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Title:

Notes on the Event in the mid 1990s work of Peter Eisenman

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Abstract:

This paper examines the idea and device of the event in the 1990's work of architect Peter Eisenman (b. 1932). In order to approach the concept of event, the paper interrogates Eisenman's period writing with an emphasis on close readings of his "The City of Memory and Immanence" (1986), "Unfolding Events" (1992), and "Presentness and the 'Being-Only-Once' of Architecture" (1995). The paper further investigates possible architectural manifestations of the event by analysing two projects, Atocha 123 Hotel (Madrid 1989-1993) and Yokohama Port Competition (1993). Documents on these projects held in the Eisenman Archive, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, provide materials for the formal analysis. The paper asks a number of research questions: By what means and in what forms does event – as idea and composition device – appear in the thought and design projects of Eisenman at this time? Which heretofore latent architectural aspects are revealed, and which new conditions are made possible, by means of Eisenman's engagement with and use of the event? Which form generation devices and strategies are rendered in the Atocha 123 Hotel and Yokohama Port Competition projects? Adopting the research findings as heuristic frames, how might one teach the event in an advanced architecture studio? The paper adds to scholarship on Eisenman through examination of a little studied aspect of his work, brings to light previously unpublished projects from a transformational period in his work and that of architectural discourse more broadly, and contributes to theories of architectural pedagogy.

The paper aligns with the conference key theme "Teaching Practice" in its staging of potential resonances and disjunctions between research and teaching.

Thanks, acknowledgements:

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The hospitality and scholarship of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, over many years has been critical for this and other projects so I extend my thanks to the many individuals at the extraordinary institution.

Introduction

[slide: Topic]

This paper provides some preliminary notes on the idea and device of the event in the 1990's work of architect Peter Eisenman (b. 1932) and starts to frame an approach to its potential translation into an advanced university research studio, isolating the objects under review

[slide: Materials]

In order to approach the concept of the event, the paper interrogates Eisenman's period writing with an emphasis on close readings of three papers: "The City of Memory and Immanence" (1986), "Unfolding Events" (1992), and "Presentness and the 'Being-Only-Once' of Architecture" (1995).

The paper further investigates possible architectural manifestations of the event by briefly analysing two little referenced projects, Atocha 123 Hotel, Madrid (1989-1993) and Yokahama Port Competition (1993).

Documents on these latter projects held in the Eisenman Archive, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, provide materials for the analysis of the works.

[slide: Research questions]

The paper poses a number of research questions:

- By what means and in what forms does event – as idea and composition device – appear in the thought and design projects of Eisenman at this period?
- Which heretofore latent architectural qualities are revealed, and which new conditions are made possible, by means of Eisenman’s engagement with and use of the event?
- Which form generation devices and strategies are rendered in the Atocha 123 Hotel and Yokahama Port Competition projects? Can they be said to characterise an ‘architecture of event’?
- Adopting the research findings as heuristic frames, how might one teach the event in an advanced architecture studio?

Within the limits of this evening’s paper, this last question will only be alluded to.

In terms of academic context: this paper adds to scholarship on Eisenman through consideration of a little studied aspect of his work, brings to light previously unpublished projects from a transformational period in his work and that of architectural discourse more broadly, and contributes broadly to theories of architecture and architectural pedagogy.

The paper is intended to align with conference key theme “Teaching Practice” in its staging of potential resonances and disjunctions between research and teaching.

And the session we’re in – Theories In & Through Design” is an apt positioning of the questions being staged and I look forward to the 2 following papers.

2. Analysis

2.1 Words (writings)

2.1.1

Event occupied an always latent and sometimes overt preoccupation in Eisenman's thought and practice over the 1990s.

The essay "City of memory and immanence" broaches architecture as event in the 1986 publication *Zone*, edited by Jonathan Crary, Michel Feher, Hal Foster and Sanford Kwinter.

In this essay, Eisenman is searching for a condition or concept which is differentiated from continuity.

