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Ghost track and other essays on the question of textile in architecture and the use of ornament versus structure in the work of dZO (Descombes, Fernandez, Regnault et Serero)

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Ghost track

Essay on the textile in architecture and the use of ornament versus structure in the work of dZO (Descombes, Fernandez, Regnault et Serero)

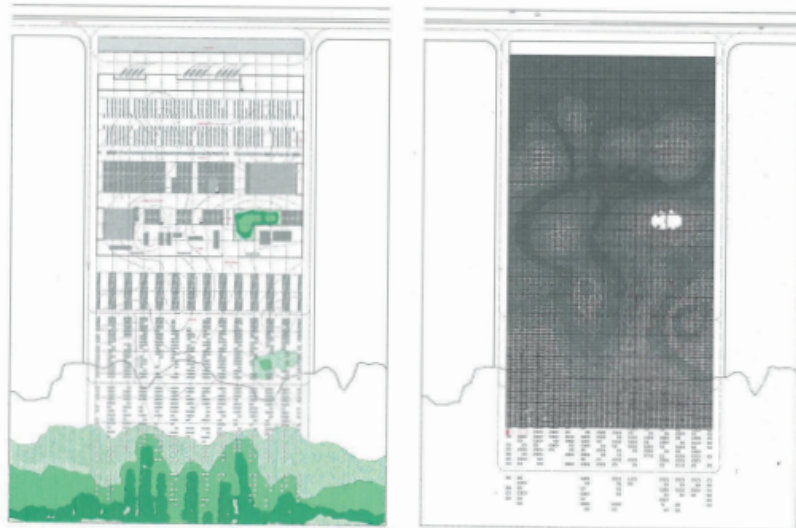
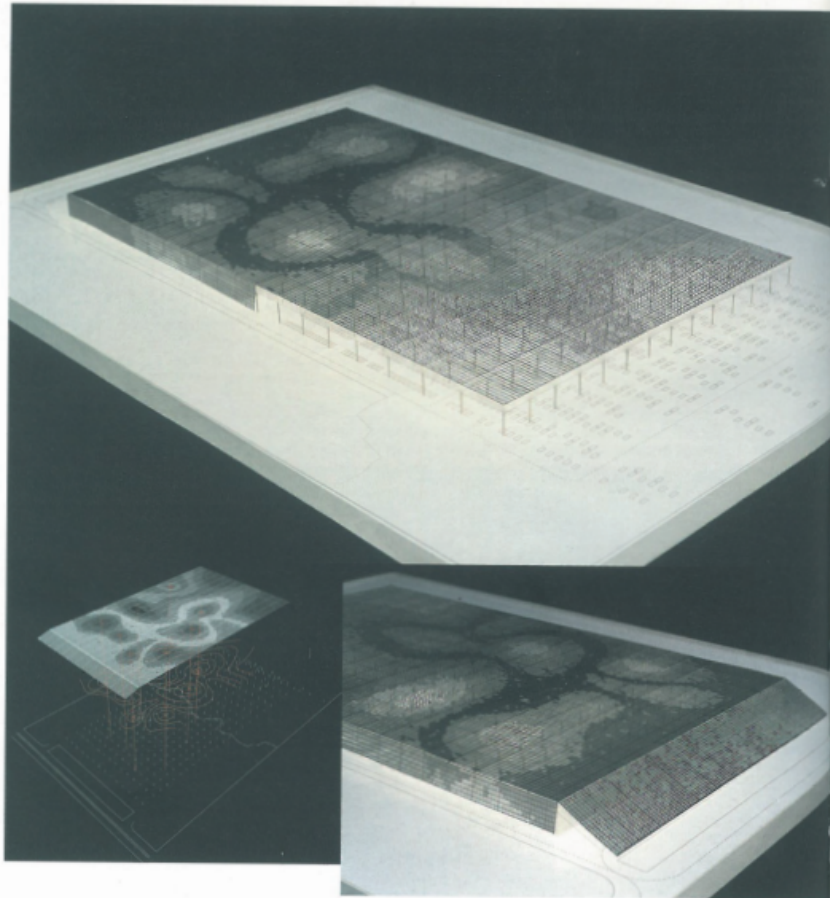
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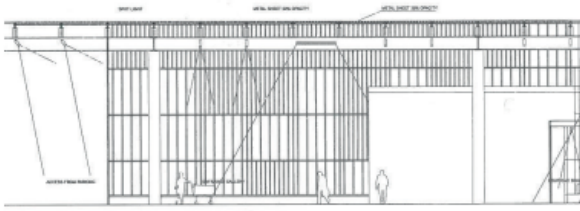
Blurred Landscape

