

Non-Referential Architecture?

Tracing a Paradox of Contemporary Discourse

Ole W. Fischer

Introduction

In 2018 Swiss architect Valerio Olgiati and Swiss-American theoretician Markus Breitschmid published *Non-Referential Architecture*. Supposedly Olgiati's idea, with the bulk of the writing by Breitschmid, the book proposes a way of building that claims to be free from ideological influences and contextual references. This approach is purportedly suited to contemporary society, which no longer has faith in secure truths or shares common values. Rather than lament the loss of identity and orientation, the authors invite their readers to rethink present cultural indifference as liberating—as an opportunity to imagine architecture exclusively from within. The authors propose that architecture need not refer to studies of historical masterworks or vernacular traditions, but can be created from individual thought alone. It can exhibit both form-generating and meaningful properties, and address the spatial perception of the viewer so as to offer them an “existential foothold.”

This essay explores the intellectual underpinnings of Olgiati and Breitschmid's “non-referential architecture”: phenomenology and autonomous architecture. Phenomenology bracketed history by proposing existential truths and naturalizing certain forms of being-in-the-world as “timeless,” while autonomous architecture—inaugurated during the heyday of post-modernism—invited us to rethink architectural design in terms of pure syntactic rules, rather than reference-ridden semiotics. Like the advocates of “non-referential” architecture, the proponents of autonomy called for a retreat from social responsibility, use, context, material, and construction—

from the “exterior” fact that humans dwell in buildings—so as to create an “architecture about architecture” that instead explores the “interiority” of the discipline. The paradox they faced remains today: How can architecture escape conventions and canonized knowledge while at the same time being fully immersed in disciplinary protocols?

“Non-Referential” What?

A small 125-page book with large type and only one image appeared in 2018 and introduced a new term into contemporary discourse: “non-referential architecture.”¹ The work of Valerio Olgiati, a Swiss architect and professor at the Accademia in Mendrisio, and Markus Breitschmid, a Swiss-American theoretician based at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, the book immediately became infamous among architecture students. The authors pitched their book explicitly at architectural practitioners—not “interpreters, critics, and historians”²—and hence omitted any references to secondary literature. The first edition sold out quickly, and there has since been a third English print run, as well as German, Italian, and French translations.³ (Fig. 68 and Fig. 69)

The term “non-referential” originated in pragmatics—a branch of linguistics—and describes those aspects of an utterance that do not primarily *refer* to something in the world, but play a *practical role* in the immediate context of its use. The cry “Help!” does not refer at all, but seeks to elicit help for the speaker. “It’s raining” or “There is smoke”—while pointing to something in the world—also have a practical function in warning or alerting us

1 Valerio Olgiati and Markus Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture* (Basel: Simonett & Baer, 2018).

2 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 9. They continue: “Keeping this approach in mind, the book refrains from appearing too scholarly and including everything that scholarly academic texts typically contain. We consciously decided that, ideally, the examination at hand would mention no names.”

3 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 1st ed. (Basel: Simonett & Baer, 2018); 2nd ed. (Zurich: Park Books, 2019); 3rd ed. (Zurich: Park Books, 2021); *Nicht-Referentielle Architektur*, trans. from English by Miriam-Seifert-Waibel (Zurich: Park Books, 2019; 3rd ed., 2021); *Architettura Non-Referenziale*, trans. from English by Doriana Comerlati (Zurich: Park Books, 2019); *Architecture Non-Référentielle*, trans. from English by Damian Cortés (Marseille: Cosa Mentale, 2022). Unless otherwise stated, references to the book are to the first edition.

about a problem or danger. Some languages have honorific markers that do not change the *content* of what is communicated, but acknowledge the social hierarchies occupied by participants in the conversation—an example of “pure” indices.⁴

As such, the term “non-referential” should not be confused with “abstract” or “non-representational” as used in modern art and architecture discourse. Yet Olgiati and Breitschmid essentially employ it in this manner for buildings that are not “derived from a common social ideal” or which represent “a symbol of something outside themselves.”⁵

The authors assert that “non-referential architecture” responds to the diverse, pluralistic, and polyvalent “non-referential society” of the globalized twenty-first century. They claim that our current individualized lifestyle de-emphasizes religious, cultural, and historical relationships and operates without shared values and beliefs. While this state of affairs is generally seen as a loss, Olgiati and Breitschmid claim to be part of the first generation to embrace this fragmentation and heterogeneity as a form of liberation, viewing the individual person as an “artist of the self.”⁶ They ask architects to provide an adequate response to contemporary society and portray them as “early adopters” of cultural trends, in contrast to philosophers, who are characterized as “late” (with reference to Oswald Spengler).⁷ The authors allude to “the end of grand narratives”—an absence of any comprehensive meta-discourse—without reference to Jean-François Lyotard,⁸ and reject both a multicultural model of coexistence (that is, “postmodern” integration) and its modernist counterpart of enlightenment rationalism and the welfare

4 “Pragmatics,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pragmatics#Nonreferential_uses_of_language (accessed March 18, 2023).

