

Joseph Esherick

1986-87 recipient of the

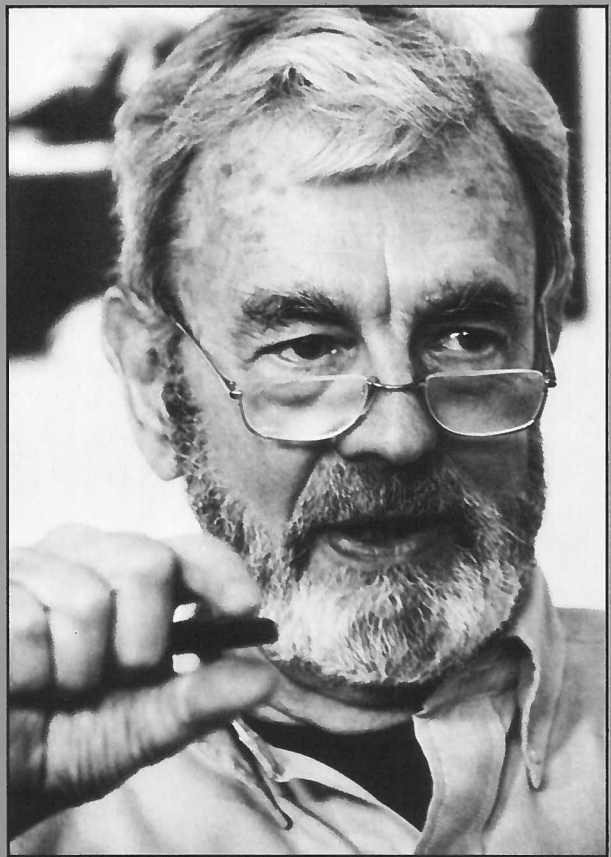
Plym

Distinguished

Professorship in

Architecture

School of Architecture
University of Illinois
at Urbana-Champaign



"In the fruitful pursuit of some understanding of what architecture is, it's my work with students that has meant most to me. I think I get pretty esoteric at times, kind of wandering off in distant fields, but my teaching has involved a very straightforward approach of trying to deal with very concrete problems that an architect faces. I really don't consider myself an educator, but an architect who likes to teach a little."

Joseph Esherick

Jaquelin T. Robertson

Dean, School of Architecture, University of Virginia
Eisenman-Robertson, Design Development Resources

I first met Joe Esherick on a *Progressive Architecture* jury and liked him instinctively . . . and immediately. He seemed the kind of quintessential American that Henry Fonda, Gary Cooper, and Jimmy Stewart used to play in those movies about (what are sometimes derisively called) "American values" and places: quiet, strong, unaffected, serious and lighthearted at the same time; tolerant but slightly cussed, both pragmatic and romantic; sensitive yet unimpressed, intelligent without any intellectual pretension — a kind of "natural." I knew I'd enjoy going fishing with Joe Esherick . . . and that we wouldn't have to talk about ARCHITECTURE. In short, he was the opposite of the stereotype Eastern Establishment Architect (obsessed with hype, career, and self promotion) and was therefore very refreshing particularly to someone originally from the provinces, who was at that time caught up in the self importance and vitality of the New York, "big-time" scene. I knew some of his buildings then, if only from the publications, but was convinced he was one of too few *real* American architects. His performance over the period of that jury reconfirmed my instinctive reaction and getting to know him and his work better over time reinforced the initial impressions.

Later I was fortunate to be on the jury which selected Joe for the coveted Topaz Award, the AIA/ACSA Distinguished Teaching Award. Reading the letters of support which came from widely varied people, some of whom I knew well, convinced me of Esherick's central importance to American architectural education (both Barton Myers and Charles Moore listed Esherick as among the most formative teachers in their respective careers). Clearly Joe has been one of our very best teachers in Architecture.

