

Eva Zeisel



# *On Design*

THE MAGIC LANGUAGE OF THINGS



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To Jean Richards and Brent C. Brolin  
with deep gratitude for their help with this book





Fig. 2: Rose.

## To See: Affinitive Seeing

**Before we can make things that are pleasant to see, we must find pleasure**

in seeing the things that are offered to our sight. We take note of the flamboyant, extraordinary sights, but we must also seek out the innumerable irrelevant shapes and lines on which our glance can alight and invest them with meaning, as patterns or forms we can enjoy. We must learn to see . . . and to enjoy.

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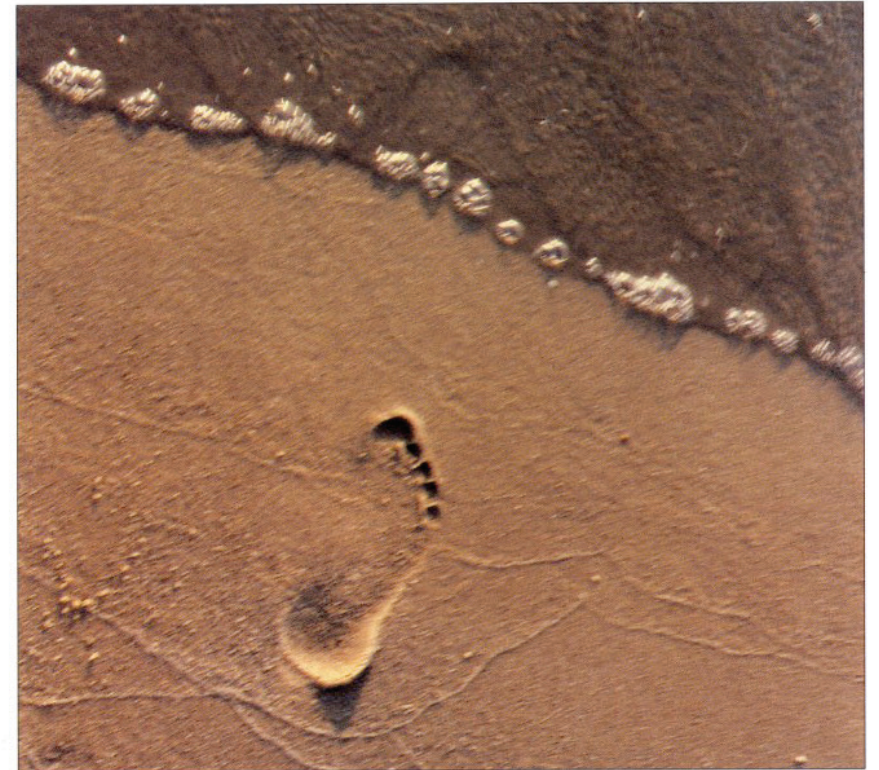


Fig. 3: Footprint.

As we see, we project our style preferences—our moods—and those preferences become a filter; through which we select those things that correspond to the lines and shapes of our preferred style—whatever it happens to be at any given time. In one mood, or stylistic period, we may see cabbages that are comparable to an Art Nouveau hair comb, while in another—when we are in the mood for geometric designs—we delight in a nature composed of technical forms.



Fig. 8. Cross-section of a cabbage.



Fig. 9: Art Nouveau hair comb.

## Line

### Walter Crane, the nineteenth century graphic artist and writer who was

director of the Royal College of Art in London, wrote the most beautiful words about the meaning of line. "The first necessity of a design," he says, "is definition." Therefore,

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Line is all important, line determinative, line emphatic, line delicate, line expressive, line controlling and uniting. In all degrees of intensity the designer possesses a means of considerable force and sympathetic power. . .

The association of restfulness with horizontal lines . . . the suggestion of fixity and solidity by the use of horizontal with verticals, the stern and logical character given to a design in which angular forms are used, the expression of movement by the wave of the meandering line. The line actually described by human action, the lines of energy and resistance by the sharp irregular zigzag, the lines of grace and rhythmic speediness, by gently flowing and recurring curves. The lines of vigor, of structural force, of life itself, in the radiating group, or the upward spiral of aspiration.

Line is, indeed, a language, a more sensitive and vigorous speech of many dialects, which can adapt itself to all purposes.

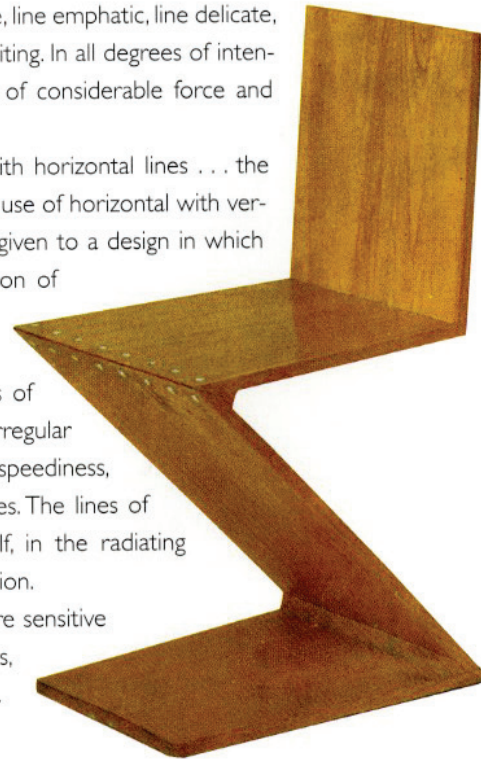


Fig. 39: Zig-zag chair.  
Gerrit Rietveld (1934).