5 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 13.

6 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 16. Perhaps this is an indirect reference to Friedrich Nietzsche’s artistic voluntarism. It is not unproblematic that Olgiati and Breitschmid take the rise of populism in Western democracies as proof of the dissolution of consensual belief systems in “non-referential societies,” yet still interpret this as “liberating” and “full of new possibilities.”

7 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 8.

8 Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979); English translation: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on*

state. Instead, they posit a “realism without interpretation”⁹ for a “non-ideological world,” in which architecture is liberated from history and meaning. In doing so, Olgiati and Breitschmid adopt an explicitly “non-political,” non-interventional, and “non-ideological” stance, focusing on architecture rather than solving “larger societal problems.”¹⁰ They want to observe, understand, and challenge the *status quo* and propose a model—echoing historical conceptions—of the architect as author, creative mind, thinker, and builder in a “non-referential” world beyond “modernity” and “postmodernity.” That is, they seek to place the architect beyond theoretical concepts that supposedly still occupy the profession.¹¹ I will return to this question below.

Olgiati and Breitschmid position themselves firmly against contemporary architectural debates on socially engaged practice.¹² Prominent examples include the exhibition and catalogue *Small Scale, Big Change* at MoMA 2010, the Pritzker Prize awarded to Francis Kéré in 2022, Yasmeen Lari’s 2023 RIBA gold medal, and the 2023 Biennale di Venezia “Africa: The Laboratory for the Future,” curated by Lesley Lokko. Similarly, the authors strictly reject contemporary themes of sustainable development, climate crisis, and the Anthropocene. They criticize a “moralist” attitude and reject the economic, ecological, and political as viable bases for architecture.¹³ Instead, they claim these considerations are “non-essential” to architectural design, which they understand primarily as a form of “projecting” (literally throwing forth—*progettare* in Italian).¹⁴ If this sounds like solipsistic *l’art pour l’art*, they are

Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

9 Olgiati and Breitschmid, Non-Referential Architecture, 16.

10 Olgiati and Breitschmid, Non-Referential Architecture, 11. Of course, we can object that any non-political position is already a political position—one of pluralistic liberalism (cf. Thomas Kuhn). See also the critique of deconstructivism as “non-political” by Mary McLeod, “Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism,” in *Assemblage* 8 (February 1989), 22–59, where she attacks Peter Eisenman and autonomous architecture.

11 Olgiati and Breitschmid, Non-Referential Architecture, 12.

12 Olgiati and Breitschmid, Non-Referential Architecture, 11. The authors employ the German pejorative term “Weltverbesserer,” potentially with reference to the play by Thomas Bernhard, *Der Weltverbesserer* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979).

13 Olgiati and Breitschmid, Non-Referential Architecture, 17.

14 Olgiati and Breitschmid, Non-Referential Architecture, 17.

quick to assure that architecture was never more socially relevant than today, since a non-referential society requires “buildings that possess general validity and common value.”¹⁵ In the face of a crisis of reference, symbolism, and representation—supposedly the result of diversity and pluralism—architecture must provide sense and meaning—albeit so-called “inner-architectural meaning” (as opposed to extra-architectural or multi- and transdisciplinary meaning). This they find contained in “first and foremost the conception, construction, and building of rooms; it deals with scenography and movements through rooms.”¹⁶ Since Olgiati and Breitschmid understand architecture as an “existential” and “metaphysical” human foothold, it must be directed at “sensual experience prior to intellectual interpretation,” and hence at the individual observer or user of a supposedly “purely architectonic object.”¹⁷ Inner-architectural meaning, they claim, touches the human observer directly through their senses in a physical and psychological manner that can be considered independent of individual background, culture, class, education, gender, beliefs, and values. Yet, knowingly or not, they thereby employ a universalist trope already present in modernism: seeking to “speak” beyond both elite culture and regional or national barriers via abstraction, function, and technology.¹⁸

References Throughout: Paraphrase and Paratext

Olgiati and Breitschmid claim to have crafted their argument in the most general, “self-evident manner,” based purely on observation, practice, and indisputable facts—completely *ex novo*. They hence make no explicit reference to other authors.¹⁹ Yet their characterization is inaccurate for a number of reasons.

15 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 19.

16 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 14. I will return to the dualism of built space and perception below.

17 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 16; and again in the third edition, p. 26: “A building exists only for itself.”

18 See, for example, Walter Gropius, ed., *Internationale Architektur*, Bauhaus Bücher no. 1 (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1925), 5.

19 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 10.

First of all, *Non-Referential Architecture* does contain a series of direct references:

- ▶ Oswald Spengler on early/late adopters;²⁰
- ▶ Friedrich Nietzsche's aphorisms and his meditation on the (ab)use of history²¹ and post-Christian society;²²
- ▶ Martin Heidegger and his onto-phenomenology;²³
- ▶ Robert Venturi, his book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), and the notion of meaning and context;²⁴
- ▶ Aldo Rossi, his book *L'architettura della città* (1966), and specifically the concept of the "autonomy of architecture" as a discipline;²⁵
- ▶ Peter Eisenman ("syntax"), Bernard Tschumi ("event"), Peter Zumthor ("civilizing innocence"), Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron ("speci-

20 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 8; Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte* (Wien: Braumüller, 1918).