This latter, that of continuity, Eisenman takes as a sign or symptom of the traditional Western city, one that entails as value or reference or is characterised by certain qualities. That 'Western city' is

- Symmetrical (vertebrate);
- Ordered (hierarchical) and
- Continuous (a closed, finite presence).¹

[SLIDE]

So what is the problem of this for Eisenman with this qualities?

According to Eisenman these qualities or aspects create a limit; they repress something. In the case of the city he writes:

'... the [Western] city has, on the one hand, repressed the possibilities of a fragmentary or unstable *rhetorical* structure and, on the other, naturalized a reductive functionalism and organicism, endowing it with originary and archaic beauty.'²

End of quote.

Event – if not used explicitly - enters the picture as a lens or terms for thinking about the idea of discontinuity as opposed to continuity, and is proposed to render an other idea or construct of the city that is **not limiting**.

¹ Eisenman, The city as memory and immanence, 440.

² Eisenman, city as memory, 440.

Event, and to use Eisenman's words, can be thought as a 'destabilising agent',

An idea or concept that has the power or potential to destabilizes all these states or states limiting the city including that of origin, and ordinary value.

Eisenman refers to this as a strategy of conceiving or positioning the city as palimpsest, that I will argue later evolves around the idea/device of event.

And he concludes with claiming, a claim he will continue to circle, that this **other city** is one that 'does not close or unify, but rather opens and disperses'³

[SLIDE]

2.1.2.

"Unfolding events" (published 1992): the title seems to say it all.

But as is often the case with Eisenman, there is an intentional ambiguity or misdirection at work.

One reading of the title might suggest being 'in the moment', part of time as it unfolds.

Another reading something less linear and directional and more disrupted: that which is unknown or cannot yet be known is approaching and we can have no certainty.

What are the architectural allusions or alliances being set up in this essay?

To start, let's give the word to Eisenman: 'Architecture must now address the event.'⁴

Some six years after "The City as Memory and Immanence", the event is more emphatic. In this essay by Eisenman it is first invoked in the context of a discussion of a discontinuous condition, specifically of that condition in relation to ephemeral events such as rock concerts. Eisenman goes on so far to describe rock concert as 'the archetypal form of architectural event' (1992, 423)

How does this translate into an architectural response? What aspects or qualities are

³ Eisenman, *The City as Memory*, 441.

⁴ Peter Eisenman, "Unfolding Events," in *Incorporations*, ed. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter. New York: Zone, 1992. 422-427, p 422.

being resisted?

In this essay it is the dialectical pair of figure/ground that is being destabilised. Or perhaps it is more accurate to describe Eisenman's provocation as starting to frame the conditions of possibility for an architecture that is different from one reliant on the the opposition of figure/ground. Let's listed to Eisenman:

[slide]

"What is needed is the possibility of reading figure/object and ground within another frame of reference. Such a new reading might reveal other conditions that may always have been immanent or repressed in the urban fabric. Such a reframing would perhaps allow for the possibilities of new urban structures and for existing structures to be seen in a way that they too are redefined."⁵

Eisenman goes on to characterise what might be called an architecture of event, or an architectural possibility of event as relating in a condition of a 'slightly out of focus' relation to what exists.

This slight shift then translates or potentially translates into a form making procedure as will be discussed in relation to certain projects.

He continues:

"This out-of-focus condition, then, would permit a blurring or displacing of the whole, which is both old and new. One such possibility of displacement can be found in the form of the *fold*. (page 424) ... [and this finds a certain resonance in architecture with Gilles Deleuze and (differently) René Thom's use of the idea of the fold,

The former interested in an object-event that results;

The latter in the potential the fold gives to model or visualise a mathematics of events (catastrophes; waves).

Eisenman concludes with a discussion of where this linking of fold and event might lead:

⁵ Peter Eisenman, *Unfolding Events*, p 424

‘The fold gives the traditional idea of edge new dimension: what was seen as an abrupt line now has a volumetric dimension ... the fold [and by association or analogy an architecture of event] is not merely a formal device, but a way of unfolding new social organizations from existing urban environments ... setting off urbanism in a new direction.’⁶

[SLIDE]

2.1.3

Roughly ten years after the publication of *City of Memory and Immanence*, and four years after “*Unfolding Events*”, is published “*Presentness and the ‘Being-Only-Once’ of Architecture*” (1995).

