

Architecture and Sexuality: Details of Constructions

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If we perceive the built environment through a particular cultural and societal lens then does it stand to reason that we behave according to those perceptions? If so, do construction details regarding the material assembly of physical space contribute to our perceptions and, accordingly, behavior?

I am not certain that there is a concrete answer to these questions, but I am asking these questions to investigate the possible interrelationships of the built environment and the influences of sexuality and behavior. In my opinion, the factors that influence queer identity include assumptions and perceptions of both sexuality and architecturally constructed space. Using perceptions and assumptions we make of sexuality, I draw on case studies by Philip Johnson, Frank Gehry, and Mies Van Der Rohe to create a similar set of conditions that describe the actual construction details of physical space and form, and discuss how the perception of space and form influences behavior in space. Also, I will briefly discuss an ethnography of Brazilian transgendered prostitutes through a lens of queer theory to reference how the process of physically creating a mask and persona is similar to creating an identity of a building.

NORMATIVE IDENTITY AND BEHAVIOR IN SPACE:

How do we determine which clothing and behavioral characterizations we assume in order to assimilate into a given social situation? Certain social situations have different expected behaviors, but how do we understand those expectations? We

see how people dress and how they act: their reactions, body language, eye contact, and tone of voice. Society influences our behavior pattern; society influences the masks we assume to appear natural or acceptable in any given situation.

Human sexuality and identity is a conditioned response to a specific environment that is fashioned by religion, political climate, socio-economic class, and region. In the United States, our cultural norm is to classify human sexuality into a dichotomous system. For example, heterosexuality is the dominant/normative identity, and homosexuality is the group that does not fit into the classification of the dominant lifestyle. I will refer to the dominant heterosexual lifestyle and the social constructs that determine normal behavior and identity as heteronormativity. However, Queer theory, as presented by the social critic and author, Steven Siedman, considers that sexual identity lies on a spectrum between identifying as heterosexual and homosexual, with the majority of people lying somewhere in the middle.¹ Many examples of polyamorous relationships occur throughout history, however through time, the heterosexual lifestyle has been preferred.

QUEER THEORY AND IDENTITY:

Heterosexuality is an identity that performs as the dominant response to human sexuality. Of course it is more natural in regards to procreation, but heteronormativity is a sexual identity that encompasses only a specific behavior of sexual identities, yet it has gained the most social and political power

because a majority of people identify as heterosexual. My concern is not the history of sexuality but the actual behavior of people in everyday situations that negotiate normative behaviors based on social and architectural stimuli in a given situation.

People who have homosexual desires and/or tendencies can learn to appear, act, and assimilate into heteronormative society by assuming certain behavioral characteristics. These characteristics are specific to a cultural and regional context. Usually, a queer person assumes a set of behaviors that do not cause people to question their sexual identity. Then, once someone embraces their queer identity, they begin the experience of "coming out of the closet" to people about their sexual identity. It is something that queer people go through to truly embrace their identity. The closet is a metaphor that represents the suppression of one's true identity by creating a façade. Critic and author, Aaron Betsky describes this as follows:

"What is the closet? ... It contains the building blocks for your social constructions, such as your clothes. The closet also contains disused pieces of your past. It is a place to hide, to create worlds for yourself out of the past and for the future in a secure environment ... the closet contains both the secret recesses of the soul and the masks you wear. Being in the closet means that you surround yourself with the emblems of your past and with the clothes you can wear, while covering yourself in darkness."²

The practice of putting on a façade to assimilate into heteronormative culture is Betsky's reference of a queer's performance. In Western cultures, people who are gay do not have a fully accepted lifestyle, nor are their political rights fully intact. Because gay people suffer discrimination, queers have learned to slip into dominant culture by learning to dress, behave, and work in an environment that does not socially accept or politically legitimize their homosexuality. The behavioral actions that allow a gay person to assimilate into society is a queer's performance. An example of this is the experiences and identity of Susan Stanton. Ms. Stanton is a city manager in Florida, and used to be a heteronormative (married with a child) male. In an interview on CNN, she describes her experience in a journal, which is essentially her closet:

"The thing that the journal gave me was a place where I could share those thoughts (questioning of her gender) in a very secure private and a protected area because at that very early age... you just kind of know that those thoughts are things that you

shouldn't be talking about or expressing or letting someone find out."³

The closet, or place of complete privacy, is a construction that allows queers to experiment and create their personal identity. I am interested in the closet as a metaphor that allows a queer to put on masks and act out a routine that does not question his/her heteronormativity. Could the metaphor of the 'closet' be analogous to a building's façade, an image projected upon and within a site? Do the details of the façade construction reveal or mask a building's contextual relationship to site, or a building's function within site? Much like people of queer identity assuming a certain guise, architecture can become a signifier or enable a certain identity in a particular context.