21 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 10–11; Friedrich Nietzsche, "Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen. Zweites Stück: Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben" (1874), in Friedrich Nietzsche: *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 1, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin/Munich: Walter de Gruyter/dtv, 1988), 243–334. An exegesis of Nietzsche's text on contemporaneity and the sense of history is beyond the scope of this paper.

22 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 31. Nietzsche proclaims the death of god in the third book of *The Gay Science* (1882). See: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Book 3, § 125, in Friedrich Nietzsche: *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 3, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin/Munich: Walter de Gruyter/dtv, 1988), 480–82.

23 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 18, with a direct quote: "The building is in the stone." Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1960), originally published in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1950), 1–66, here 4: "Das Bauwerk ist im Stein. Das Schnitzwerk ist im Holz. Das Gemälde ist in der Farbe. Das Sprachwerk ist im Laut. Das Musikwerk ist im Ton."

24 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 19, 29ff; Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1966).

25 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 19; Aldo Rossi, *L'architettura della città* (Padova: Marsilio, 1966); English translation: *The Architecture of the City*, trans. Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman, introduction by Peter Eisenman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).

fic form”), and Rem Koolhaas (“the generic”)²⁶—all of which Olgiati and Breitschmid summarize as different attempts at “liberating” architecture from images and the symbolic, while claiming that none of these “theories” would have “accepted the polyvalent world affirmatively”,²⁷

- ▶ Alberto Giacometti;²⁸
- ▶ The idea of architecture as a metaphysical shelter, taken from Barnett Newman,²⁹ who follows Heidegger’s contrast of the term “room/Raum” with the rational and geometric “space/*spatium*”;³⁰
- ▶ Frank Gehry and Antonio Gaudí, whom they compare in a discussion on “newness” in architecture—the first supposedly being engaged with his

26 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 19–20; Peter D. Eisenman, “Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition,” in *Design Quarterly* 78/79 (1970), 1–5; Bernard Tschumi, “Space and Events,” in *The Discourse of Events*, ed. Bernard Tschumi and Nigel Coates (London: Architectural Association, 1983), reprinted in Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 141–149; Peter Zumthor, “Eine Anschauung der Dinge,” in *Architektur Denken* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1997), 8–26; Jacques Herzog, “Das spezifische Gewicht der Architekturen,” in *Archithese* 12, no. 2 (1982), 39–42, reprinted in Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, “Das spezifische Gewicht der Architekturen,” in Herzog & de Meuron 1978–1988: *Das Gesamtwerk*, vol. 1, ed. Gerhard Mack (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1997), 204–206; Rem Koolhaas, “The Generic City” (1994), in *S,M,L,XL: Office for Metropolitan Architecture*, ed. Jennifer Sigler, photography by Hans Werlemann (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 1248–1264; and a Rem Koolhaas lecture at Harvard GSD October 4th 2016.

27 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 20.

28 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 3rd ed., 28.: “The best thing about them [sculptures] is that one touches them.”

29 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 66. See also Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks*, and Barnett Newman, quoted in Richard Shiff, “To Create Oneself,” in *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York and New Haven: The Barnett Newman Foundation and Yale University Press, 2004), 3: “Life is physical but it is also metaphysical—only those who understand the meta can understand the physical.”

30 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 67, with reference to Martin Heidegger’s lecture “Bauen Wohnen Denken” at the 1951 “Darmstädter Gespräch,” published in *Mensch und Raum: Das Darmstädter Gespräch 1951*, ed. Otto Bartning (Darmstadt: Neue Darmstädter Verlagsanstalt, 1952); reprinted in *BauweltFundamente* 94 (Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1991). The buildings of Borromini and Mies van der Rohe supposedly have “little to do with geometry” (Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 69).

time, the second against his time, depending on how architects are taken to understand “society’s sensibilities”;³¹

- ▶ A whole slew of references related to “contradiction” (a term itself indebted to the aforementioned Venturi):
 - ▷ Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* on distinguishing difference from otherness.³²
 - ▷ Immanuel Kant and the *Critique of Judgement*, which they take to describe a three-step process of sensual stimuli (1) that trigger a person’s imagination (2), leading to conceptualization (3). “Beauty,” according to the authors’ reading of Kant, results from this passage from imagination to conceptualization (and back).³³ They refer to the work of Mark Rothko as shifting between understanding and inaccessibility in a way that can produce “sense” from a painting or building alone (most likely referring to the Rothko Chapel in Houston). As a second example, Olgiati and Breitschmid refer to an archetypal house—as in a child’s drawing without a roof—which reminds the informed reader of Atelier Bardill by Olgiati in Scharans, Switzerland, 2002–07.³⁴ This might trigger the observer to contemplate the house as a shelter.
 - ▷ Gottfried Semper’s *Stoffwechseltheorie* (named in German!), a theory of material change, such as from timber to stone in the Greek Temple of antiquity,³⁵ or in the former capital city of the Mughal empire Fatehpur Sikri in Uttar Pradesh, India (under Akbar I, reign 1556–1605). The latter is one of Olgiati’s favorite examples of reddish imbued concrete, one of his preferred materials.
- ▶ Vitruvius, the most classical of references.³⁶

31 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 81.