It appears in a collection whose title I imagine did not ingratiate the editor to Eisenman but that is another story.

Here we are only concerned with the narrow use and utility of event in this essay.

Where Eisenman was previously concerned with destabilising options figure/ground in favour of creating the conditions of possibility for other states, here is concerned with creating the conditions of possibility for blurring the notion of ‘type’.

He does this through the frame of what he calls a condition of “presentness”.

That which is being resisted: the coupling of presence and meaning.

He writes:

‘It will be argued here that this unique conventionality of architecture, which links its iconicity and instrumentality, already contains the capacity to open up and separate its condition of presence from its meaning. This opening up creates a possibility for for another condition... it is the deconstruction of this natural relationship [between presence and meaning, of the origin or originary, of the identify of place or site] that puts into place another being-only-once that is unique to architecture. This condition can be properly called presentness.’⁷

[slide]

⁶ Peter Eisenman, *Unfolding Events*, p 426.

⁷ Peter Eisenman, “Presentness”, p. 139.

In order to illustrate this, he refers to projects of Le Corbusier.

Ronchamp he argues does not destabilise or push along the idea of the type “chapel”.

La Tourette Monastery, on the other hand, subverts the stable ordinary notion of “monestary type”.

‘At La Tourette this condition of presentness remains because the dislocation of the type has not been reabsorbed in the conventional idea of the monestary type’.

(page 143)

[SLIDE]

In his own work,

The Greater Columbus Convention Center is on the side of convention as a sign of the convention center;

whereas

‘the Wexner Center is an example of presentness precisely because it subverts the instrumentality and iconicity of the museum.

I will come back to these writings at the end.

Moving now to the work, the projects:

[SLIDE]

2.2 Works (projects)

While Eisenman was publishing the above over a roughly 10 year period (mid 1980s – mid 1990s), he and his office was engaged with a number of projects. Coming after the so-called excavation projects (Cannaregio (Venice), IBA Housing (Berlin), Long Beach Museum, (Romeo and Juliet (Veron), two little explored projects from the period will be considered. Is there evidence of ‘event’ as formulated in the parallel writing at play in the projects?

Which composition or form generation devices might signal the presence of event thinking?

I have been working on the Eisenman archive for some years, held at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, and the following materials come from a period of work in November 2019 there.

2.2.1 Atocha 123 Hotel (Madrid)

According to the archives held at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, the unexecuted project for the Atocha 123 Hotel, Madrid, started in 1989 and the last work, at what appears to be initial design development/pre contract documentation stage, was in 1993.

The years over which “Unfolding Events” was being written and published.

There are on record at the CCA

- 766 drawings (18 OS1 box folders, 1 OS2 box folder);
- 16 models;
- 12 rolls of drawing;
- 1.28 linear metres of textual records.

In my November 2019 trip there was not time to organise inspection of the models so my comments will focus on the drawings in the context of this question of event.

I’ll also use some secondary material at the end to provide information on the final project,

[ANALYSIS]

Finally, here are some images from a monograph which I discovered after submitting my abstract for this conference. At that stage I hadn’t seen any publication of Atocha 123 Hotel so had assumed it was unpublished (thus the change in title).

In this images you see clearly the plan/volume layering, rotation, and inflection reviewed earlier in the sketches.

And a presentation model from street level of the main Atocha street elevation, Obviously based on the detailed façade/building envelope studies the project continued to evolve to a high level of detail.

Though unbuilt, the outcome might not have been too dissimilar to that of _____ Office Building in Tokyo.

2.2.2 Yokohama Port Competition

The archives held at the CCA are dated 1994 and the full project name is Yokohama International Port Terminal Design Competition.

There are some 171 drawings in 6 OS1 box folders and some 0.1 linear metres of textual records held at the CCA (CCA References AP143.S4.D107).

At the time of my visit the archives had yet to be full catalogued thus there may be other material that comes to light.

