



Mies van der Rohe, Apartment building, Weissenhof Estate, view of construction, Stuttgart, Germany 1927.

Pure form is interrogated in a way
that reveals its twisted and splintered
structure.¹

—Mark Wigley on Frank Gehry

What now little man?²

—Moe talking to Curly in "How High is Up?"

How is the subject of failure to be contextualized? What does failure look like? Its image must change over time. Failure is a disturbance, and a rupture of the goal to succeed, but success is many times a subjective call. The signal fails, a noise is heard, and static overcomes a sound or image. Failure is not obedient and it functions outside of an ethic or ideology. Why does something or someone fail? There is a fault, and one might fail because they do not have specific knowledge available to them. There is the occasion where the risk of failure is high. To "break the rules," "go against the grain," "think outside the box," are common sayings that suggest the idea of not abiding by a set of conditions or following the directions. One might be so inclined to break the rules as a way to discover an unexpected outcome, to experiment, to explore the possibilities, to risk failure. To fail is to succeed.

DAVID SCHAFER
UP IS HIGH, HOW?

The era of Modernism brought with it sets of rules and parameters that varied per practice. Following the Enlightenment it brought the aesthetics of rationalism to the forefront of culture. Practitioners of Modernism sought to reduce, pare down, and eliminate extraneous matter in pursuit of an essence or truth. What better form communicated rationalism and purity than that of the grid and the cube? There was the aspiration to eliminate the subjective and embrace the machine aesthetic or even become more like a machine. This utopic condition anticipated the future of a streamlined culture of leisure and mechanized labor.

One of the affects of Modernism was heroically made visible in the practice of architecture and particularly with the International Style.³ The I-beam framework of a skyscraper, usually concealed and clad with a façade was exposed in the International Style and especially within the work of Mies van der Rohe. Here, the reduced grid was expressed as a sign of the rational. This sub-structure of steel also allowed such signifying towers to be designed as the Empire State Building in New York. The Empire State Building in New York City was finished in 1931 and was assembled at the never-before-seen rate of four stories per month due to the prefabricated steel beams and components that were produced in Pennsylvania. It signaled a new phase of Capitalist development. The observation deck on the 86th floor allowed a view of Manhattan not previously known from the tourist point of view. The height and verticality of the new tower allowed for the person on the street to achieve a new position of vertiginous power. The competition of height had begun.

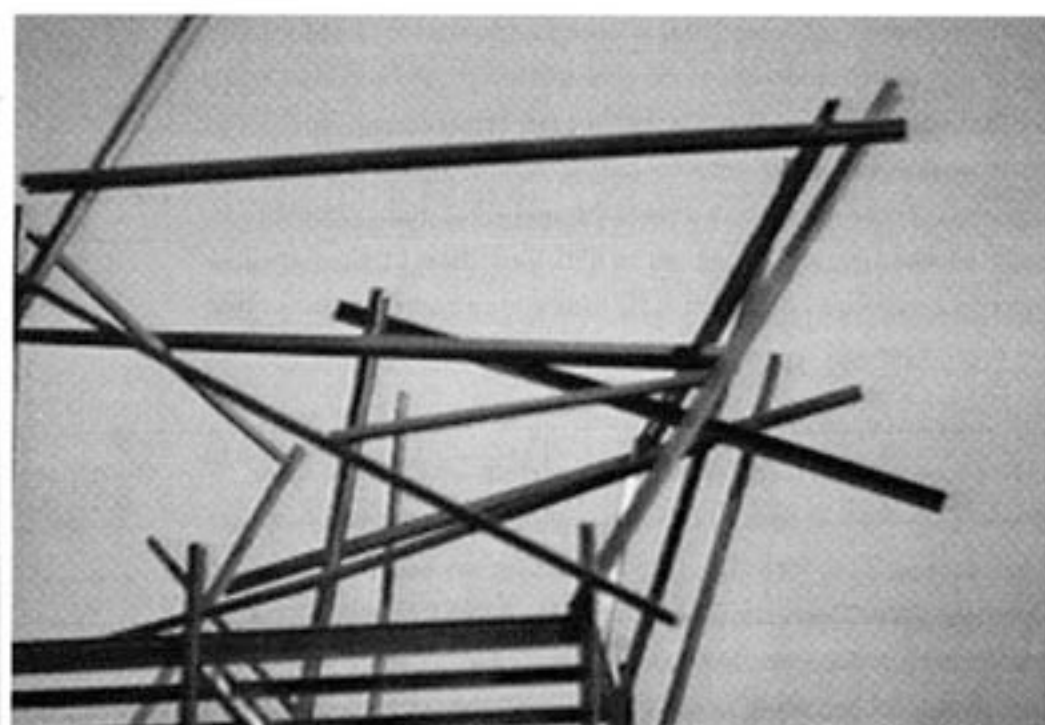
But as distance from the ground becomes greater, the threat to the overall structure diminishes.⁴