32 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 96; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 10.1054b.

33 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 96–97; Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005).

34 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 98–99.

35 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 99–100; Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder praktische Ästhetik: ein Handbuch für Techniker, Künstler und Kunstfreunde*, vol. 1, *Die textile Kunst für sich betrachtet und in Beziehung zur Baukunst* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag für Kunst und Wissenschaft, 1860), 233, 431.

36 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 125; Marcus Vitruvius Pollio,

Secondly, the book also contains indirect, implicit references to theories and authors, where Olgiati and Breitschmid employ well-known phrases and concepts as commonplace theoretical tropes without explicitly referring to their sources or contexts. We already encountered an example in their invocation of Lyotard's "end of grand narratives" without attribution. Further references of this kind include:

- ▶ Heidegger, via the phrase "metaphysical homelessness,"³⁷ and Nietzsche through the term "post-Christian" society;
- ▶ Louis Kahn and the notion of "ordering the world" through architectural design;³⁸
- ▶ "The second Enlightenment" with regard to contemporary society after modernity and postmodernity;³⁹
- ▶ Kant, through "the thing itself" (*Das Ding an sich*) and the concept of transcendental aesthetics;⁴⁰
- ▶ Karl Marx, via the term "superstructure" with regard to social ideologies, albeit without its dialectical counterpart of "base structure";⁴¹
- ▶ Max Weber, through the phrase "disenchantment of the world" (*Entzauberung der Welt*) and his theory of modernity and modern society;⁴²

De architectura libri decem, trans. Frank Granger, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–1934).

- 37 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 110; Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927), ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977).
- 38 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 3rd ed., 17; Louis Kahn, "Order and Form," *Perspecta* 3 (1955): 46–63.
- 39 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 3rd ed., 32–33, probably with reference to Ulrich Beck, who along with "second modernity" and "reflexive modernity," also employed the term "second Enlightenment."
- 40 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 26–27, 110–111; Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781/1787), ed. Wilhelm Weischedel, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974).
- 41 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 3rd ed., 24; Karl Marx, "Vorwort," in *Zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* (1859), in *Marx-Engels-Werke*, vol. 13 (Berlin: Dietz, 1971), 7–11.
- 42 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 32; Max Weber, "Wissenschaft als Beruf" (1919), in *Schriften 1894–1922*, ed. Dirk Kaesler (Stuttgart: Kröner, 2002), 474–513.

- ▶ Hal Foster, when mentioning the volume *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* as hallmark of postmodernist theories in the 1980s;⁴³
- ▶ Peter Bürger, again by citing the title of a book (*Theory of the Avantgarde*) without naming its author;⁴⁴
- ▶ The term “spatial creation” and the notion of empathy aesthetics, which are probably derived from August Schmarsow;⁴⁵
- ▶ “Incidental space” as the opposite of the “idea and intended experience of space,” a reference to the authors’ Swiss colleague Christian Kerez and his installation at the 2016 Biennale di Venezia Swiss Pavilion;⁴⁶
- ▶ “Symphonic relationships” between rooms, an idea that can be found in both Schmarsow and Kahn, and similarly the description of architecture as petrified or frozen music, a metaphor that reaches back to the romanticism of Schopenhauer and Schelling;⁴⁷
- ▶ The term “deconstruction,” a clear reference to Jacques Derrida.⁴⁸

Thirdly, Olgianti and Breitschmid refer to the historical categories of “modernity” and “postmodernity,” which they simplify and essentialize into a polar

-
- 43 Olgianti and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 32; Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), with essays by Jean Baudrillard, Douglas Crimp, Hal Foster, Kenneth Frampton, Jürgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson, Rosalind Krauss, Craig Owens, Edward W. Said, and Gregory L. Ulmer (in lieu of Jacques Derrida). The collection has a strong connection to the neo-Marxist art and culture journal *October*.
- 44 Olgianti and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 32; Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974).
- 45 Olgianti and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 37–38, and also 60, where space is described as the “raw material of architecture,” and spatial perception as an inborn human capacity, supposedly universally shared across all people, periods, cultures. On empathy theory, see August Schmarsow, *Das Wesen der architektonischen Schöpfung* (Leipzig: Karl W. Hiersemann, 1894).
- 46 Olgianti and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 60; Sandra Oehy and Christian Kerez, eds., “Release Architecture: Incidental Space,” in *ARCH+ 224* (July 2016).
- 47 Olgianti and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 60; Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, vol. 2, *Ergänzungen zum dritten Buch*, § 39 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 582; Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, “Philosophie der Kunst” (1802/1803), in *Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 2, ed. Manfred Frank (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985).
- 48 Olgianti and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 71; Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967).

