# 1991 ERIC OWEN MOSS

## *Which Truth Do You Want To Tell*

*'Does the bank define what's real, or are you prepared to contest that?' This is the kind of question central to the work of Eric Owen Moss (b 1943, Los Angeles). Dismissive of the linear rationality implicit in Modernism yet equally uninterested in architectural history and quotation, Moss rather seeks to puncture architectural preconceptions and extend the realms of the possible. His buildings include the Petal House, Los Angeles (1982), 8522 National Boulevard, Los Angeles (1988), Central Housing Office Building, Irvine (1989), Cineon Kodak at Samitaur (1996) and Pittard Sullivan (1997).*

These buildings don't uncover a single truth, so which truth do you want to tell.

Inevitably there are experiences that affect or 'infect' the work. You can see a shift in the projects, over a period of years, from an attitude that is more extroverted (responding to the world as external stimuli), to one that is more introverted (trying to understand the world based on one's internal perceptions). And yet you can't get rid of the external quality entirely.

Architecture has the ability to expand that internal boundary. It can punch a hole in your sky. You have one frame of reference, someone else has another; we all have a certain way of understanding the world. You start to think that it's enclosed, that it has limits, but it really doesn't. You think it has those limits, even if you claim you don't.

And then somebody kicks out the lid. It's theological; it's a revelation. I borrowed the line 'hole in the sky' from a peyote user and saxophone player whom I knew a long time ago in Berkeley. He used that expression to describe LSD (which, at the time, had an alleged esoteric association). So this is the *hole in the sky theory*, which has to do with the impact of a building on people who experience it, and see that it reveals possibilities that stretch their understanding. That revelation could be social or political or something else. If they refer back to themselves, it might open up something which was not previously available.

It's not so much that there is a right and a wrong understanding; it's more that there seem to be a number of rights and wrongs overlapping. There are a number of possibilities, but not an infinite number. This is not the 'everything's relative; pick a card' theory. Buildings make specific things available . . .

There seems to be a need to find an analytical side or a causal explanation for everything. We need to be able to give things a sequence, a method, a logic. Simultaneity is a different reality, which you can't explain that way. There are possible linkages; it's not that logic doesn't exist, but that it's plural . . .

There is a good argument for the end of the modern movement in architecture. It's the end of a kind of adolescent confidence in linear scientific thinking. Science is good and it's bad and it understands and it misunderstands and all of that. But it's a one-sided view.

You can't avoid the inclinations that produced the preeminence of science in the world because you're walking around with a head. You're always trying to understand what's going on and what things mean. And even when somebody has a rule that doesn't work, it doesn't mean there are no rules; it means that you try to modify or adjust.

Working on buildings for me, is like re-writing a text. It's an attempt to contest the conventions and un-conventions in architecture and the way people experience their lives . . .

The beauty of the railroad car, which has become the *railroad car theory*, is not a kind of idolatry. It has to do with adding to the lexicon of beauty, in terms of the erogenous qualities of machinery. It also indicates a sympathy for the ability to dissect and understand things rationally. And a belief that, as one understands the world and develops technique (and techniques is manifest in equipment and machines), a philosophical point of view is translated – a way of understanding the world in a scientific sense. So, the belief in science and in the ability to make the world amenable, to rational analysis, has this 'child' in the machine, and the rational world adopts that child and says, this correlates.

But the machine moved beyond that simple correlation. It started to have the appeal of image and style beyond its role as one stage in the long history of ideas. It started to make the pages of *Vogue* magazine – it was shiny, it was precise and it always worked. And although the machine was not pretty in a conventional sense, it become associated with a certain kind of beauty – a *stylistic* beauty. That's not the kind of association I'm interested in.

The railroad car in this discussion has grease on the wheels, and sometimes goes off the tracks. It's like the helicopters Jimmy Carter sent to Iran that didn't work because they got sand caught in the propellers. It's that kind of machine . . .

But you see all the time how the obligations of the world become the reason for not doing things . . .

Does the bank define what's real, or are you prepared to contest that? When

you contest it, you're attacked, as though you're oblivious, or simple-minded, or some sort of knucklehead – as though you don't really know how the world works. *And how does the world really work?* That changes too. I'm prepared to say I can alter that perception, even if it's an exception. It can be done. Not only in your head but out there. And people will recognize it. I think that's objective.

It's funny –

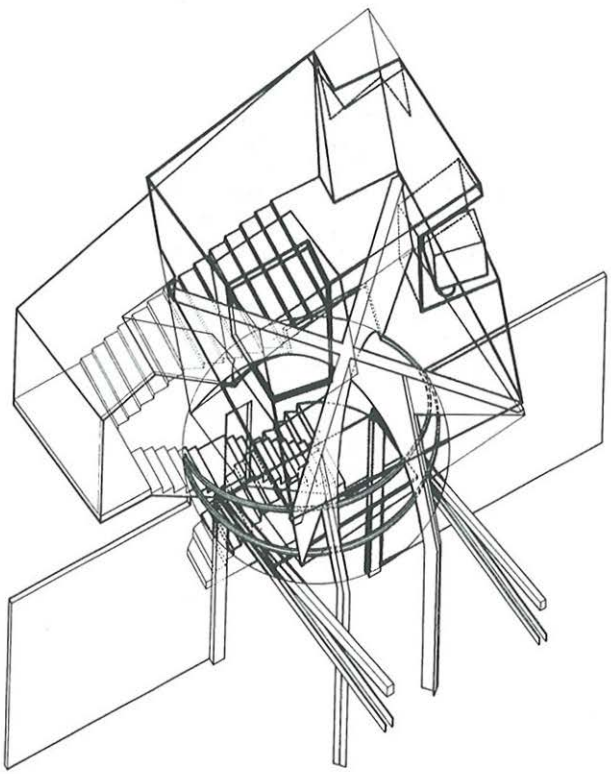
when you do this, you're always denying connections . . .

and then you suddenly start seeing all the connections.

You can boil it all down to one building, and quit lying.

(pp10-17)

Extracts. Source: Brad Collins and Diane Kasprowicz (eds), *Eric Owen Moss: Buildings and Projects*, Rizzoli (New York), 1991. © Rizzoli International Publications Inc.



*Eric Owen Moss Architects, The Box, Culver City, California, 1994*