Concours International (Italie),
L'Arca / Auchan: Un projet innovant
pour une structure commerciale,
projet, terminé, 2001
Où: Italie, TRAC Centre
Photos: Anne-Sophie Bezzoz

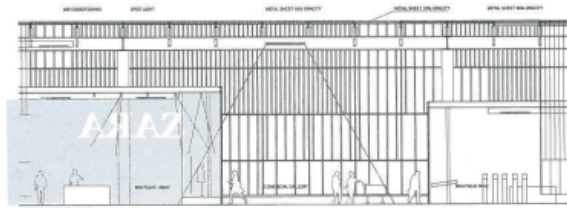
Poser la question de la porosité de l'enveloppe du centre commercial, c'est détourner l'autarcie traditionnelle de ce type de programme au profit d'une dynamique d'intégration, de prolongement du bâtiment dans son contexte. Structure ouverte, le projet propose une gradation de l'urbain au paysage, de l'autoroute au végétal. Tourant le dos à la voie d'accès principale, il définit son propre site comme lieu de transition. La structure commerciale, le parking, le paysage s'intègrent dans un même mouvement d'altération des limites. L'espace de vente ne se lit pas comme un milieu neutralisé, étendu de manière systématique, mais est, au contraire, pensé comme une espace différencié. Polarisées autour d'événements (promotionnels, culturels), des zones spécifiques s'organisent en une forme fluide, définies par des données lumineuses, thermiques et sonores précises. Ces zones se projettent sur l'enveloppe, pellicule sensible qui imprime et exprime la variété des espaces. Filtre actif, cette enveloppe tamise et régule. Elle est une surface d'échange avec l'extérieur intégrant dans son épaisseur les équipements techniques nécessaires (ventilation, désenfumage...). Le nouveau centre commercial ne se définit pas par le "design" de sa façade ou de son enseigne. Il s'agit plutôt d'un concept d'intégration, opératoire de manière différente dans chaque cas. Si son enveloppe remplit une fonction signalétique, c'est avant tout parce que la richesse de sa "texture" est l'expression de la variété de ses espaces intérieurs, différenciés et fluides. Le centre commercial s'identifie comme singularité paysagère parce qu'il procède au "flou" de son identité, mélangeant calpinage intelligent de son enveloppe et texture végétale, procédant au dégrat des trames et de l'organisation en plan. Il combine efficacité et flexibilité d'un espace commercial avec une approche paysagère et écologique de son intégration.

To talk about the porosity of a shopping mall's envelope is to put a fresh spin on a traditionally self-contained type of brief and to think in terms of active integration, of taking the building out into its context. Via an open-ended structure the project offers a gradual shift from the urban to landscape, from motorway to greenery. By turning its back to the main access road it defines its own site as a transitional zone in which the sales area, the car park and the landscape all contribute to actively breaking-down accepted boundaries. The sales area does not come across as controlled and methodically laid out, having been conceived, on the contrary, as differentiated: specific yet fluid zones take shape around promotional, cultural and other events and are marked out by their own light, heat and sound characteristics. These zones determine the shape of the envelope, a sensitive film that registers and expresses the variety of the spaces inside it. The shell, then, filters and regulates, functioning as a surface for interchange with the exterior and containing such necessary facilities as ventilation and smoke evacuation equipment. The new shopping centre is not a function of its look or brand image; rather, the concept is integration-based and operates differently according to specific needs. While it is true that the shell has a descriptive function, this is above all because the richness of its "texture" is expressive of the variety of its smoothly differentiated internal spaces. This shopping centre becomes a distinctive part of the landscape because it deliberately blurs its identity, mingling the shrewd grid of its shell with vegetal textures as it implements gradations of layout and organisation at floor level. Hence it combines efficiency and flexibility with an ecological, landscape-based approach to its own integration.