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## Shading and Shadows

### Shading informs us of three-dimensionality. We explain the shape by means

of gradual, wide, shaded areas, or darker narrower areas of shading. Shading can make parts of an object disappear, or things might look thinner than you thought they would when you designed them in two dimensions.

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Fig. 59: Paper cut-outs and plaster models.

Shading might be manipulated to elevate things from their base, or make them cling to the ground.



Fig. 60: Plaster model of teapot handle, Eva Zeisel.

Fig. 61: Footed and un-footed bowls, Eva Zeisel.



Fig. 62: Divided dish.

Only the gradation of the soft shading informs us of the hills and valleys of the divided dish. Without directional lighting from one side, its subtle modeling would be invisible.

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When light and dark surfaces meet sharply they form a line that establishes definition and clarification. This line might become the most prominent characteristic of the work.

Shading informs us of the indentation. The hardness of the small, round bottle is illustrated by the sharp rim of the indentation at the opening. A soft, gradual shadow here would make it look as if it were made of soft stuff.

## Surfaces: Textures & Reflections

**The surface of a thing can be scratchy or smooth to the touch. It can invite the**

hand to stroke it or wrap around it. It is also important to be able to imagine how a surface would feel when the object is beyond our reach. Though we may see a glass building from afar, we still "touch" it with our eyes, sensing its cool flatness.

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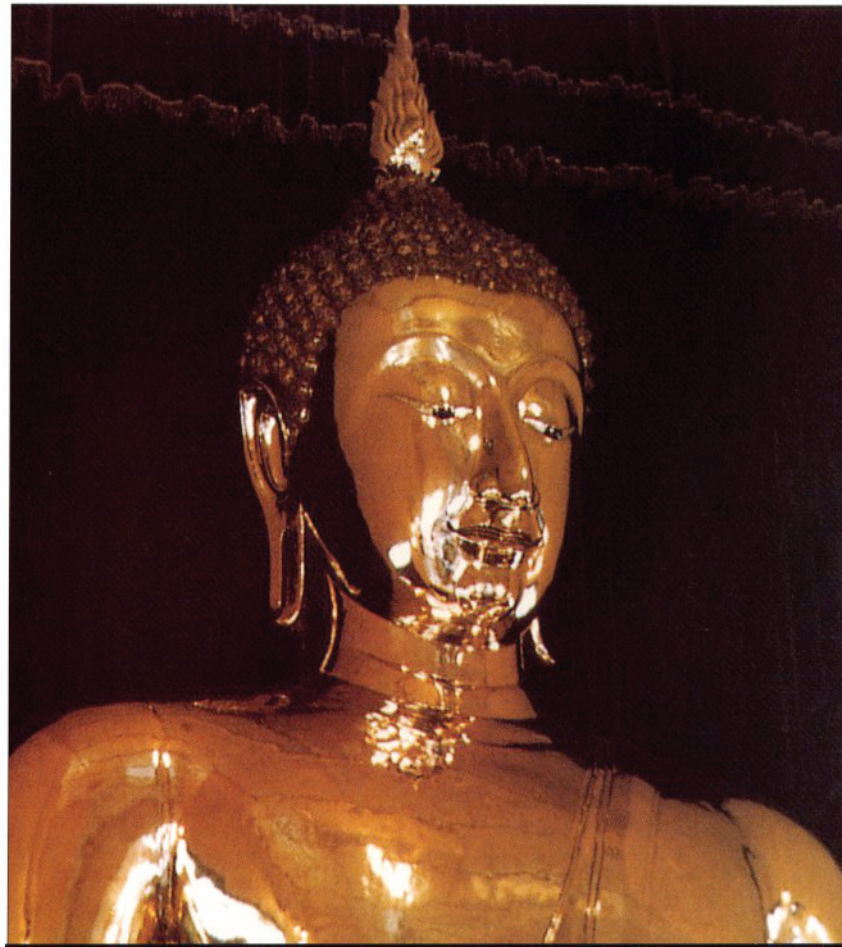


Fig. 72: Smooth, gilded Buddha.

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Fig. 73: Spiky pitcher.