opposition. They reduce the “modern project” to its “political” aspects, understood as both liberal and Marxist,⁴⁹ and claim this caused a(n oedipal?) reaction from the postmodernists they have already listed (Venturi, Rossi, Foster, Bürger, et al.). Yet Olgiati and Breitschmid reject the postmodernists’ “critical discourse” as still trapped within Enlightenment rationality. They claim it reflects an ideology incapable of describing and analyzing contemporary society, which they interpret as diverse, pluralistic, polyvalent, individualized, non-consensual, and liberal. The authors hence announce the obsolescence of the concepts of modernity and postmodernity and proclaim a historical caesura within the structure of society and its relationship to architecture—especially in terms of how it generates “meaning”. The buildings of non-referential architecture

have to be significant in a world that does not embrace significance. It is a fundamental shift away from an architecture that offers its inhabitants a way of participating in a life-affirming known totality they believe in, and move [sic] toward an architecture that offers inhabitants a way to build a life-assuring totality that they believe does ultimately not exist.⁵⁰

The historical “break” that Olgiati and Breitschmid declare repeats the narrative of various modern avant-gardes and assumes Hegel’s teleological conception of history.⁵¹ At the same time, they propose a “solution” for the other “break” that has occurred between form and meaning: generating architectural significance in the absence of common social values, beliefs, and references. Here, again, they need to rehearse concepts from existing architectural theory. The authors call for the independent, absolute, singular building that responds to “something existential about [a] person’s life.”⁵² They explicitly warn against mistaking this position for (neo)liberal relativism, but trust in the immanent qualities (even if they do not use this term)

49 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 21.

50 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 22.

51 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 61: “non-referential architecture does not aim for consonance . . . it requires a break in the sense of a caesura.” See also their discussion of the principle of “newness” in architecture, which by and large follows avant-garde arguments, on 75–84; similarly, in the third edition, 33: “the non-referential world . . . is also no longer historical in its nature.”

52 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 3rd ed., 25.

of physical presence and aesthetic experience. In doing so, they borrow from two distinct schools of thought: the disciplinary autonomy of architecture⁵³ (by emphasizing a sensual, contemplative mode of architectural engagement over a functional programmatic one) and phenomenology (by opposing individual aesthetics to universal rationalism and social values).⁵⁴ These two interpretative models both originate in a critical re-evaluation of modernist functionalism and rationality during the postwar period, yet they have traditionally been located on different ends of the intellectual spectrum: (post) structuralism and architectural phenomenology, respectively.

We can see from the traces in their text that Olgiati and Breitschmid's understanding of "architectural autonomy" is informed by Aldo Rossi and Peter Eisenman, who reacted against both modernist functionalism and the then-popular semiotics of architecture. In the 1960s and '70s, Rossi and Eisenman applied ideas from structural linguistics to architecture. They searched for abstract rules by examining the transformation of urban forms over time (the fixed structures, morphology and typology of the European city)⁵⁵ and by looking at the syntactic operations of pure architectural elements (e.g. point, line, plane, volume, column, wall, plate, opening, and their addition, subtraction, rotation, and superposition as identified in modern designs of Le Corbusier and Terragni). Eisenman dubbed these operations the "self-referentiality" of architecture.⁵⁶

Olgiati and Breitschmid's reliance on phenomenology is already clear from their references to Heidegger. Their focus on sensual spatial experience, embodiment, materiality, essentialist oneness, and individual existential meaning hence comes as no surprise. However, phenomenological writers

53 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 14: "no discipline other than architecture itself has the ability to contribute anything of consequence to these fundamental architectural conditions."

54 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 27. In opposition to the claim that sensual experience lies beyond cultural, intellectual, class, religious, gender or other differences, current psychology argues that experience itself is shaped by all these factors.

55 Cf. Rossi, *L'architettura della città*.

56 Peter Eisenman, "Aspects of Modernism: Maison Dom-ino and the Self-Referential Sign," in *Oppositions* 15/16 (Spring 1979), 118–128; Peter Eisenman, *The Formal Basis of Modern Architecture*, PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1963 (published Basel: Lars Müller, 2006).

typically do consider the importance of place, context, and history, drawing on vernacular sources and discussing the supposed organic unity and authenticity of regional cultures. For this reason Jorge Otero-Pailos argued that the “phenomenological turn” runs parallel to and partially overlaps with postmodernist architecture.⁵⁷

While the structural rigor of autonomous architecture seems at odds with the experiential, sensual approach of phenomenology, Olgiati and Breitschmid combine them in an attempt to overcome the “deficiencies” of each. Where a purely structural reading of architecture runs the risk of abstract “emptiness” and nihilist meaninglessness, phenomenology compensates by charging a room with existential “sense-making.”⁵⁸ And where the subjective and regional limitation of a phenomenological search for presence, wholeness, place, culture, and context leads architecture to an overreliance on the tactile qualities of “story telling”⁵⁹—and hence referentiality—this can be overcome through the “subjective universality” of the autonomous structure’s physical presence.⁶⁰ Olgiati and Breitschmid even pay homage to “deconstruction,” which they claim introduced the coexistence of contrary meanings. They also allude to Eisenman in saying that deconstruction became accessible to architecture through syntactic operations, although they criticize the merely formal results of analyzing superimpositions, dislocations, computational fluidity,⁶¹ and parametric digital design.⁶² Instead, Olgiati and Breitschmid posit that both deconstruction and phenomenology converge in the “oneness” of the architectural object independent of external references:

[I]t is testimony to the overarching current of the polyvalent non-referential world that—even if they come from supposedly opposed poles,

57 Jorge Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

58 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 24.