Philip Johnson's AT&T Building:

Taking up a block on Madison Ave between 55th and 56th Streets in New York City, the AT&T headquarters became the stamp of the post-modern movement in the United States. Johnson's design became the image that signifies the AT&T Corporation and now has become the façade of the Sony Ericsson Company. The AT&T building adapts to the zoning requirements of midtown in an interesting way, and continues to address the public very differently after the change in ownership.

AT&T was in a process of reimagining its image as the largest company in the world but also retaining its ability to identify with the everyday man. Many within the company subscribed to the image of "Midwestern humility, Gray suit anonymity" for the communications giant. However, the CEO at the time, John DeButts, chose Johnson based on a presentation of two images of the Seagram Building and Pennzoil Place, as well as his vision to create an iconic image.⁴ As designed, Johnson's vision for the company created an icon on a grand and heavy scale. The broken pediment perched atop the building became the single most identifiable signifier of the AT&T building and the new image it was putting out to the world. The façade consists of granite panels, which in places are up to ten inches thick, adding up to about three times as much material than was standard at the time it was built.⁵ The bulking up of granite panels weight and thickness required six thousand tons of steel than what would normally be required for typical construction. The granite cladding creates a monolithic façade, but the thick

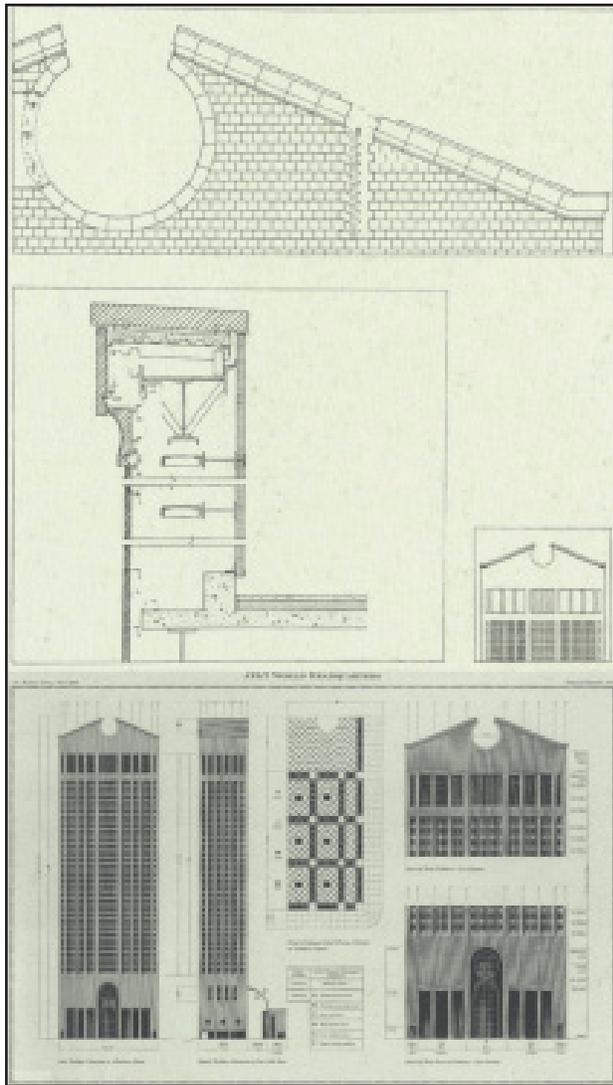


Figure 1 Detail Drawings

veneer creates a heavy building, punctured by lines of glass that are supported by mullions of slivers of granite. The fenestration details negotiate the scale and visual weight of the building.