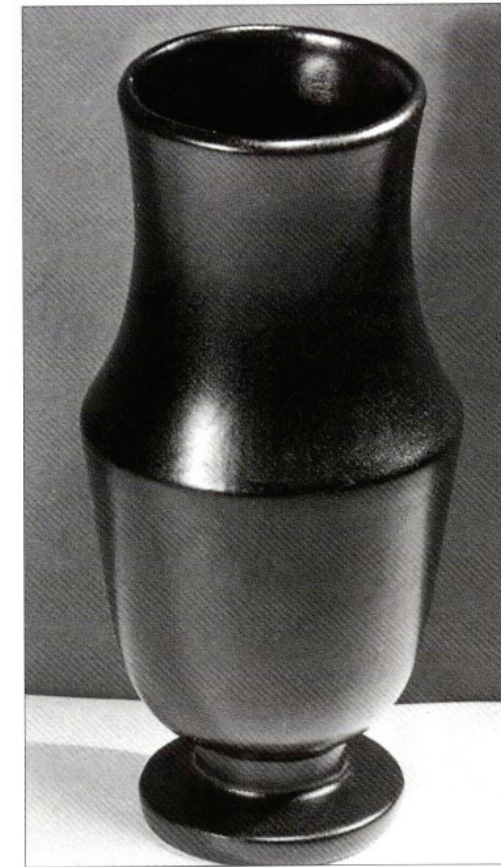


Fig. 74: Vase with smooth surface.

When we press on a thing, it might give way to pressure with a feeling of elasticity or softness. It might be warm or cold, depending on the material: a fork made of plastic compared to one made of silver. A plastic champagne flute and a metal chair convey different sensations than a crystal glass or wooden chair.

Texture is not the only attribute that can destroy the agreeable sensation of touching a rounded form. So might decoration, which seems to dress the shape in a garment.

## Scale

### **Scale is one of the most important aesthetic elements, particularly where it**

reaches its extremes. The pyramids have hardly any other aesthetic quality to hold us but our fascination with their size. Stepping into the nave of the Chartres Cathedral we feel its awe-inspiring height.

The miniature accoutrements of a doll house rivet our attention to their details. The human size becomes the measure of the grandeur or cuteness of the things around us. The monumental ornament shown here seems to me to be the result of an aesthetic misunderstanding. What might have been a casual, even delicate ribbon when seen at the size that it was most probably originally modeled, becomes instead a disturbingly crude object when enlarged to monumental size.

Fig. 85. Outdoor sculpture,  
New York City. Curb Clement  
Meadmore, 1968.



The same object, a sphere in this case, evokes different responses at different scales.

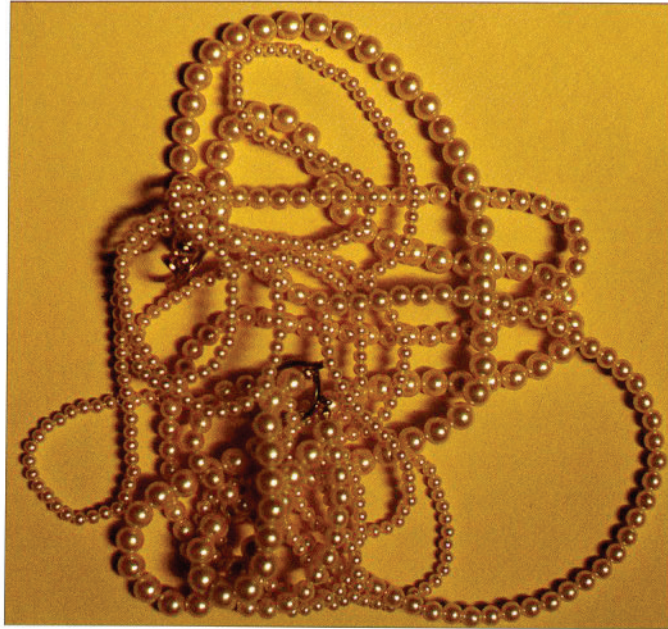


Fig. 86: Small spheres (necklace).