The tower, a subject heavily theorized in philosophy, gender studies, and architecture, provides a backdrop for the subject of this essay. The word "High" in the title of a Three Stooges episode

that I am about to describe may also be interpreted in relationship to culture, as in 'high' culture, or 'elite' culture in relationship to cultural space. So then the title would read, "How Elite is Up?" The tower or skyscraper has not only been scorned and parodied in academic circles, but has also been the subject of many comedies from the silent era to the present in film. One short film, a slapstick comedy, is relevant here as an early example and amusing play upon the skyscraper as a subject for parody.

The Three Stooges short episode titled "How High is Up?" from 1940 situates Larry, Curly and Moe as riveters, The Minute Men Riveters, on the 97th floor of a skyscraper being erected in what appears to be New York City.⁵ Upon entering the work area for Apex Construction which is on the ground, Moe says after being asked if they know how to rivet, "we are three of the best riveters who have ever riveted." After being told that they were going to have to work on the top floor, the Stooges look up to see the tall tower. Curly is overcome with vertigo from the ascending height and falls backward to the ground like a board falling over. He is overwhelmed at his experience of verticality, it gets the best of him and gravity takes over. Soon, they are on their way up to the top floor, standing on an exposed I-beam lifted by a crane to the 97th floor. Once they arrive on the top floor of the new building, they look down from their new altitude to the dizzying ground below and Curly says "I can't stand heights" and Moe replies "why" and Curly's response is, "because I belong down there." He is once again overcome by the vertiginous experience of height and desires to be on the ground. Moe's remedy for Curly is to blindfold him. At both the ground level looking up, and at the top looking down, Curly collapses at the experience of the extreme verticality.

The philosopher is first and foremost an architect, endlessly attempting to produce a grounded structure.⁶



Still from "How High is Up?" view of structure that was built by the Three Stooges.

It is known that in much of Martin Heidegger's and Jacques Derrida's writings, an architectural vocabulary is utilized and interwoven, and is sometimes the basis of their discussion.⁷ It is useful in visualizing form into the discussion of theory, it identifies with the idea of building and structure. Heidegger and Derrida continue to draw relationships between philosophy and visibility of architecture. Many architects have since been influenced by these philosophical, theoretical, psychoanalytic, and critical texts. With this essay I am interested in how the 1940 episode titled "How High is Up?" implicates the Deconstructive practice that was first witnessed in architecture in the 1980s.⁸ I am interested in the impossibility for a critical architecture. How can a relationship be drawn between an architect's intentions and the resulting building? The visual metaphors many times so quickly become illustrative narratives that are entrenched in a form of illusionism.

After a few other satisfying stunts, the Three Stooges begin riveting the structural beams together. After a while the foremen arrive on the 97th floor and yell out, "where are those 3 new men?" Then, after one foreman leans against a vertical beam and it crashes down onto him, he points upward and aghast, declares, "there they are." The camera moves to an upward view of this structure that represents the visionary work of the Stooges. The bizarre image is a staged model that was used to represent the 97th floor. Generally there is a unifying principal in an architectural project, but here, there is seemingly no unifying structure. The haphazard and chaotic structure envisioned by the Stooges is not in agreement with the modernist grid utilized by previous buildings and the especially the International Style; instead, it expresses the revulsion of common sense. The collapsing structure is configured with diagonals, and is a disturbance of order and forces of reason. Their structure exists in stark contrast



Still from "How High is Up?" the foreman looking up at the structure.