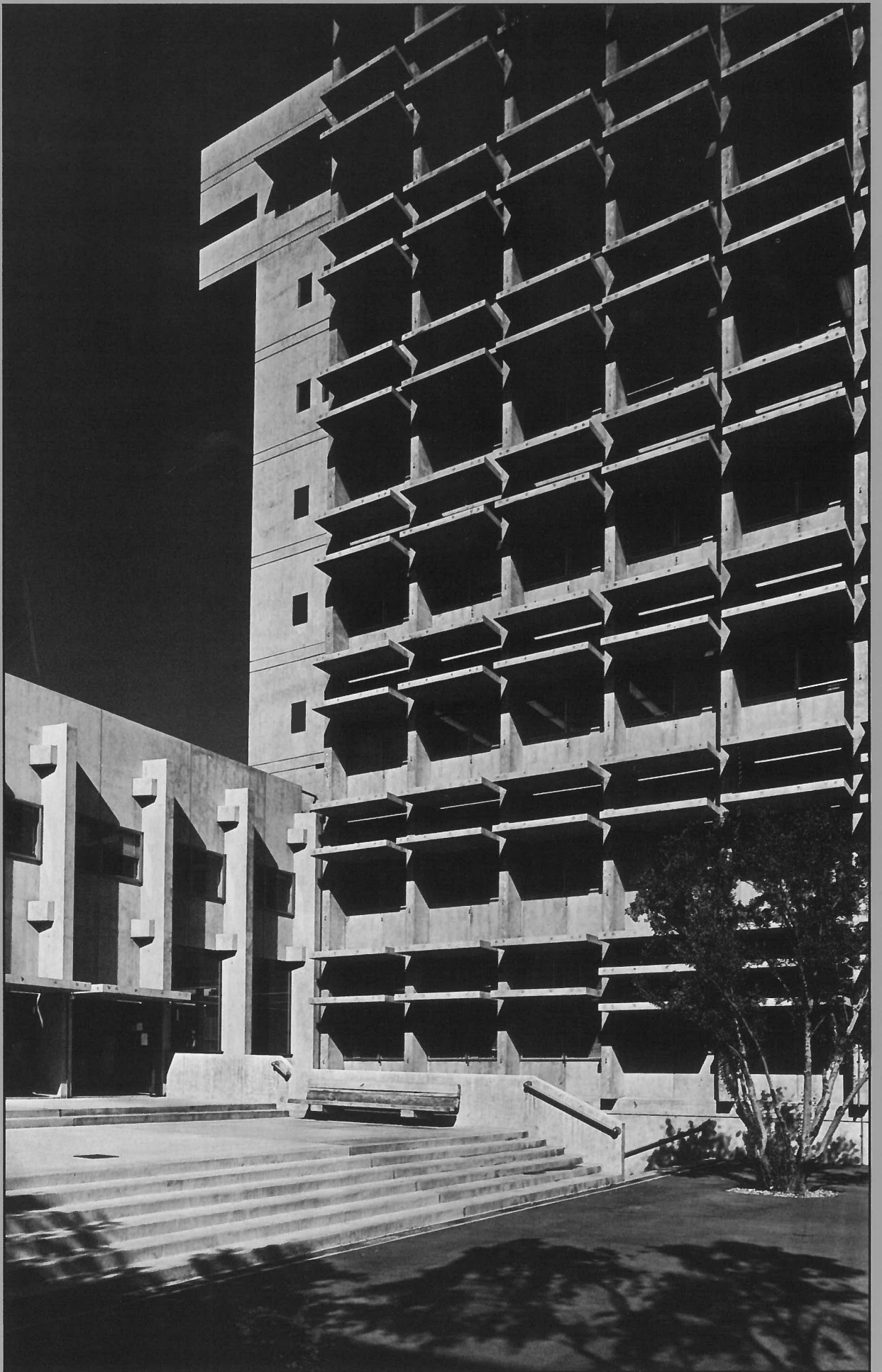
But he has, as with all artist/architects, taught with his buildings as much as in the studio. His houses, the seminal work at Sea Ranch, and more recently the aquarium at San Diego, carry for me a special importance. For they have that most precious and fragile architectural quality of being responsive to their programs, elegant, and at home in their surroundings — appropriate, unpretentious, *correct*. Furthermore they explore a real and ongoing regional vernacular without