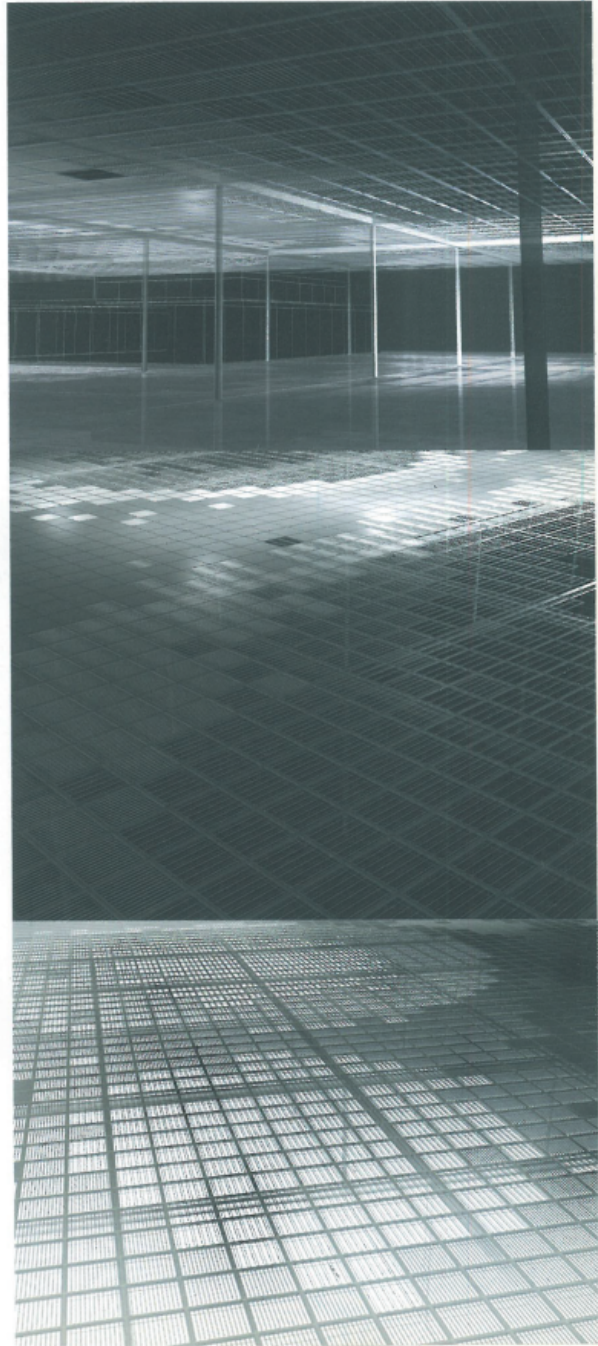




DETAIL OF THE MAIN ENTRANCE



DETAIL OF THE COURTYARD GALLERY



cession de ravins dont le franchissement pose problème. Ici, le thème de l'«entre-villes» renvoie moins à une déchirure locale qu'à la suspension d'un aboutissement: celui du tissu urbain qui ne parvient pas à formaliser et structurer sa limite. La limite, dans notre projet, est pensée comme ouverture: ouverture de la forme de la ville à celle d'un territoire, effacements successifs de l'une au profit de l'autre. Le site précis consiste en un ravin s'élevant sur 100 mètres de dénivelé et plongeant dans la mer. C'est la ligne de crête de ce ravin qui constitue le lieu privilégié de notre intervention et que le projet tente de requalifier en axe structurel principal du développement urbain. Ce projet se définit plus comme une organisation urbaine originale réagissant à une topographie singulière, plutôt qu'à une extension du plateau d'Añaza.

La topographie n'est pas considérée comme un simple contexte spatial, cadrant ou cadré par le projet, mais comme un élément actif jouant un rôle primordial dans le processus de conception.