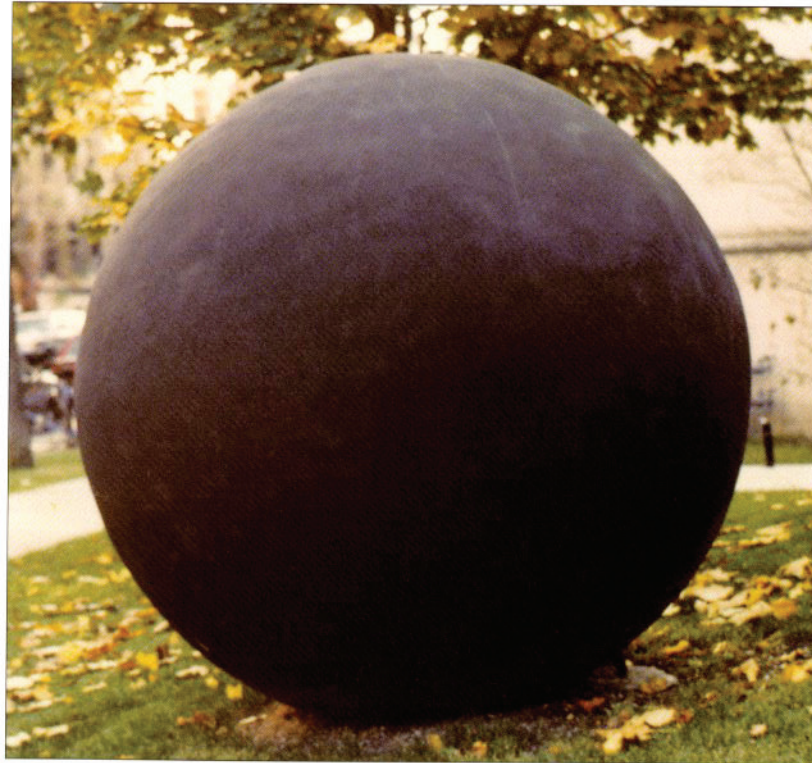


Fig. 87: "Black Sphere," by Gene Highstein, 1976. University of Chicago campus.

Scale can be deceptive. Consider these two teapots. Is the large one huge and the small one normal size? Or is the smaller one a miniature?



Fig. 88: Large and tiny teapots.

## Crisp or Soft

**Whether it is a building wing or a teapot handle, when one part is joined**

to another the designer faces a delicate problem. Designers must decide how to join the different parts of a design—by having them seem to grow from one to another, for example, or by creating a crisp demarcation line. The former was the Art Nouveau fashion, the latter, that of the Modern Movement.

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Figure 93: Lomonosov cup, held by author, 2003.

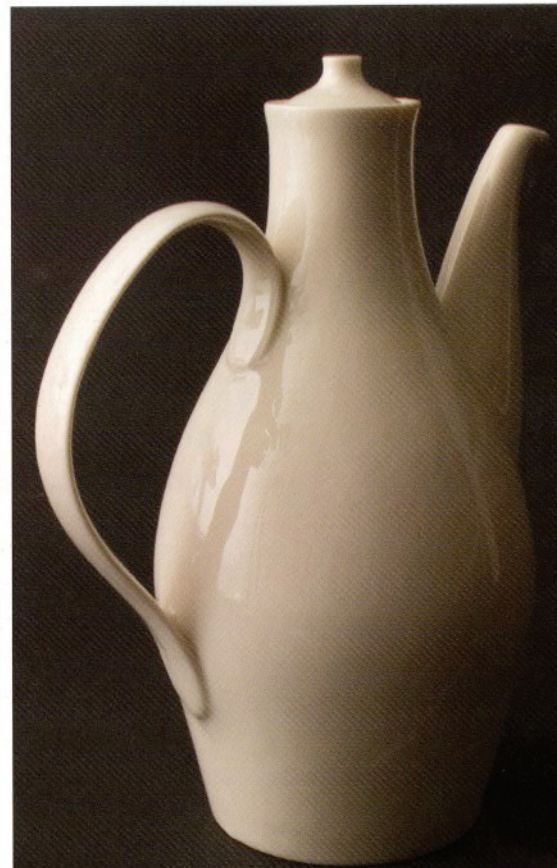


Fig. 94: "Museum" coffee pot with attached handle, Castleton China, Eva Zeisel, 1942–45.

## Compact to Lacy

**A compact shape expresses solidity. It is comforting by its steadfast presence.**

Shapes like these look larger than they really are. If you want to give the customer the feeling he is drinking more coffee than you actually served him, you will use this sort of shape for the container. It's not a chic shape, but a motherly one, sedate and ample, reliable, here to stay.

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Fig. 99: Restaurant cup, compact form.

However, you might like to make a graceful, light shape, one which does not seem to squat on the ground, one which looks lighter than its actual weight, which seems to poke into the sky, even to fly away, weightlessly. You might play with the object's edge.

Break up the rim and let it meet its sky with a ragged contour. Or a lacy contour. Frail-looking, fine lacy ornaments break up the compact bulk of the buildings.



Fig. 100: Adobe building with compact form.

Fig. 101: Wall with broken contours, Iranian village.