excessive or self-conscious flourish and add to that tradition (which I had come to admire so much from afar) of Maybeck, Coxhead, Green & Green, Harwell Hamilton Harris, Wurster and others who managed to reinforce and make palpable a particular and beautiful natural setting. Esherick's buildings, at their best, seem both archaic and "roadside"; though clearly of our time, they have a kind of timeless authenticity, or naturalness, not unlike the uniquely American characters portrayed by those movie actors which Joe, as a person, had brought to my mind at our first meeting. Fonda and Stewart and Cooper would somehow have been "at-one-with" Esherick's architecture — a magical cultural blending of players and settings — and I can't get it out of my mind that it is this sincere and unmistakable "Americanness" which gives them their potency.

I never "analysed" an Esherick building. It's not that they couldn't stand such an exercise or didn't deserve it, but rather that I never felt I had to. The buildings themselves, in their landscape, seemed their own best argument.

"Form is what things are."

"The ideas pile up and the form emerges."



Charles W. Moore

O'Neil Ford Centennial Professor of Architecture
University of Texas at Austin
Adjunct Professor of Architecture, UCLA

Twenty-five years ago, when four of us were forming an architectural partnership in Berkeley, we had two major goals: the first was to do distinguished, even — if possible — important buildings that might fit into what lay around them and point the way to something beyond; the second was to develop architectural ideas in ways that would make them accessible and transmittable to one another, then to the people who would work with us, then to clients and to the general public. Our special heroes then — and still — were Louis Kahn, who had been the teacher of three of the four of us, and Joseph Esherick, who was using the homely and comfortable and accessible Bay Region vernacular to make masterful buildings, serious forms at play in the light.

Chasing our first goal of doing good buildings was, heaven knows, difficult enough; but the second, of collaborating on the development and transmission of genuine architectural ideas has proven, for us, particularly difficult and elusive. It is in this realm that the contribution of Joseph Esherick and his partners Homsey Dodge and Davis stands out as what is, I believe, one of the outstanding architectural achievements of our time. It continues to astonish me that the personal and poetic visions of Joe and George Homsey of twenty-five years ago could have been transmuted into the extraordinarily high level of continuing excellence of a sizable firm which was able, when Esherick became Chairman of the Berkeley Architecture Department and could spend only a limited time with his office, to regroup and continue doing work of undiminished quality, of imagination, even of genius. The mastery of a way of imagining and reasoning and building to produce collaborative works of architecture with that spark of genius that our society regards as individual and expects to see snuffed out in committee is thrilling to see, and I know of no one else who can do it so well, so often, as Esherick Homsey Dodge and Davis. Among the works that I see the most frequently, the demonstration houses at the Sea Ranch, now over twenty years old, the Cannery in San Francisco, and the new Aquarium in Monterey go on bringing a lump to my throat every time I see them: they are all deeply moving, for being so special and so right, genuine masterpieces, all done as collaborations.

Back to the Moore Lyndon Turnbull Whitaker partnership's first goal, to do good buildings, it is, I think, instructive to ask: Why are Esherick's buildings so good? Because, for one thing, they embody genuine ideas, positive and strongly held, about how buildings should fit their society, their region, their site, their specific inhabitants, ideas that Joe has been developing for three decades at the University of California at Berkeley where he probably, more than any other person, has been responsible for encouraging the extraordinary range of viewpoints and talents that have been collected there.

Particularly though, it seems to me EHDD's buildings deal in ordinariness and light. There is in the works an unflinching — and genuine — modesty transmuted to elegance. I once, in an article, compared Esherick to a Japanese tea master, who knows how to invest ordinary materials and commonplace images with a refined appropriateness edging toward the sublime. He has shown his partners and associates how to do this, too, most recently Charles Davis at the Monterey Aquarium.