59 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 69–70. Perhaps there is a nod to Kenneth Frampton and Peter Zumthor here.

60 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 26.

61 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 70–71, although the reference to digital tools and curvilinearity seems to target Greg Lynn and UNStudio more than Eisenman himself.

62 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 109–110.

such as phenomenology and deconstruction—architectural theories ultimately aimed for the same thing: the dissolution of the reduction of the experience of space inherent in a geometrizing system that operates by disjunctions of being either this or that. ...Non-referential architecture ...is unconcerned with meaning—it is concerned with possibilities.⁶³

One direct consequence of this blending of phenomenology and autonomy is a decidedly anti-historical stance. Olgiati and Breitschmid consider history “extra-architectural” and reject common categories such as names of the architect, client, builders, historical period, style, context, and even the idea of a building’s function or program.⁶⁴ Instead, they proclaim that architecture deals exclusively with “space constellations” (a hidden reference to Schmar-sow) and should hence be studied purely formally, not socially.⁶⁵ The authors suggest the term “genealogy” in opposition to “history,” taking the term from Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault:

[G]enealogy presents basic physical facts, such as information about the dimension of rooms, the materials a room is built with, the measurements of columns, the placement and size of openings, the thickness of walls, how a person enters a room, etc.⁶⁶

63 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 71.

64 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 39: “[I]t is often advantageous for the architect if nothing is known about the civilization that erected a given building. It is actually better for an architect to not know who commissioned a building, why it was built, and what program and function it served.”

65 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 37–38. We might also detect a reference to formalism in architectural history, as developed by Heinrich Wölfflin, Paul Frankl, and Alois Riegl—and subsequently Clement Greenberg, Rudolf Wittkower, and Colin Rowe.

66 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 40; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral: Eine Streitschrift* (1887), in *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 5, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), 245–412; Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’histoire” (1971), in *Dits et Écrits*, vol. 2, ed. Daniel Defert, François Ewald, and Jacques Lagrange (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 136–156.

This formal analysis of architectural elements supposedly uncovers the “universal genetics of space.”⁶⁷ In this respect, it resembles Eisenman’s search for the “deep structure” of architecture in the late 1960s, inspired by Noam Chomsky’s transformational generative grammar.⁶⁸ Yet Olgiati and Breitschmid draw a different conclusion when they claim that this formal reading of spatial order should not be interpreted “intellectually,” but “emotionally”⁶⁹—and not only by observers and users, but also by architects. The authors argue from a distinctively “pragmatist” perspective and insist on an “architectonic idea,” by which they mean the “form-generative” and “sense-making” aspect of buildings. We should, they claim, be able to express this “holistic idea” with one sentence or phrase without relying on general criteria like size, building program, type, shape, and construction. To bring home their point, they describe a three-step design process, which they present in a strictly deductive manner: Start with an “architectonic idea” (e.g. “secluded garden”—a reference to Olgiati’s holiday home Villa Além in Portugal), choose an “ordering system” (e.g. rectangular garden enclosed by four walls), and finally devise a “concrete architectonic formulation” (material, color, size, type of plants, etc.).⁷⁰ This approach stands in stark opposition to the complex feedback loops discussed in design studies, which project structures onto sites to deal with complex problems.⁷¹ (Fig. 70, Fig. 71, Fig. 72)

Built Work: Homage to...

A thorough discussion of the multiple references employed by Valerio Olgiati’s own bureau in Flims goes well beyond the scope of this essay. However, a few motifs can be pointed out. First, Olgiati echoes the sculpted minimalism of Atelier Zumthor in the nearby Chur—and thereby also the materi-

67 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 42: “[D]ifferent people perceive space identically, irrespective of the time and civilization in which they lived.”

68 Thomas Patin, “From Deep Structure to an Architecture in Suspense: Peter Eisenman, Structuralism, and Deconstruction,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 47, no. 2 (November 1993): 88–100.

69 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 44.

70 Olgiati and Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture*, 101–108, on the principle of “order”, here 101. Note the earlier reference to Kahn.