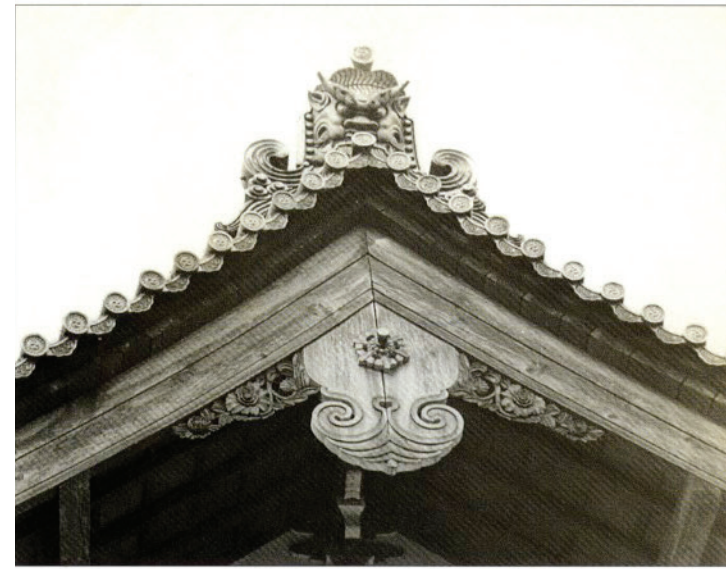
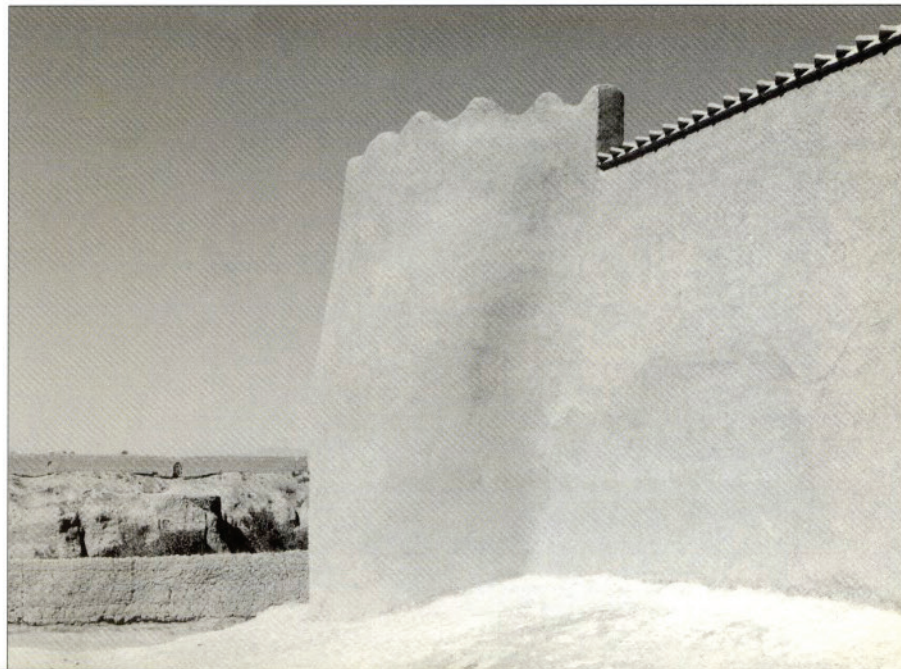


Fig. 102: Gable of Japanese tiled roof.