Perhaps light is the not-closely-held secret of the power of these buildings. Day light doesn't just bathe them: it comes alive in them, dances and dodges and surprises and glows. It is controlled and balanced and comfortable and adequate, but then it is suddenly in a modest and unassuming and comfortable way, magic.

Robert Venturi

Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown

Joseph Esherick's extremely significant contributions to the architecture of our time are subtle and evolutionary, acknowledging the aura of place. He promotes regionalism in his building and his teaching, not in explicit, dogmatic, or ideological ways, but as a natural response to the Bay Area, where he largely works; his work in this way becomes simple *and* complex, easy *and* profound, indigenous *and* original, and spirited like all great art.



"Beauty is a consequential thing, a by-product of solving problems correctly."

Donlyn Lyndon

Professor of Architecture
University of California, Berkeley

The works and teachings of Joseph Esherick are intertwined. Not, as they are in some, by the visible doctrine of shapes, but by the persistence of an enquiring mind and spirit.

The cluster houses at the Sea Ranch: shingle extensions of the meadow; built hedges that sweep the wind past secret gardens; cypress mates, boxes that have gone to seed; an assemblage of windows that reach for light, push out for view, hunker down into the grass. Joe's cluster houses, the first single family houses at the Sea Ranch, were built to show what the place could be. They have never been surpassed (or, alas, equalled). They are an architecture that works. Their forms are all accountable to actual physical conditions: wind, sun, hedgerow, outlook, fences, cars, concrete, wood studs, shingle and sod. Yet they are assembled with an attention to measure and adjustment that makes them seem to be not the workings of a hand but a part of the place itself.

Wurster Hall at the University of California, Berkeley: Difficult to envelope in loving metaphor; hard, relentlessly matter-of-fact adventurous construction, with subtleties of sense and arrangement masked by a gruff manner; iconoclastic.

Surprising to learn that the Sea Ranch buildings started as bold ink brush drawings and ruminations on the outbuildings at Ronchamp. Surprising to realize that the spatial sequence of interiors and the disposition of major offices in Wurster Hall follow almost exactly those of the small shingled Old Arch which previously was home to the School. Surprising, that is, if you are unfamiliar with the undoctinaire range of Joe's mind.

Joseph Esherick is an architect who never stops questioning. Yet he differs from most habitual questioners in that he has an equal commitment to finding answers and acting in the world. Inquiry, for Joe, is not speculation, but substance. Confidence is not a pose, but a habit. Humor is the appearance of ironic detachment in a man who is driven to make things to good purpose.

Not the least of Joe's accomplishments is the creation of a great firm. In the San Francisco Bay Area, Esherick Homsey Dodge and Davis

have been for many years the standard bearers for excellence in the profession and this year their national presence has been acknowledged by the American Institute of Architects. With Joe's leadership, the provocative, thoughtful ingenuity of their work is always exemplary. They show us now, as they have for decades, just how fascinating it can be to have buildings appear to be what they are, when what they are, and what they do, has been richly and imaginatively conceived.

"If we know one thing, it is that everybody is different and that there isn't going to be any one single answer to anything."

Josep Muntañola Thornberg

Professor and Ex-Chairman, Escola T.S. D'Arquitectura
Universitat Politecnica de Catalunya, Barcelona,
Spain

I could never refuse to write about Joseph Esherick's architectural achievements and ideas. The first time I met him was in Berkeley in 1976 when I was Research Fellow and he was the Chairman of the Department of Architecture. More recently, I have spent some time trying to grasp Joseph Esherick's architecture and personality. I have found both a very creative architect and a very unusual one. I have also wondered if some critics have misunderstood his talent which is rooted in the most pure empiricism and modern expressionism together. This has been, and is, a powerful cultural mixture. One can taste this power in the Cary House (1960) and in the Metcalf House (1948), each several years ahead of its time.