The base of the building was originally designed to be like an Egyptian Hypostyle hall. Zoning laws however required a plaza and commercial shops on ground level. To maintain the iconic image and negotiate zoning restrictions, Johnson raised the first floor off the ground and created a glazed commercial gallery at the rear of the property. The lobby is the only interior space that addresses Madison

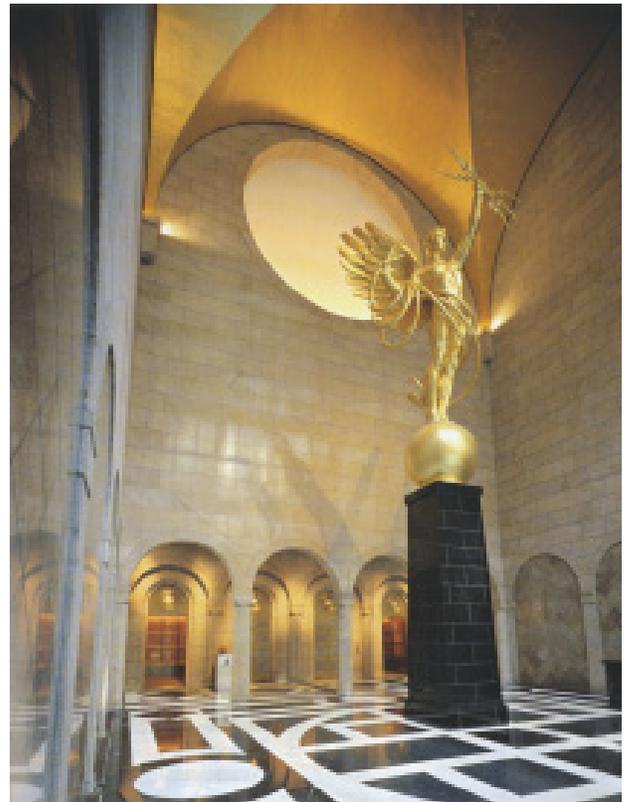


Figure 2: "The Genius of Electricity" by Beatrice Longman

Ave. On either side of the narrow lobby, was an open space for the public. It was a space to be inhabited by pedestrians, but was not designed to the degree that the interior lobby was. Now that space has been closed off for retail space for the new owners, the Sony Corporation. The feel of the AT&T headquarters does not offer the amenities or accessibility that other surrounding buildings provide further isolating its solidity.

Johnson gave the whole project an unmistakable symbol of a solidly conservative corporation. However, the anonymity and humility that the company subscribed to was not to be seen or felt by the public. The materiality and scale of the building creates a disconnect to those on the street level. The building seems excessive and closed off, but once you enter the lobby the grandeur becomes highly polished and light. Johnson pushed to have "The Genius of Electricity", a golden statue of the winged Mercury, to fill the lobby. Its placement creates an irony of the weightless nude, masculine, arguably homoerotic, statue against the conservative, hard stable rock.

Johnson created a mask for AT&T. He gave the company a grand appearance, to hide AT&T's slow decline. The identity Johnson created required more labor, time, and money to present the company on a scale that far outweighed their actual situation in the marketplace. Johnson chose an aesthetic and construction method that was not conventional for New York City at that time. He changed, or queered, his classical allusions, into something that artificially represented the grandeur of the largest company in the world at that time, but AT&T had hit its peak before the project began. Johnson's own personal identity must have fed into creating such an iconic structure in Midtown. His playfully mocking demeanor not only created an ironic façade for the executives of AT&T, but as Betsky suggests, Johnson gets his queer revenge as the executives have to look at the muscular, nude backside of Mercury as they exit the building.⁶

PERFORMANCE OF ARCHITECTURE

According to Aaron Betsky, queer sexuality is about a performance, applying a mask, or a façade that allows someone of queer identity to appear as if they follow the rules set up by heteronormative society. Architecture is an image-maker that presents a certain guise to the normative world as illustrated by Johnson's AT&T building. What are the architectural features that create this image in other buildings? What elements then cue behavioral change?

Frank Gehry's Nationale-Nederland Building

Can an architectural language begin to describe sexuality through materiality rather than symbolic gestures? The Dancing House, otherwise known as Fred and Ginger, by Frank Gehry uses construction materials and certain details to reveal a dialogue regarding heteronormative sexuality and gender roles. On the surface, the well documented, slender, fluid, curvy, light figure created by the glass form of the building takes on a feminine characteristic as it is juxtaposed next to the heavy concrete structure referred to as Fred. Fred's strength in materiality touches the ground lightly with columns and glazing. Ginger's transparent surface form appears as if she is gracefully being lifted against Fred.