71 Cf., for example, Nigel Cross, *Designerly Ways of Knowing* (London: Springer, 2006).

alism and institutional formalism of Louis Kahn. Second, he also exhibits the influence Peter Eisenman's neo-modern elementarism, focused on the design process, the conceptual art of architecture, and its syntactic rules of wall, opening, column, etc. We could also speak here of second-order referentiality, since Eisenman's work—and that of other architects belonging to the so-called neo-avantgarde of the 1960s and '70s—points back to the historic modernism of De Stijl, Le Corbusier, and Terragni. Yet Olgiati's oeuvre enhances these references with a phenomenological sensitivity to material, construction, technique, and surface—for example, in the early Schulhaus in Paspels (1996–98), the Gelbes Haus in Flims (1997–99), the Atelier Bardill in Scharans (2002–07), and the National Park Visitor Center in Zernez (2002–08). In his more recent Villa Além in Portugal (2012–14), designed as his own weekend retreat, there are obvious references to the idea of the walled oriental garden (paradise), as well as to Louis Kahn's Salk Institute in La Jolla, California (1959–65) and Luis Barragán's Fuente de los Amantes in Atizapán de Zaragoza, México (1964–69). Some critics also see resemblances to Casa Malaparte, Capri, by Adalberto Libera (1938–42). One again we see references on top of references—and let us not forget the aforementioned reddish sandstone architecture inspired by Fatehpur Sikri.

Let's Get Personal: History, Genealogy, and Biography

Even if we have reservations regarding a biographical reading of architectural work, it is worth noting that Valerio Olgiati's (*1958) father Rudolf (1920–1995) was a well-known regional modernist architect in Flims, Grison, Switzerland. Rudolf Olgiati combined elements from the vernacular tradition with modernism, in particular making multiple references to Le Corbusier. While many of his buildings are predominantly white and abstract, they draw on local references, images, and objects found in the Alpine canton of Grison. Rudolf Olgiati's work has hence been considered regionalist, site-specific, contextual, and culturally embedded.⁷² Valerio Olgiati studied at the ETH Zurich during the 1980s, left Switzerland and moved to Southern

72 Cf. Thomas Boga, *Die Architektur von Rudolf Olgiati: Dokumentation zur Ausstellung an der Eidgenössischen Technischen Hochschule Zürich vom 16. Juni – 7. Juli 1977*, reprint (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2010).

California, before returning to Flims in the 1990s. There, he radically transformed the old “Gelbes Haus,” a public postal building, into a museum for local history (1997–99) that housed many objects donated by his father upon his death in 1995. While I have discussed the motif of “skinning” the building elsewhere,⁷³ we could also interpret Valerio Olgiati’s non-referential theory and work in relation to his father’s shadow. A long shadow is also cast by another father figure—this time an intellectual one. At the ETH Zurich, Valerio was a member of the infamous “analogue architecture” class lead by Fabio Reinhart and Miroslav Šik (1983–91), which was distinguished by a specific kind of postmodernism drawing on Aldo Rossi’s realism and use of analogies. Students under Šik’s tutelage created large-scale perspective drawings (“architectural images”) in wax crayon, depicting ordinary architectural situations. They embraced “dirty realism” by drawing buildings that were deeply connected to specific places, to popular culture, and a carefully chosen set of architects including Sigurd Lewerentz, Gunnar Asplund, English Arts and Crafts practitioners, Otto Wagner, and Jože Plečnik. At the same time, they employed strategies of estrangement by focusing on anonymous vernacular architecture, desolate urban peripheries, and sinister (post)industrial landscapes like those found in Bernd and Hilla Becher’s photographs or the films of Wim Wenders, Jim Jarmusch, and Michelangelo Antonioni. Against this background, Valerio Olgiati’s non-referential approach can be read as a form of liberation from both regionalist and analogue architecture—a way of killing the father.⁷⁴

Coda: Contemporaneity or Endless Loops of References? Post-Postmodernism Redux

When we place Breitschmid and Olgiati’s non-referential “theory” and Olgiati’s own architectural work within a historical continuum, we arrive at several preliminary conclusions.

73 Ole W. Fischer, “Die Gedanken tragen weiss. – Drei Häuser, ein Bild und der Mythos,” in *TransAktion* (Zürich: gta Verlag, 2003), 130–137.

74 It is worth noting that personal matters have also intervened between the two authors: Markus Breitschmid and Valerio Olgiati are involved in court proceedings, where

First, despite their strong rejection of modern and postmodern architecture, the authors rely on existing narratives: the notion of historical “breaks,” avant-garde claims to “newness,” etc. Like postmodernism’s relationship to modernism, their position appears oedipal: they can easily define what they oppose—in this case, their predecessors—but struggle to provide a positive definition of “non-referentiality.” Venturi’s influence on Olgiati—complexity, linguistics, images, the everyday—cannot be overestimated, yet he works against this via autonomy and syntactic abstract formalism in the manner of Rossi and Eisenman. Like Eisenman’s exercises in systematically unravelling the cube through transformative geometric operations, losing and finding authorship in endless process work, Olgiati insists on the “architectural idea” as a purely cerebral project (like playing chess in one’s head) before drawing the first line on paper or screen. He describes the design process as unfolding this idea into structural order, material, space, and built form without external references—yet supposedly always connected to reality. However, it remains unclear what kind of “reality” this entails, since social questions, politics, history, context, technological issues, the economy, and ecology are explicitly excluded—as are client, program, and site. What distinguishes Olgiati’s approach from the theoretical positions of Eisenman and Rossi is his reliance on a phenomenological metaphysics of presence and existence (Heidegger) and on transcendental ideas of truth and beauty (Kant)—positions that contradict both each other and the (post)structuralist theories of his predecessors.