This empirical expressionsim leads Joseph Esherick to the most energetic rejection of formalistic approaches to architectural design. Again, some critics have misunderstood this attitude when they classify it into the group of spontaneous or eclectic positions. The Cannery in San Francisco and the recent Aquarium in Monterey Bay show a very different reality. Thanks to this rejection of preconceived styles, Joseph Esherick could freely evaluate each building in order to rehabilitate both with respect and creativity.

He acts as a competent physician who should never be impressed by the social class or by the wealth of the patient. And this is rare among architects. His known argument, "Forms are what things are," explains clearly a philosophy not very far from that of Alvar Aalto or Louis Kahn. This phrase explains where the poetics of architecture should be rooted: not in the style, not in form follows function, not in more is less or less is bore. The poetics of architecture should be rooted in the form and the form should be the building; it should behave with it, change with it, live with it and die with it

Joseph Esherick works have challenged, and will continue to challenge, wrong conventions and interpretations about the relationships between modernity and tradition in architecture. Modern architecture, true modern architecture, has never been a bunch of preconceived styles or rules of composition. The works of Esherick and his short, powerful and ironic verbal expression, re-

mind us that the unique enemies of modernity are the academic routines and the formalistic and self-contained attitudes in architectural design. When architectural forms are what things are, architecture looks as if it has always been there, in place, living with nature, making the landscape better, and providing better living for man.

"Architecture is a process, a way of bringing together spoken and unspoken needs in relation to reality. I think we have been confusing the process with the end product. We have been thinking of the building instead of man living in space and using space. We have been confusing ourselves with expressions instead of realities."



"The light in these houses moves around you as you move around with it, producing elusive, sculptural interior spaces."





"If you feel a window's only function is something to look out of, you may be making a terrible mistake. . . ."



A. Richard Williams

Professor of Architecture Emeritus
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Although the quest for appointing a Plym Distinguished Professor is worldwide, the first two recipients, Gunnar Birkerts and Paul Rudolph, are Americans who reflect the strength of architecture in this country, but in very different ways. Birkerts, an ex-European, has understood and orchestrated so well the idioms and ingenuities of American methods, materials and technologies, advancing still more the meaning of excellence in Modern Architecture. Rudolph's life-long personal approach may seem that of a European maestro, but his work reveals the deep-rooted native influences of pioneers like Wright, and a richness of spatial and structural means that suggests origins going back to the Mayas.

Joe Esherick brings us an even more basic expression of American character: that of teamwork and an unpretentious directness and determination to meet clients' needs. This combination of qualities, along with consistent excellence of architectural performance, was acknowledged in the 1986 American Institute of Architects "Firm of the Year" award to Esherick Homsey Dodge and Davis.

As a guest of Sami Hassid at Berkeley in 1964, I first met Joe on a jury of one of Christopher Alexander's students, whose project did not seem to involve drawings or other ways to record design thinking. I soon became lost in the verbal complexities of the discussion, but could tell by the expression on Joe's face that I was not alone out in left field. In the same year, one of his houses and my own were published in the same issue of *Progressive Architecture*, with his on the cover. The quality of his design made me realize that other things were happening at Berkeley beyond words alone, and that Joe was then and continued to be increasingly a guiding influence in the School as well as in practice in California and the nation.

Since we are the same age, I got to thinking of another of our contemporaries, Bill Caudill. Bill had many of the same easy but intense qualities that Joe possesses. The most prominent of these is the sincerity and effectiveness of making the client a part of the team. Bill innovated the now well-known "squatter method" of charrette work sessions with the client to find a concept and solution. Joe's firm has had from its begin-

ning the same dedication to joint decision making with the client but with different methods and perhaps more patience as an ingredient. Although the idea of "excellence in diversity" is again being recognized as a long-term architectural value, such direct participation of users, clients and fellow workers all through the process is more rare than common in the work of most publicized architects.