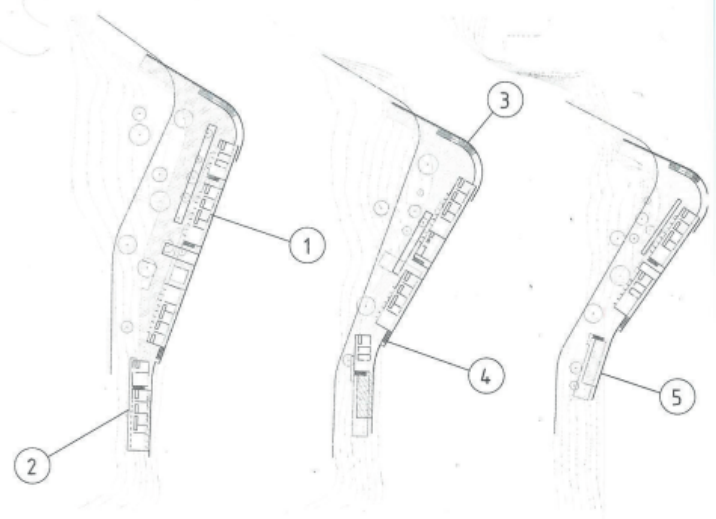
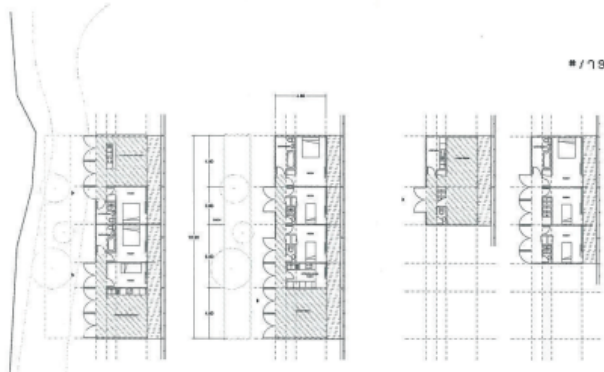
A cette topographie, on superpose une topographie seconde et artificielle, accrochée au ravin, et matérialisée par une succession verticale de decks sur lesquels les logements, bureaux et commerces s'organisent en ruban. Loin de se faire concurrence, un jeu, une vibration s'établit entre les deux mouvements favorisant la proximité visuelle et formelle de l'un et de l'autre. De cette manière, le projet est une combinaison de négociations locales et contextuelles entre une forme géologique hasardeuse et une forme urbaine en voie d'organisation, mais dont cette organisation intègre peu à peu des stratégies de hasards et de rectifications.

The project sets out to solve a landscaping and town planning problem: the expansion of the city of Santa Cruz de Tenerife towards its periphery across a topography marked by a succession of ravines that cannot readily be crossed. Here the "In Between Cities" idea has less to do with a local fracture than with a process left hanging, an urban fabric that cannot succeed in formalising and structuring its own limits. In our project these limits are treated as a freeing-up, as the opening of urban into territorial form, with the former being gradually, successively worn away to the benefit of the latter. The exact site is a ravine representing a 100-metre change in level and finally plunging into the sea. The point of focus we opted for is the crest of the ravine, which the project attempts to turn into a basic structural line for urban development. However, at the halfway mark this line kinks to allow the ravine to be crossed. Thus the project can be described more as an original form of urban organisation, a reaction to a singular topography, rather than an extension of the Añaza plateau.

The topography is not considered a mere spatial context, framing or framed by the project, but as an active component with a fundamental role in the design process.

It is overlaid with a second, artificial topography, hooked onto the ravine in the form of a vertical succession of decks on which housing, offices and shops are laid out in strips. Yet there is no competition between the two topographies: rather, an interplay, a vibration is set up between the two movements, thus encouraging their visual and formal proximity. In this respect the project is a combination of local, contextual negotiations between geological chance and an urban form in the process of being organised; however the organisation little by little incorporates strategies born of chance and adjustment.