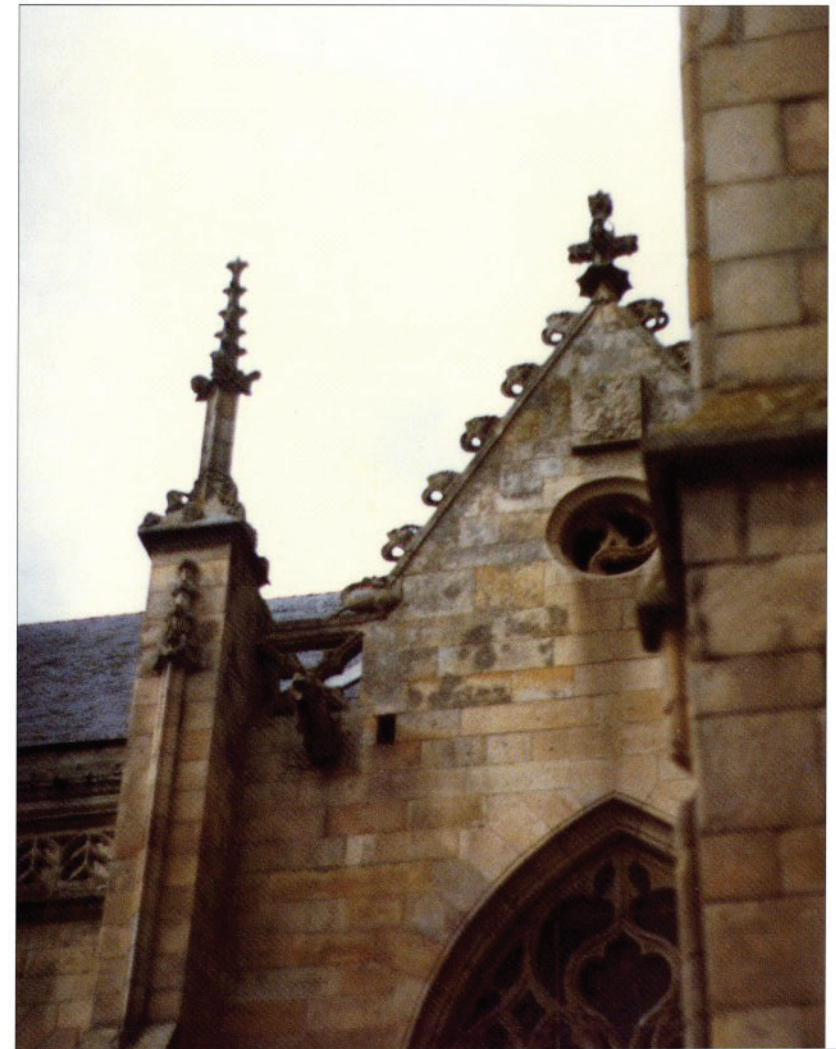
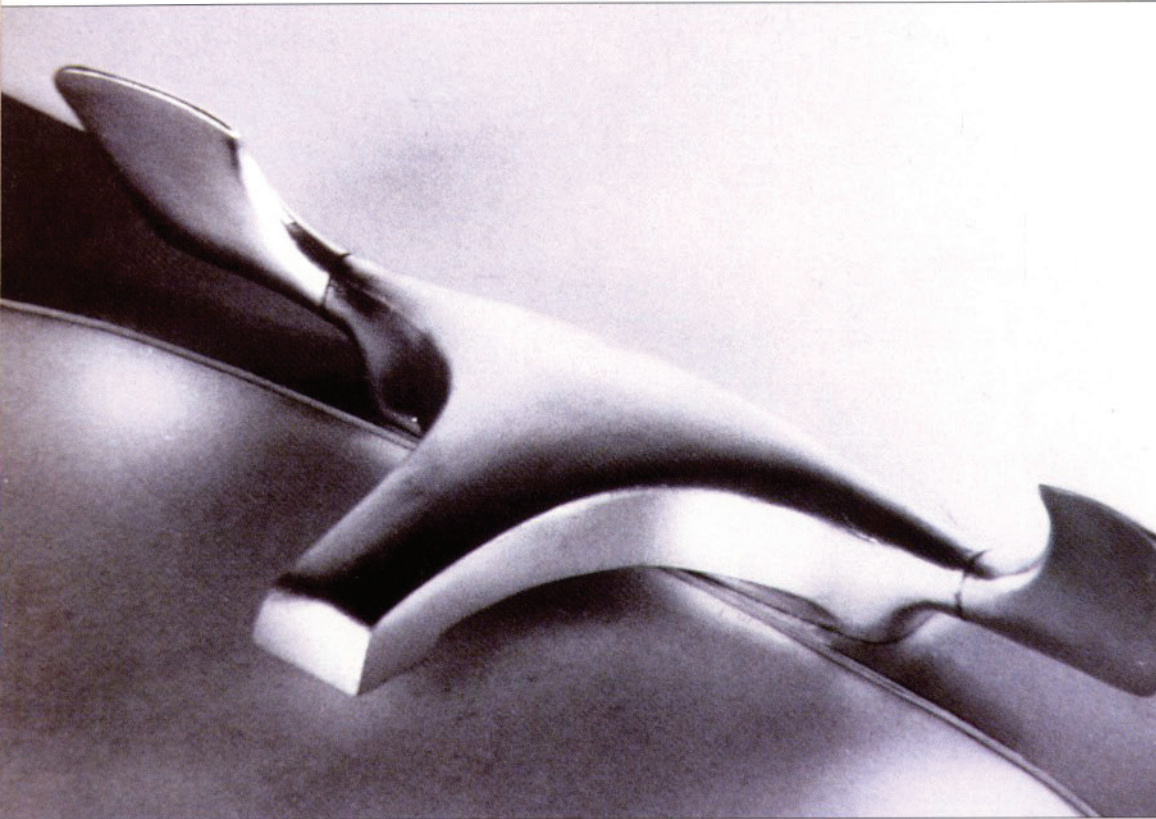


Fig. 103: Folk Gothic, Brittany.

Still playing with the contour, you might help your shape's ascent to the sky by giving it wings to fly. Still, it is only the contour of the solid shape that you manipulate.

Fig. 108: Bathtub faucet with "wing" handles, student work.



However, you might make the shape seem lighter, reducing its earthbound solidity, by lifting it up from the ground like many of the buildings by the architect Le Corbusier.

Fig. 109: City University, Paris. Le Corbusier.



Or even by poking holes into it.

Fig. 110: Palladio's Basilica,  
Vicenza, Italy.