At a recent visit with Joe in his office in San Francisco, I was impressed with this aura of strong respect for clients, for the special nature of each program, site and context and perhaps most of all, respect among everybody in the office. This atmosphere was very similar to the magic one feels, too seldom, in architectural schools — indeed, Joe's office seemed to be, more than anything else, a place for mutual learning, though impromptu and low key. An in-house lunch seminar was going on as we cruised around looking at projects.

The appointment of Joe Esherick as a Plym Professor adds the third side to a triangle of talents contributing to greatness in American Architecture and Architectural Education. I would like to think it is the base, since it lies at the heart of America's unique asset in refining human philosophy — that of compassion and faith in joint enterprise — in team combos, like jazz, in which the talents of very different individuals come together as one joyful expression.

"A good architect is a schizophrenic under control — but just barely."

Frederic Schwartz

Anderson/Schwartz Architects

Visiting Critic in Architecture, Yale University

I am an architect because of Professor Joseph Esherick. Through his teaching and generosity many have gained knowledge, truth and not less than these, the special friendship between teacher and student.

Professor Esherick taught us not only to use our eyes and hands but also our hearts. By his example as a teacher and a builder, and by the quality of his character, we are not only better architects but also better people. He always had an open mind: he spoke with you, not at you. One felt a true student-teacher collaboration — the type read about in the student bulletin but never actually experienced. One never felt this Master Architect was above learning with you or from you. He encouraged us to re-examine our own intentions and to explore alternatives in a patient and systematic way, to be concerned not only with our physical designs but also with the capacity to seek human values in our projects.

Professor Esherick opened our eyes to the richness of the American Landscape. He taught us to start with what exists, to focus on the inherent character and soul of an abandoned warehouse or a desert landscape; and to critically analyze the physical and social forces which shape our environment. As young architects we were also encouraged to have vision and to dream.

The work of Professor Esherick and the collaborative effort of his firm Esherick Homsey Dodge and Davis provide ready examples of these ideas and principles. Their work prides itself on the design of "ordinary" buildings that grow out of the constraints and the opportunities of a given problem. Buildings like the Cannery, Sea Ranch, the Deer Valley Resort and the Monterey Bay Aquarium are important because they are at home instead of being heroic. The use of conventional materials and the stress on the importance of detail and craftsmanship creates lasting, time-honored buildings.

During the late Sixties and early Seventies, the years of turmoil at Berkeley, Professor Esherick's door was always open — if you wanted to talk he would listen. These were times of tremendous strife and pressure, times that required a great deal of patience, compassion, and under-

standing. Teaching went beyond architecture — it confronted life and death. I was affected more than the next student by the war in Viet Nam and the events at home. At the time of the Kent State shootings, Jeffrey Miller and three of my high school friends lived together in Ohio. Jeffrey was murdered, you saw him on the cover of LIFE magazine. My home town was divided and I left school. Professor Esherick joined hands with us in the protest. He suggested I take time off to think constructively and not to wander aimlessly — to focus my anger and frustration. I traveled east across America, writing to Professor Esherick about my observations of the condition of the time — turning a negative experience into a positive learning one.

Professor Esherick's teaching, work and sensitivity to our environment remain conscious directives in my day to day design process and decision making. No words can adequately express the extraordinary and special lifetime bond that exists every so often between teacher and student. I know that I have been touched by that special relationship. I'd like to think that my friendship with Professor Esherick was a little more important than the next student's. But, through his constancy, fairness and excellence I know I am just one of many that feel the same.

There are influential teachers and important architects. Few have affected so many by both the excellence of their work as well as their teaching. Each generation has its Gropius or Kahn, for my generation there is Joseph Esherick teacher of teachers, Master Builder and friend.

"No successful architecture can be formulated on a generalized system of aesthetics; it must be based on a way of life."



"The building exposes people to the passing of the day, using light rather than form as the main medium of the design. It gets away from form as something to see."