The surface read of masculine and feminine roles in dance is translated into building form and mate-



Figure 3: Façade of the Dancing House

rial choices. However, another commentary can be made by how Ginger's form is detailed. The outer skin that gives off her swooping form and curvy appeal is just a façade.

From the plan, vertical windows lie between the structure and actually provide the shelter from the elements for the building. The form of the swooping glass is strictly for aesthetic. A gender and sexual role critique can be established here: that women, especially in the historical and cultural context of the real Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, are expected to look and perform in certain ways in society, to bear children, cook, clean, and take care of the house that the man provides. However, women are pressured to look beautiful and sexually appealing while doing all of those things mentioned above. This may be more of a mid 20th century ideal, but Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire are of that generation. Ginger's form critiques the ways in which women have to be perceived by society, but ultimately function in different ways behind an exterior appearance. This is much the same way

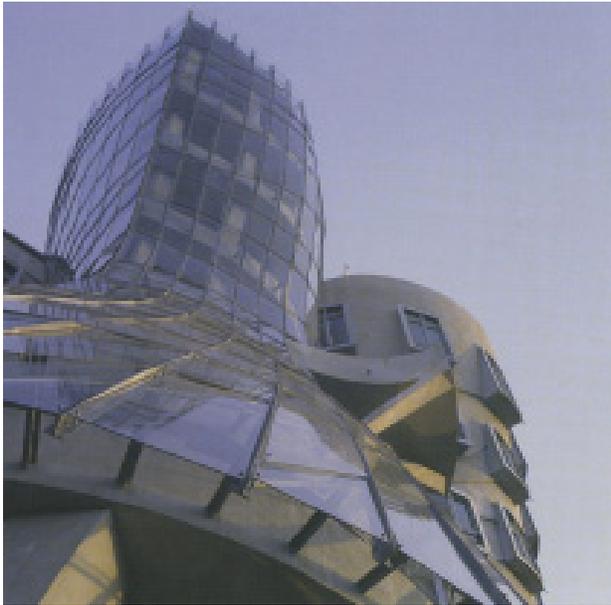


Figure 4: Detail of Glass Facade

that homosexuals have to appear to act a certain way to assimilate into heteronormative society.

The Travesti Guise

Sexuality and behaviors develop according to a social and regional context of a place. Don Kulick, in his ethnography, *Travesti*, highlights the ambiguity of sexual identity in Brazil and the ways in which sexual practices influence personal identity. He focuses on Brazilian transgendered prostitutes to illustrate his conclusions. According to Kulick, sexual identity is based on who is doing the penetration, and who is being penetrated. If a male is penetrating a female, he is clearly heterosexual, but Kulick also explains that if that same male penetrates another male, he retains his heterosexual identity. It is not until he reverses his sexual position and becomes the penetrated that he takes on a homosexual identity.⁷ The ambiguity of sexual identity in Brazil changes the ways in which males understand their own sexual identity and in turn the assumption of their persona.

Kulick lived with the male prostitutes and gained their trust in order to know the lives of the prostitutes. The prostitutes retain their male genitalia, but put on drag. The drag is their guise, but the drag physically goes much deeper than we typically

see in the United States. Travesti prostitutes inject industrial silicone into their hips and chest, in order to make their bodies more feminine. They insert the silicone below the skin, altering the look and feel of their bodies. However, this gender identity change is actually ambiguous because these prostitutes are sexed male, fake a female gender, but retain a male gender as well. They do not believe that they are women, but alter their bodies to become a more desirable feminine commodity. The travesti is a hated identity, but is a sought after commodity. Their commodity is then enhanced by the physical alterations and dress that they take on to appear feminine and desirable. They have adapted their behaviors and physical appearance in order to make a living, the only way they know how in a political environment that does not afford them the same privileges as more normative identities.

Brazilian transgendered prostitutes must negotiate their physical and sexual identity to create a mask and persona in their specific cultural context. Can one consider the process of creating a guise analogous to the manner in which specific details achieve an aesthetic for image-making?