- 1. three bedrooms apartment (50m²)
- 2. two bedrooms apartment (75m²)
- 3. primary public access
- 4. secondary public access
- 5. office



Ghost track

"Could we not say that every invented form manifests itself as the fold - crumpled, formless and torn up, even - of an earlier form? It is, at any rate, a form of drapery"

Georges Didi-Huberman

1. In his efforts to rehabilitate Aby Warburg's concept of the survival (Nachleben), it is surely no coincidence that Georges Didi-Huberman chooses the fall of drapery to project it into the phantomic model of art history¹. The survival always implies a movement of peripherization, which comes from both as an evaporation and a deposition, a fading away and an archiving. An active memory that disrupts the continuity of the history of forms. The structure of exclusion here is the movement of the cloth/veil/shroud, which offers to the gaze the nudity of the Nymph's body, and at the same time gives the drape its formal autonomy. At the bottom of the painting, on its edge and almost outside it, the drape/fold cultivates its spectrality and residual power. Derrida writes:

*"Always a form against a ground, but the parergon is a form whose traditional determination is not to detach itself but to disappear, to sink, to fade, to melt precisely when it is deploying its greatest energy."*²

This sums up the paradox of the parergon, its uncertain location: what is intrinsic to the work somehow organically linked to what is extrinsic, in what traces its limit by bending it back and dispersing towards the inside. Like Aby Warburg before him, Didi-Huberman invites us to consider the permanence of forms, their survival, not in their capacity to fundamentally and essentially model the basis of a culture, but on the contrary in their subtle outspreading in the background, under cover of derision and tenuousness³. Starting with this liberated garment, this fabric that no longer clings to a body or veils anything, what emerges is an isolated, unsettled figure, whose movement no discursive or figurative project can fix, an optical blurring of the frame whose appearances/disappearances verge on the hallucinatory. The autonomy and disappearance of the figure mark the end of circumscription, as subtly underscored by the falling material - an exteriorisation that distances body and material in a reciprocal movement of expulsion. In the transformation of the garment, from the clinging to the draped, or from the crumpled body to the uninhabited cloth, we can observe the circulation of an intensity in which the pictorial space adopts what marked the fallen limit of the body, its clothing, as a limit of/to Representation. At the same time as it sends or projects the drape towards the margins, confronting it with its own uselessness or emptiness, it frees its formal power. Its exclusiveness is both its exclusion and the guarantee of its persistence.

The excess (for us, ghost track), the outside of the work (par-ergon) open up the formal possibility of another way which already guarantees the conditions of its dispersion and its

¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ninfa Moderna, Essai sur le drapé tombé*, Paris, Gallimard, 2002.

² Jacques Derrida, *La vérité en peinture*, Paris, Flammarion, 1978, p. 72.

³ « (...) ce qui survit dans une culture est le plus refoulé, le plus obscur, le plus lointain et le plus tenace, de cette culture. Le plus mort en un sens parce que le plus enterré et le plus fantomal ; le plus vivant tout aussi bien parce que le plus mouvant, le plus proche, le plus pulsionnel." Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Image survivante, Histoire de l'Art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 2002, p. 154.

survival. Decoration, or that which stands (or falls, or is laid down) as such, is here, in more ways than one, a coincidence, and its concept a hallucination.

2. The popularity currently enjoyed by the work of Gottfried Semper prompts us to set stereotomy off, against tectonics, the motif against the model, as if, at its edge, practice was revitalized by formal principles that are more essential (its essence?) and more fluid (its anthropological fluid?).

As we know, the principle of the textile essence of architecture, as stated by Semper in *Prinzip der Bekleidung*, posits the shell and its texturality as primordial, preceding the structure. Architecture begins with and in ornament, or rather, in braided, twisted canvas; not with its capacity to provide shelter or put up an enclosure, but with its actual fibrous quality. Mark Wigley writes as follows of Semper's thesis:

*"The interior is not defined by a continuous enclosure of walls but by the folds, twists, and turns in an often discontinuous ornamental surface."*⁴

The discontinuity of the twisted surface comes in at several different levels here. First of all, it implies a definition of architecture as more or less indifferent to the idea of spatial circumscription. Moreover, as we will see later on, it evokes a discontinuous, riven idea of the project.

In referring to Semper here, we are not trying to point to some original form or formula, an ur-organization of structure and surface that would provide an ideal model for the distribution of roles. On the contrary, turning the structure/surface dialectic towards the primacy of ornament all too often imprisons this in the role of screen, mask or intersector⁵. What is more, it freezes the free play of its concept.