K-Piece, Mark di Suvero, 1971.

to the structure beneath them. It appears as an all out affront on logocentrism. The foremen were absolutely horrified as the structure represented a total failure, not only in construction but in aesthetics as well. The punch line of this episode is the image of the Stooges work, and is funny because it represents an architecture, a space, that would never be imagined in that era. It was preposterous and represented a form of abject horror.

Architecture is understood as a representation of deconstruction, the material representation of an abstract idea.⁹

Here the Three Stooges could be seen as architects and because of many similarities of form, their work could implicate many contemporary architects as a stooge, and their work as a form of slapstick comedy. The Stooges are incompetent, or at least not competent as builders, but not incompetent at comedy. The Stooges diagonally composed I-beam form and image may also be associated with a Mark di Suvero sculpture, or more precisely,

a visionary work by the architect Frank Gehry from 1980.¹⁰ What represented architectural failure in 1940, later stands for late modernism in sculpture and, later in the eighties, a conceptual breakthrough in architecture, as it relates to the appropriated philosophy of Jacques Derrida and other philosophers regarding the subject of Deconstruction. The Stooges critical structure anticipates the collapse of Modernism and the future of new and advanced architectural forms. The Three Stooges were naïve visionaries and what functioned as the punch line of a slapstick comedy became the logo of theoretical architecture for the likes of Frank Gehry, Bernard Tschumi, Coop Himmelblau, Eric Owen Moss, and many others.¹¹ The Stooges architecture is a form of critique and represents the impossibility of the visualization for an ideology, or a philosophy that the Culture Industry is now responsible for.¹² The idea of this episode, and maybe even the Three Stooges in general, recalls the Situationists and their anti-urbanism position on spectacle.¹³ Much of the theoretically driven architecture of the 1980's and many other examples even

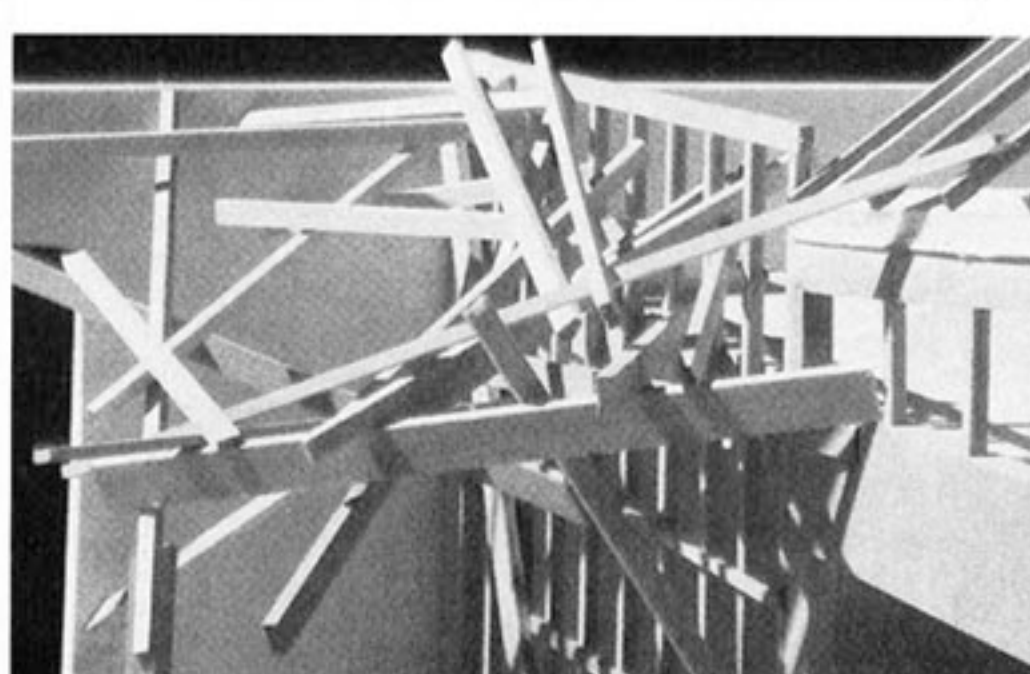


The Umbrella, Eric Owen Moss, Culver City, CA, 1998.

leading up to the present, ultimately risk becoming reduced to shopping mall kitsch and stylistic formalism. Their physical forms many times cannot sustain the burden of their theoretical underpinnings.