QUEERING ARCHITECTURE

Space accrues meanings, memories, and emotions over time as people interact within space. Public space must appear under a certain guise, according to Aaron Betsky⁸; it has to act and function in a certain way to function in normative society.

Construction details make it possible to hide and/or join structure, allowing different materials to connect. By masking structure, a construction detail parallels Betsky's notions of the closet, and ultimately creates form. Form is what appears to society, to culture, to people walking or driving in the streets. Materiality, patterning, joining and structural components create building form, an image or guise that reflects particular meaning to a society's built environment. Depending on certain cues given by a building's surrounding, the image that is created becomes a metaphor or identifier of the activity within that space. Because form is the presentation to the normative world, what exists in the space between exterior and interior walls is not perceived. To architects, we know that these spaces house everything that maintains comfort and shelter for building occupants, such as col-

umns, beams, electrical wiring, plumbing, HVAC, and data cables.

If the elements mentioned above determine the functionality of the building in a space that is not perceived from the outside, then how does a construction detail manifest itself to mimic the role of the closet, the private space where true identity is kept hidden? A construction detail is drawn to show contractors and construction workers how to construct multiple pieces of material together for a certain purpose. These details mask an array of purposes that a building has concealed within it. A detail can be purposed for views to the exterior, or to prevent water from seeping in or out, or for an aesthetic material choice. Details come from necessity, and they come from art, but they are also the process that makes a building able to stand, makes it possible for a building to function in society, and allows a building to exude a certain aesthetic.

Mies Van Der Rohe's Farnsworth House:

Situated on a floodplain of the Fox River about two hours outside of Chicago, the Farnsworth house is the catalyst for the glass houses of the late modernist movement. It is said that the Farnsworth house is so unconventional that every experience in it assumes an aesthetic quality that would challenge behavioral patterns assumed in a different context.⁹ Mies is known for his saying "God is in the details."¹⁰ The details are the most important elements that create a certain aesthetic. A certain aesthetic then has the ability to influence and determine behavior within that space.

The Farnsworth house is peculiar to its location. The piloti that support the almost floating floor slab

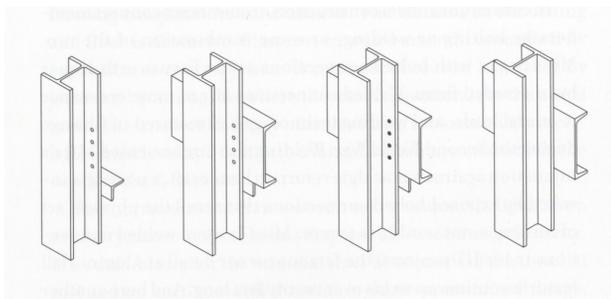


Figure 5: Diagram of Plug Weld Constructio Sequence

disappear into the boggish ground and does not reveal how the slab is actually supported. Those same steel columns rise and seemingly only butt up against the beams that support the floor and ceiling slabs. The Farnsworth House is the first place Mies uses plug welds to achieve a structural clarity in the design. According to academic and author Michael Cadwell, the techniques used to create these plug welds erase each other as the next step is acted out:

"steel erectors first drill the columns with holes at the beam connections and fit the columns with erection seats; they then place the perimeter beam on these seats, shim the beam level, and clamp it secure; next, welders plug the vacant column holes, fusing the column to the beam; and finally, finishers remove the erection seats and sand all surfaces smooth. Curiously, these connections require a sequence of operations that demand a high degree of craft, yet each operation disappears with the next. The mechanical craft of the seated connection disappears with the industrial craft of welding, the industrial craft of welding disappears with the handcraft of sanding, and the handcraft of sanding disappears with its own operation. There is no glorification of technology in this curious sequence, just as there is no remnant of craft."¹¹

The detail described is the only connection that can be seen, but it is not true to the actual process of its construction. The function of the construction detail is hidden behind a mask created by the construction sequence. This sequence becomes a metaphor for the way in which architecture acts as a closet, hiding certain functions and in this case material connections. As Cadwell suggests, the sequence vanishes any trace of how it is constructed, and all that is left is an image projected within the site. But two worlds exist, the interior and exterior world of the house. It becomes almost voyeuristic to the people on the interior as they can be seen throughout the property. The glazing replaces the function of the normal, opaque wall as slender mullions slip into the floor and ceiling slabs. The glass is concealed in steel stops and bars, which are attached again, by using finely crafted plug welds. The glazing also becomes a mirrored curtain that reflects the interior environment as you are on the inside, and reflects the exterior environment when you are on the outside. It reveals the inside and outside world simultaneously. However Edith Farnsworth's installation of curtains furthers the closet metaphor, because she felt the need to veil herself in privacy, from being seen as she performs her daily life at home.