The decorative destiny of the twisted surface begins the process of mourning for the superposition of motif and structure, of *Werkform* and *Kunstform*, for it is the motif that, structurally, holds the drape. Wigley again: "Strictly speaking, it is only the decoration that is structural."⁶ What matters, in the braided surface, is the coincidence of graphic and structural, the textile pattern that determines its own internal tension and its physical behavior. The fold adds a second pattern over that, a more ample and distinct one, but dependent on the primary structure. From, this differential process of the constitution of the surface we can, we believe, draw out structural and formal issues that go well beyond the *Werkform/ Kunstform* debate mentioned above.

3. Manuel De Landa⁷ notes that it is easier to create a digital model of verbal knowledge (like "teaching" a machine to play chess, for example) than to model a *savoir-faire* (doing), a construction technique, a technique of manual elaboration that implies irregularity, hesitation, trial and error, internal logics of compensation, heterogeneous and programmatic

⁴ Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses, The Fashioning of Modern Architecture*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1995, p. 11.

⁵ Veil that Alberti advised to the painter to place between him and the scene to represent in order to better see its outline.

⁶ Mark Wigley, *Ibid*, p. 11.

⁷ Manuel De Landa, *Les Philosophies de conception : the case of the modelization software*, in *Verb, architecture boogazine*, Barcelone, ACTAR, 2002, p. 134.

condensations, assemblages unraveled and raveled up in an attempt to keep the surface as a whole together. The technique of braiding evokes this kind of complexity, these strategies of finalization. It points to the power and product of a transformative intelligence, the mental and material process shared by any kind of *tekhnê*. The corpus of technical gestures linked with this knowledge, given as an ensemble of knowhow, is resonant with an overturning of limits. The art of braiding, knotting, twisting and curling motifs, the oscillation of the thread around the fabric, are as much the echo of infinitely inversed/reversed figures as they are of dreams of spaces without seams, without joints, whose weave absorbs in its density the linearity of its contours.

Braiding is the product of a general economy, a differential principle of diminishing interstices, and of the illegibility of its constituent logic. Just like a carpet covered with decorative patterns using a simple movement whose repetition and recurrence proceeds by gradual complication in time and in space⁸, so the braided surface tends towards the loss of the figure, to the phantomisation of the process of elaboration, to a general spectro-graphy. An internal pulsation of the surface, both graphic and structural, which blurs the legibility of its project, of that which, initially programmed, would have allowed for its braiding. The condensation of knots, the saturation of the weave, create a zone of indiscernibility or undecidability whose amplitude we need to measure (cultivate?).

In opposition to the obvious regularity of braiding stands the abruptness of technology, the transformation of the project which, in more ways than one, is the betrayal of a memory, of a preceding utterance engaged in the mnemonic movements of resurgence, recurrence, division and anamnesis. As a *savoir-faire*, insofar as it is the projection of a knowledge in the process of a doing, the ability to braid organically integrates incident into its temporal and spatial unfolding. This is what defines its eminently event-like character. The braided surface is made by unmaking, by countering - not systematically but when opportune, in context - the programmed form of its knots.

We might wonder to what degree what is programmed is a certain kind of blindness, a reduction of the area of projection as the limit of foresight, at the same time and running counter to a nodal topology. A strategy that would impose a back and forth movement between the eye and the hand where one would phantomise the other in a contradictory and compensatory way.

All this might encourage us to rethink the timeliness/timelessness of the "hand-made" and the phantomisation of decoration in the light of its disappearance, in the age of its technological reproducibility, on the threshold of Modernity. This not with a view to its rehabilitation, which is already well under way, but within the limits of the concept itself. The rehabilitation of decoration as decoration throws a veil over the greater activity of its forms - what Didi-Huberman calls its residual power. It ignores the knotted topology of the *parergon* and the energy that it dissipates inwards. The praise of decoration as decoration does not see that on its surface an organization of forces is being played out that, already, is twisting programme/context/form into a totally new disposition.

⁸ E.H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order - a Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Londres, Phaidon Press, 1979, p. 67.