Deconstructive discourse identifies the inability of philosophy to establish the stable ground.¹⁴

Revealing more details regarding this relationship, one can refer to the exhibition curated by Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1988 titled "Deconstructivist Architecture". In this exhibition relationships were drawn between Russian Constructivism and a new architecture of the 1980's, referred to as Deconstructivism. Many architects are featured in the exhibition including Frank Gehry. In the catalog there is an unassuming foamcore model of photographs of a small unassuming dwelling and several by Frank Gehry for the second stage of his first house in Santa Monica, CA. The trellis on the back of his house is remarkably



Model second stage for his home in Santa Monica, CA, Frank Gehry, 1979.



Rooftop remodeling, Coop Himmelblau, Falkensteinerstrasse 6, Vienna, 1988.

identical to the Three Stooges project on the 97th floor of 1940. Could Frank Gehry have seen the episode of the Three Stooges? Could the Three Stooges have read Heidegger? The conflation of the slapstick version of architectural failure from 1940 and the Gehry proposal 40 years later form an insightful statement, and ultimately a critique of how architectural practice has narrated and animated theoretical discourse into a reductive practice composed of stylistic fantasy and formalism. In the 1940's, ideas regarding the construction of space were based on the grid, and there seemed very little functioning outside of the institution of Modernism. Ultimately, the Stooges effort is a form of translation of the architectural tower.

In Derrida's "Des Tours de Babel" the figure of the tower acts as the strategic intersection of translation, philosophy, architecture and deconstruction.¹⁵

NOTES

- 1 Mark Wigley, "Deconstructivist Architecture" catalog, MoMA 1988, page 22.
- 2 The Three Stooges, episode "How High is Up?" 1940, story and screenplay by Elwood Ullman. Produced by Del Lord, Hugh McCollum. Directed by Del Lord.
- 3 The International style was a major architectural trend of the 1920s and 1930s. The basic design principles of the international style are identical with those of modernism, but the term usually refers to the buildings and architects of the formative decades of modernism. Architects working in the International style gave new emphasis to the expression of structure, the lightening of mass, and the enclosure of dynamic spaces.
- 4 Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction* (Cambridge: MIT, 1995), p. 11.
- 5 Three Stooges: An American comedy trio named Larry, Curly, and Moe. Their violent and transgressive antics began in the late 20's, and flourished in the 30's and 40's and always included physical slapstick comedy such as pie throwing, slapping, eye pokes, falling down, and general chaos in any situation they found themselves in.
- 6 Wigley, p. 10.
- 7 Though there are too many titles to list here, but I am basically referring to Heidegger's, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking", and Jacques Derrida's, "Des Tours de Babel".
- 8 The Deconstructive practice in architecture whereby the writings of Jacques Derrida among others had influenced a great number of architects beginning the late 1970's and developing in the 1980's. These architects were generally interpreting and applying the various theories and concepts to the subject of building, space, and experience, by interrogating and intervening into the rational

program of architecture which includes stability, order, and purity, and revealing its slippages, internal conflicts, and flaws.

⁹ Wigley, p. 2.

¹⁰ Frank Gehry's house in Santa Monica 1978-88. A typical bungalow is interrogated with the concepts mentioned in endnote number 8. Industrial materials such as plywood, chain link fencing, fiberglass, and concrete are integrated into the structure and cladding.

¹¹ Here I am referring to how most examples of what is deemed Deconstruction architecture had a particular kind of look that tended to resemble each other. This look, which is to be taken very seriously for my purposes here, is related to slapstick comedy and parody.

¹² Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944) *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*. Diverse forms of popular culture, from Hollywood cinema to jazz, were described in the 1940s by The Frankfurt School of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer as a single culture industry that ensures the continued obedience of the masses to market interests. They described the culture industry as an iron system that occupies consumers' leisure time with amusements designed to enable them to bear the exhaustion and boredom of their increasingly rationalized and mechanized work.

¹³ The Situationist International (SI) was a very small group of far-left, international, political and artistic agitators with roots in Marxism and the early twentieth century European artistic avant-garde. Formed in 1957, the SI was active in Europe through the 1960s and had aspirations for major social and political transformations. The SI disbanded in 1972.

¹⁴ Wigley, p. 24.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 23.