In a sense, Breitschmid and Olgiati’s “non-referential” architecture can be seen as a kind of anti-Baudrillardian quest—a struggle against the “empty” or “floating” signifier and against simulation without a referent in

the theoretician sued the architect in a defamation case. Breitschmid took action after Olgiati commented on social media that Breitschmid’s single-family residence in Riner, Virginia was a “distorted version of [his] design.” The dispute arose because Breitschmid had initially asked the architect to provide a sketch for an architectural idea they had discussed (the “Manahoac House”), but after receiving cost estimates, switched to a local design firm for design and execution. See “Judge Sides with Valerio Olgiati in Defamation Suit Brought by Markus Breitschmid over Virginia House; Case over Fees Is Ongoing,” in *The Architect’s Newspaper*, January 2024, <https://www.archpaper.com/2024/01/judge-sides-with-valerio-olgiati-in-defamation-suit-brought-by-markus-breitschmid-over-virginia-house-case-over-fees-is-ongoing/> (accessed January 31, 2024).

reality.⁷⁵ Yet they still cling to a postmodern notion of architecture as language or textual system. Perhaps we can compare the contradictory theory and practice of “non-referential” contemporaneity—caught in paradoxical relationships with historical references—to the emergence of the “post-digital” over the last decade. The so-called post-digital image replaced the computer-generated imagery (CGI) of the 1990s and 2000s, which aimed for photo-realistic renderings, with a more imaginative, artificial, and estranged form of representation. Yet, despite its name, the post-digital uses digital tools to mimic the complex pictorial traditions of hand-made architectural drawings and collages from the 1970s and 80s in a form of neo-postmodernism, or postmodern revival. References still abound.

75 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1981); English translation: *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills,” in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 52–68.

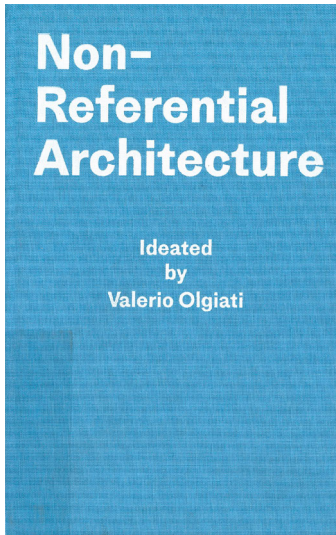


Fig. 68.
Valerio Olgiati and Markus Breitschmid,
Non-Referential Architecture, 3rd ed.
(Zurich: Park Books, 2021), cover.

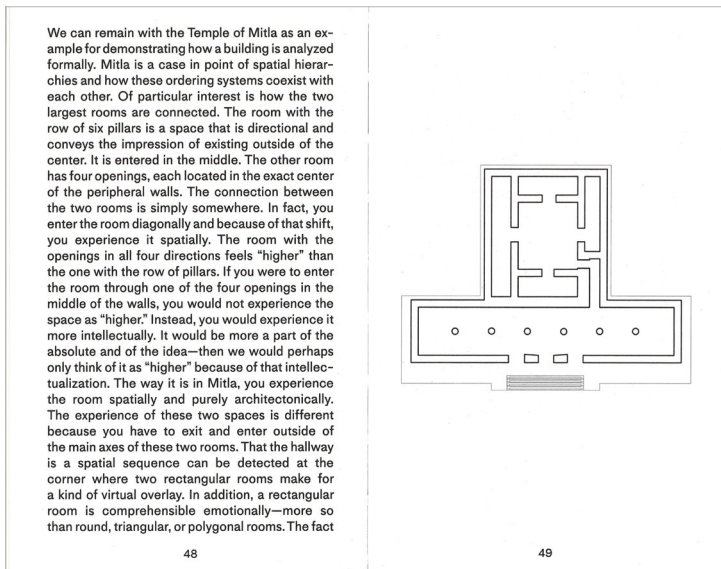


Fig. 69.
Double spread from Olgiati and Breitschmid, Non-Referential Architecture, 48–49,
showing the only image in the entire book: a plan of the Zapotec temple in Mitla,
Mexico.



Fig. 70.
Valerio Olgiati, Villa Além, Alentejo, Portugal, 2012–14, courtyard. Courtesy of Archive Olgiati.



Fig. 71.
Valerio Olgiati, Villa Além, Alentejo, Portugal, 2012–14, plan. Courtesy of Archive Olgiati.



Fig. 72.
Valerio Olgiati, Villa Além, Alentejo, Portugal, 2012–14, section. Courtesy of Archive Olgiati.