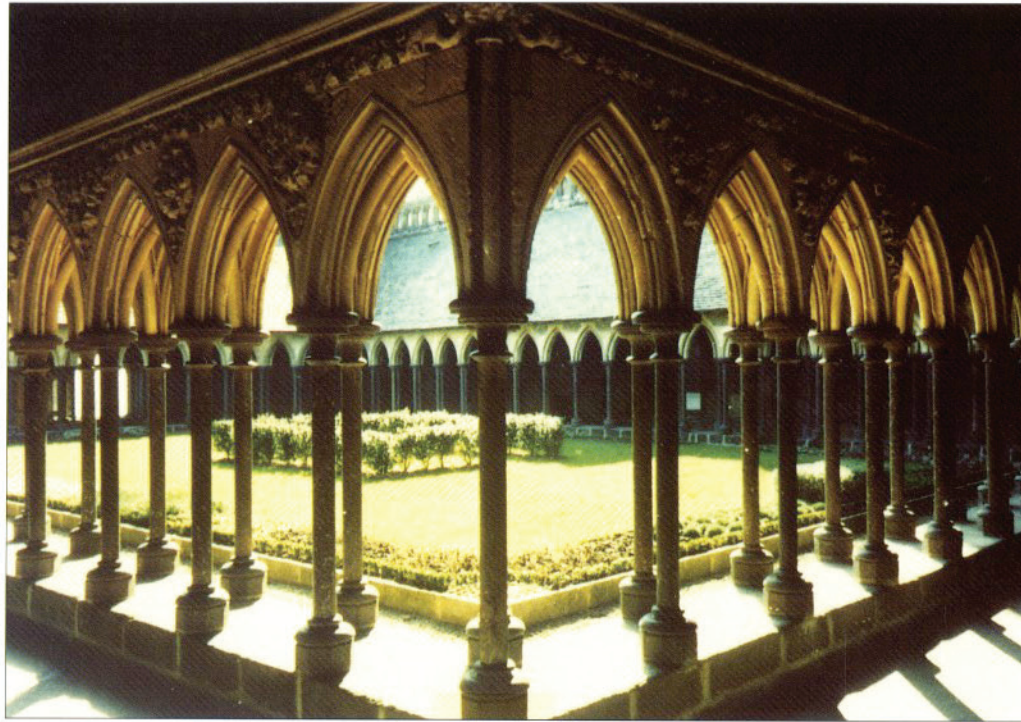


Fig. 111: Medieval cloister.

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Intruding into the bulk of buildings make them look lighter than if they were solid walls.

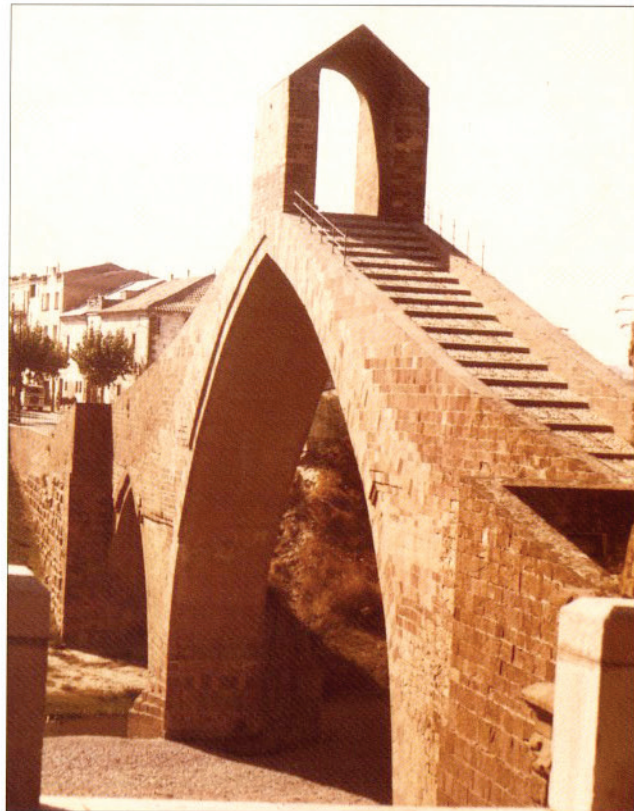


Fig. 112: Stone pedestrian bridge, France.

Facing page, Fig. 113: Roman aqueduct, France.



## Contours: Complete and Incomplete Forms

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**When shapes culminate in lively upper contours, like parts of the whole,** objects feel like growing things—seashells, pods or flowers. Imagine these objects with their tops cut off; they would no longer have as intimate a relationship to natural forms.



Fig. 120: "Bird" serving dish.  
Western Stoneware, Eva Zeisel, 1953.