The Farnsworth House's aesthetic creates an effect that uses reflections to veil the people within the space from the outside. The construction details allow the building to read as a clean set of elements fused together in a clear composition, but one that is hard to decipher or understand how it is actually constructed. The way in which the plug welds are hidden behind exquisite craftsmanship blurs the built environment with the natural environment. These details are precisely and thoughtfully masked during construction. The Farnsworth House leaves an image that acquires a certain identity that breaks away from normative housing and organization as one lives in a semi-transparent design floating in the middle of a flood plain.

Architecture is perceived through a multi-sensory physical experience that can influence emotions, perceptions, and behavior. But is it the whole space that influences behavior, or is it the small changes in material? Because changes of material change the external 'reading' of the building, does the building form become something that can be read like a book? A narrative that says something about sexuality, or just something that cues a specific behavior?

Within the urban context of cities across the United States, the details that cue behavior, in regards to sexuality, are the signifiers of gay culture. Pride flags, rainbows, and HRC branding signify that it is embraced to be queer in a place. Architecture does not, in my opinion, have a sexual identity tied to it, however once certain symbols are applied to a constructed façade, then architecture's narrative may reveal a specific perceptible identity. A building can become a sort of brand or image of the activity that goes on behind its façade. Philip Johnson's AT&T Building creates an image to the exterior world through form and the construction techniques used to become an iconographic landmark. The structural clarity of Mies Van Der Rohe's Farnsworth house presents peculiar construction details to achieve both transparency and reflection in a residential environment that begins to define a non-normative lifestyle within that space. The details work cohesively to create the image of the whole house, paralleling this concept, the ethnography about Brazilian Transgendered prostitutes demonstrates their negotiations of identity and persona in their specific cultural context. And finally, Gehry's Dancing House in Prague is an example of architecture

that inadvertently begins to associate gender identity to building form/façade through the detailing of the façade. If we consider that construction details become signifiers and mimic the way sexuality assumes masks in society by taking on meaning within a specific social and cultural context, then we may recognize that sexual identity contributes to our understanding of the cultural, societal, and material construction of architecture.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Steven Seidman, *Queer Theory/Sociology*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996).
 - 2 Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*, (New York: William Morrow, 1997), 17.
 - 3 Susan Stanton on CNN's Lary King Live interviewed by Jeff Probst. March 12 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2010/03/12/sot.1kl.susan.stanton.cnn>
 - 4 Philip Johnson: *The Constancy of Change*, eds. Emmanuel Petit 1973-, Beatriz Colomina, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 126.
 - 5 Ibid., 128.
 - 6 Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*, (New York: William Morrow, 1997), 119.
 - 7 Don Kulick, *Travesti : Sex, Gender, and Culture Among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
 - 8 Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*, (New York: William Morrow, 1997), 7.
 - 9 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1886-1969, *Farnsworth House, Plano, Illinois, 1945-50*, ed. Dirk Lohan, (Tokyo, Japan: A.D.A. EDITA Tokyo, 1976), 4.
 - 10 Ibid., 4.
 - 11 Mike Cadwell, 1952-, *Strange Details*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 113.
- Figure 1: Eric Peter Nash, *Manhattan Skyscrapers*, ed. Norman McGrath, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 147.
- Figure 2: Casey C. M. Mathewson, *Frank O. Gehry : Selected Works : 1969 to Today*, ed. Frank O. Gehry 1929-, (Richmond Hill, Ont.: Firefly Books, 2007), 310.
- Figure 3: Ibid., 324.
- Figure 4: Philip, Johnson: *The Constancy of Change*, eds. Emmanuel Petit 1973-, Beatriz Colomina, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 129.
- Figure 5: Mike Cadwell, 1952-, *Strange Details*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 114.