, the Wexner Center is also a hub and passage way in which people live their lives, often disconnected from the building’s institutional intention. The building is a threshold. Near the edge of campus and city, the building bids welcome and farewell simultaneously. Wexner is also a building of many thresholds. In addition to blurring the line between inside and out, its grid-informed complexity generates multiple internal thresholds for light, vision, passage and its own program.

If the presence of stereotomic, tectonic and representation are determining factors to a buildings theoretical success, then the Wexner certainly has potential for holding a place in architectural history. However, as Diane Ghirardo points out in her critique, Eisenman has compromised substantial theory for photogenics.

“The difference between the Wexner and works by Terragni and Rossi lies in the absolutely controlled, if apparently arbitrary, surprises that the Wexner offers, which skirt dangerously close to one-liners. [Terragni and Rossi] do not rely upon such complicated artifice to entice the view, but allow their buildings to yield up their treasures, many of which are unanticipated, slowly and over time. With his highly diagrammatic structures (some interiors seem not unlike a dentist’s waiting room) Eisenman apparently deliberately seeks out the ‘depthlessness’ which some commentators believe is characteristic of Post-Modernism. Unfortunately, he has succeeded. But he has failed in another objective: he claims to advocate an alienating architecture, but this building is profoundly ingratiating, and has been warmly received by a wide range of precisely those people Eisenman sees as complacent and deceived by contemporary consumer culture. That the Wexner Center is still a fine building is testimony to the resilience of materials and construction to the artifice of theory.” (4)

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plate 7: interior spine (1)

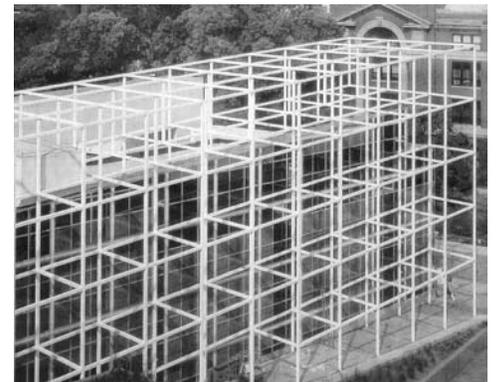


plate 8: Sol LeWitt "structure" (left) (11) and Eisenman's Wexner Center (right) (4)