Afterword

Amidst overwhelming cultural pressures today to dominate what we make, to stamp buildings into masterful and controlled merchandise, to claim eternity in the signature, the architecture of Joe Esherick appears to deliberately slough off its ego and bequeath much of its interpretation to others. It is continually pointing beyond itself rather than towards itself.

Meaning is emancipated by a range of participatory devices, each able to prod and release latent associations, but to do so only through human involvement and imagination. Instead of passivating people with packaged and established meanings, these enigmatic structures are perpetually activating us, incorporating beholders into the work by empowering creative renditions of unfixed forms. The language speaks with openings rather than closures. It aims for variable responses instead of predictive reactions. It employs reciprocal boundaries to crack open objects and draw things into dialogue. We can call this interactionist striving many names, but it is essentially a composing of living structures, in the sense that all real life is based upon dialectics and change.

Our antennae can grope into a wider and more redolent universe through an architecture that reveals hidden forces of nature, such as winds, that reflects and moves with the ground's physiognomy, and that weaves primordial earth and vegetation directly into built space.

Light is employed as a protean energy. Solid figures become loosened from constancy as the sun washes through complex membratures in waves of mutation, turning cadaverous matter into a living and evanescent fabric.

Certain elements are placed like stumbling blocks into unexpected and startling contexts, upsetting our stereotypes and automatisms, stimulating us to imagine referential and secondary meanings beyond the obvious, freeing us from the authority of literal facts.

Accumulated quirks and anomalies, superfluities and agglutinations, broaden the leeway from any easily graspable and communicable formal content, thus preventing debasements of buildings into commodities, even for the architect, who delightedly points out their resistance to salable imagery.

Incomplete scaffoldings and skeletal frames blend polar worlds into fuzzy and vibrant amphibious realms, while offering up fragmentary gestalts that can be completed only in the mind's eye. Overlaid patterns destabilize positivistic locations and shapes. Rooms are offset and interlocked like collages, granting every space a share in other volumes, each made grand and intimate at the same time. Paths are shifted and variegated to disturb mechanical transit, liberating walkers for spontaneous and improvised movement. Like Clyfford Still's interflowing and evocative paintworks, so admired by Joe, these spaces are a mine of magical scripts.

For such stores of autonomous power, an all too rare kind of artistry is evidently at work, where instead of depleting creative potential in a stylistic or utilitarian end-product, the maker withdraws after sowing the seeds for inexhaustible re-creation. This is an architecture of endowments rather than displays, of rents rather than constrictions, of beginnings rather than terminations, and most generally, of fertility rather than death.

Henry S. Plummer
School of Architecture
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

"The principle quality a house ought to have is flexibility and changeability. . . it should be such that it generally stays in the background. People, and the things they do and have, are far more important than any building."



Afterword

I had known Joseph Esherick long before we actually met on this campus of the University of Illinois. My first encounter with Joe, as I remember, was by way of a couple of his buildings that were included in a book on contemporary architecture published in Hungary in the early 1970s. The book, written from a modernist perspective, was rather unsympathetic to the Sea Ranch complex and more so to the Cannery in San Francisco. Exactly this negative introduction drew a closer attention of mine to these works since, being already disenchanted about many of the increasingly dogmatic premises of modernism itself, I was interested in finding new directions that could successfully challenge these premises. In this respect, the relevant parts of the book dealing with the Sea Ranch and the Cannery, with one small photograph and with no drawings, did not provide me with further clues.

It was almost a decade later that I had the opportunity to personally visit and experience these buildings by Joe Esherick. After coming to the United States, I lived in California only temporarily, but I made it a point to get acquainted with the architecture of the region during my stay. I saw a large variety of buildings and places ranging in style from California high-modern to Disneyland. As these places varied in quality so did the intensity of my architectural experiences. Trying to come to terms with the unique and often rather puzzling culture of the West Coast, I rarely saw a more successful design in the region than the Cannery. Not only was the building convincing at first sight, but by some magic it managed to "invite" me back time after time to discover always something new about its wonderful and inexhaustible qualities.