(un)-Scripting

There is said to be a historical conception of writing as supplement (to the spoken word) and of ornament as supplement (to the work, the building) which would allow us not to establish equivalents, but rather to see such peripherizations as culturally identical. Writing and ornament would thus share the same properties of artifice and addition, but also of *supléant*⁹. **(un)-Scripting**, a project for a synagogue for a Jewish community in New Jersey sets out to raise, in critical terms, the issue of scriptural pattern as distinct from historical and theoretical suppression of formal ornament. The reading and exegesis of the sacred texts of the Torah are at the heart of Jewish religious practice and the use of Hebrew calligraphy both reinforces and provides an underpinning for this practice. Here the movement of Hebrew script is taken as a generative force for the project, with the letter and the graphic sign used both to structure and modify the space. The anamorphic character of the signs is an attempt to hybridize, to provide an organic link between typographic singularity and the specific requirements of a brief. Thus setting this written trace in movement is intended as observation of a pattern within the survival of a Model, that is to say of a typography working within a typology. All, then, is pure contagiousness and mixing of scale: potential architecture of the ornament and potential ornamenting of the building. The sanctuary and the congregation area are enclosed by a shell perforated with Hebrew signs. The facade is an assemblage of pierced wooden panels and frosted glass onto which these inscriptions are projected. In the course of the day the letters appear with varying degrees of sharpness and in different colors. At sunset, when the Sabbath begins, the light inside the synagogue reveals the texts on the facade to the observer outside.

Blurred Landscape

To talk about the porosity of a shopping mall's envelope is to put a fresh spin on a traditionally self-contained type of brief and to think in terms of active integration, of taking the building out into its context. Via an open-ended structure the project offers a gradual shift from the urban to landscape, from motorway to greenery. By turning its back to the main access road it defines its own site as a transitional zone in which the sales area, the car park and the landscape all contribute to actively breaking-down accepted boundaries. The sales area does not come across as controlled and methodically laid out, having been conceived, on the contrary, as differentiated: specific yet fluid zones take shape around promotional, cultural and other events and are marked out by their own light, heat and sound characteristics. These zones determine the shape of the envelope, a sensitive film that registers and expresses the variety of the spaces inside it. The shell, then, filters and regulates, functioning as a surface for interchange with the exterior and containing such necessary facilities as ventilation and smoke evacuation equipment. The new shopping center is not a function of its look or brand image; rather, the concept is integration-based and operates differently according to specific needs. While it is true that the shell has a descriptive function, this is above all because the richness of its "texture" is expressive of the

⁹ *"But the supplement substitutes. It adds itself only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; any filling it does is like the filling of a vacuum it represents, and so generates an image, it does so via the prior lack of a presence."* Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie*, Editions de Minuit, 1967, p.208.

variety of its smoothly differentiated internal spaces. This shopping center becomes a distinctive part of the landscape because it deliberately blurs its identity, mingling the shrewd grid of its shell with vegetal textures as it implements gradations of layout and organization at floor level. Hence it combines efficiency and flexibility with an ecological, landscape-based approach to its own integration.

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David Serero is an architect and researcher at Columbia University in New York. He won, as part of the dZO architecture group, the Young Architects Award in 2001-2002. dZO is a group of four architects founded in 1998 and working between Paris and New York. Several of their projects have won awards or praise in international competitions. Their work emerges as the result of subtle give and take between the project brief and the context. Here **architecture is not an object but, as it were, a surface for interchange between interior and exterior**, generating permanent transformation within its environment. Topography is seen not as mere spatial context, but **as an active element in the design process**. In Blurred Landscape dZO reworks the shopping mall via dynamic integration of the urban into landscape on a site within which openness to the outside is achieved by programmatically visual gradation. Functioning as a porous membrane for its environment, the building's shell, which also houses the technical equipment, exists in continuity with its context. Thus the building appears as a visual field with blurred boundaries, a malleable "texture" that sums up the diversity of its smoothly differentiated interior spaces. In its projects dZO approaches the brief globally, integrating it into a landscape and ecology-led approach that fuses the boundaries of its identity as programme with those of its environment.