I'll focus initially on a few process drawings and then show some of the design development materials.

The first point of interest is Eisenman's use of precedent to begin or ignite the design thinking.

As Eisenman has frequently discussed in interviews, from a certain point of view architecture is (just) the transformation of precedent.

Could we say that in his use of the term, event can refer to forces at the time –

Conceptual concerns,

Form generation devices (think of mathematics)

History

Here we see several study panels of very different case studies. In this sheet

OMA's Zeebrugge Sea Terminal

And a Norman Foster port building as seen here.

And here Renzo Piano's Kansai Airport

The office seems particularly interested in diagramming the circulation in this axonometric; and use distribution in this diagram.

[SLIDE]

And an abstraction of the city.

Then he starts to block out. Or bulk out

A sketch, one of the few in Eisenman's hand (though not certain); most of the drawings are in another hand or annotation.

The event the office takes: wave fluctuations by month in this series.

A study of units.

Then a move to a continuous not to say coherent form.

I could not find the presentation material.

The end of the story:

Here are some images of the realised and much published winning entry by Foreign Office Architects.

[slide]

And the plan:

We could undertake a different discussion about the different plan and section ideas:

Is FOA on the side of Animal/skeleton: Phenomena?

And Eisenman Architects on the side of Diagram: abstraction?

And is the later more about event?

3. Preliminary Findings

Let's return to the opening research questions and attempt preliminary response.

To the question:

A. By what means and in what forms does event – as idea and composition device – appear in the writing and design projects of Eisenman at this time?

We can see evidence clearly in the writing

The three writings raise a number of aspects or qualities if not to say architectural conditions associated with event in the thinking of Eisenman.

The following table provides one summary:

Table: Aspects of event in period writing of Peter Eisenman

	City of memory and immanence (1986)	Unfolding Events (1992)	Presentness (1995)
What is being destabilised? Which is the object or focus of critical work	Origin Originary Urban processes	Figure/ground	The coupline of presence and meaning. 'The subversion of type'
Form generation device or concept deployed	trace registration scaling	fold blurring	presentness
Reference outside the discipline	Freud (city as palimpsest)	Leibniz Gilles Deleuze René Thom	Deconstruction Derrida

In response to the question:

B. Which heretofore latent architectural aspects are revealed, and which new conditions are made possible, by means of Eisenman's engagement with and use of the event?

This is a larger question and may find its response in Eisenman’s project of resistance. Resisting function, structure, context in a practice of perpetual critical activities to get to a ‘zero’ condition: denying presence – recall the ideas in the “Presentness” article.

C. Which form generation devices and strategies are rendered in the Atocha 123 and Yokohama Port Competition projects? Can they be said to characterise an ‘architecture of event’?

Table 2: Comparison of event in two projects by Peter Eisenman

	Atocha 123 Hotel	Yokohama Port Competition
Devices, form generation strategies	Fold Rotate Overlay Superposition	Trace Modulation Repetition Difference
Expression	Volume manipulation Building enclosure agitation Elevation	Volume Continuous surface variations Plan

*D. Adopting the research findings as heuristic frames, how might one **teach the event** in an advanced architecture studio?*

While not developed here, I think an advanced studio could be developed

Next steps?

Examine other writings, including such primary texts as:

- Zones of Undecidability I
- The Interstitial Figure
- Processes of the Interstitial (Eis 1997 El Croquis)
- The Church of the Year 2000. [text]

I would look at other projects from the period such as

- Rebstock Park (Frankfort) (1990-1994)
- Aronoff Center for Design and Art (1988-1996)

And expand in much greater detail the analysis of Eisenman's writing and expand to consider such secondary authors as:

- Henry Cobb on Aronoff [theoretical frame, but project focus is on less known projects: Atocha,
- Stan Allen (on event and field)
- Sanford Kwinter
- K Michael Hays (on Aronoff)
- Philip Johnson (from A+U 1988 special issue),
- John Rajachman who has written a number of prescient essays about the 'fold' and the 'event' in Eisenman in relation to the Rebstock Park Master Plan.