The Cannery proved to me that old and new, rigorous and easy-going, serious and informal, or the individual properties of architecture and urbanism are not, and should not be, mutually exclusive qualities. The inner courtyard within the fabric of the building "performed" wonderfully as a small but genuine urban plaza, and it did so without being converted into the then already fashionable shopping mall with its hermetically enclosed atrium. In other words, Joe, with his Cannery, really provided me with one of those early examples I came across in contemporary American architecture which was able to bypass equally the pitfalls of both rigid

or reductionist modernism, and also the temptations of trivializing fashion or of a literary traditionalism. In this sense the work of Joe became and remains to me one of the first, personally discovered and memorable representatives of an architecture that Kenneth Frampton has termed since then "critical regionalism." The virtue of this regionalism embodied in the Cannery lies in its manifestation of having significance for the world outside itself.

Because of these precedents and my consequent high regard for Joe, in addition to his wonderful personality, intellectual capacity, and long time experience both as a highly acclaimed practitioner and educator, it was a great pleasure to finally meet him in person as the third Plym Distinguished Professor in our School. And for me, it was also a real honor to work with him while I served as one of his hosts and program coordinators during his stay in Urbana-Champaign.

Botond Bogнар
School of Architecture
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

"Buildings like the Cary House or the Sea Ranch are intentionally anti-material and anti-focal — 'ordinary.' The Cannery is probably the best example of these ideas on a larger scale."

Joseph Esherick
1986-87 Recipient of the Plym Distinguished
Professorship

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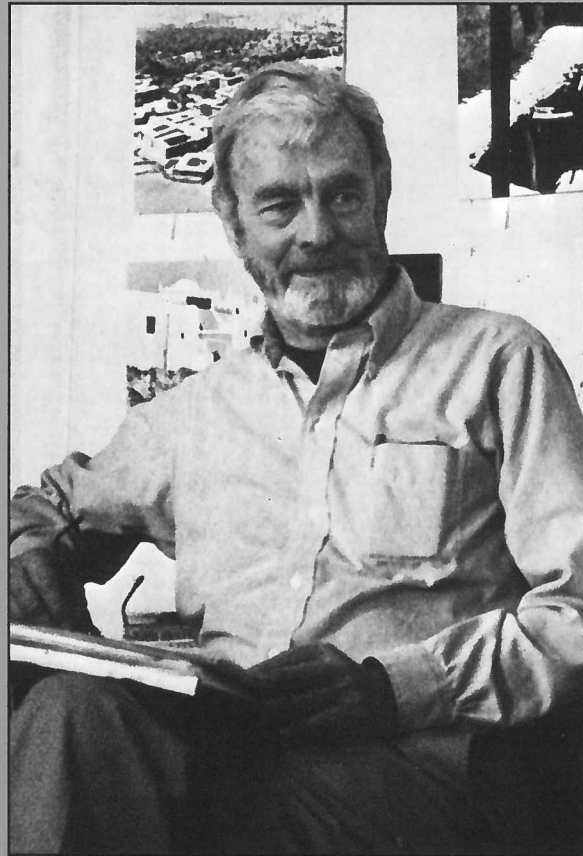
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5; The Bermak Residence, 1963, Berkeley, Cali-
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Rondal Partridge, 8 (top); Stevenson College,
1968, University of California, Santa Cruz
Roy Flamm (courtesy of The Bancroft Library), 8
(bottom); The Cary House, 1960, Mill Valley,
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Robert Brandeis, 9 (top); The Romano Resi-
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Joseph Esherick as the 1986-87 Plym Distin-
guished Professor

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*"I'm the only person I know who identifies with
Leopold Bloom in Ulysses. Leopold Bloom to me is
me, as far as I'm concerned, always bumbling and
doing stupid things and pursuing unimportant
things with a fervor."*