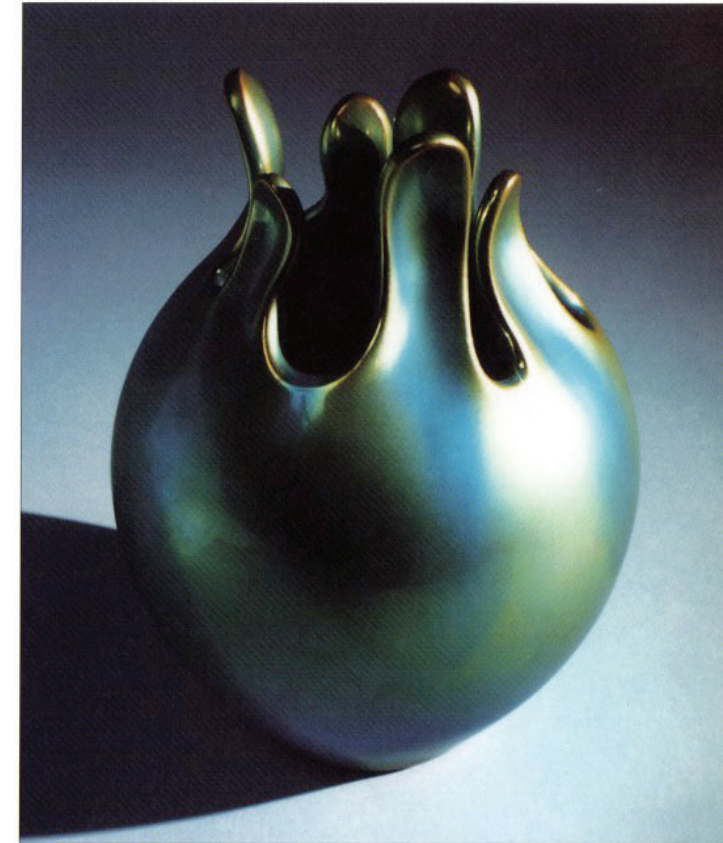


Fig. 121: Etruscan vase.



Fig. 122: Pottery bowls with wavy edges, Eva Zeisel, Budapest, 1926.

Fig. 123: Zsolnay vase,  
Eva Zeisel, 1983.



When buildings are conceived and created as complete sculptures or compositions, we know where they begin and where they end.



Fig. 124: Chrysler Building with top.



Fig. 125: Chrysler Building without top.

Buildings or inkwells or vases or pitchers which look as though they were cut off haphazardly seem incomplete, unfinished, unsatisfactory.

When vessels are rounded at the bottom, and not cut off, they too look complete, like fruits plucked from a tree. Sometimes the contents of a vessel complete its form.

Fig. 126: Apple with Riverside China sugar bowl, Eva Zeisel, 1946-47.



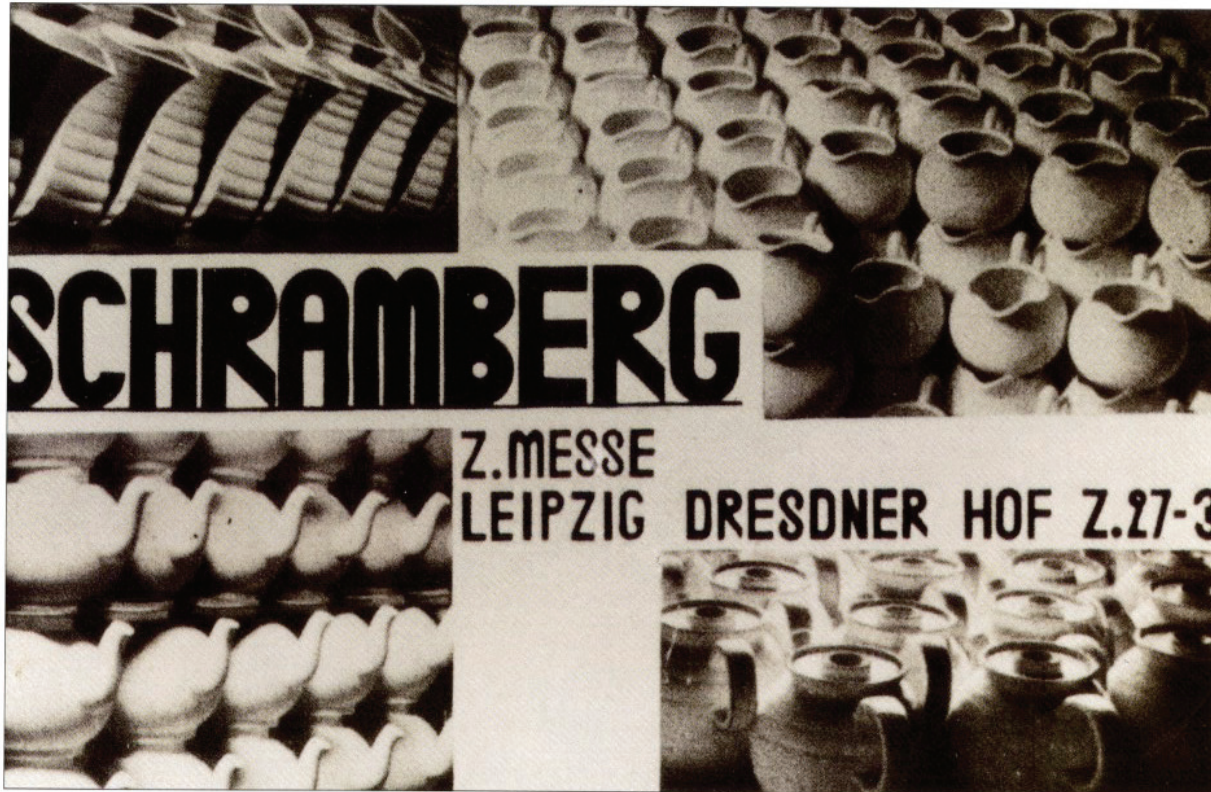
## Influences

### We are, of course, fascinated by things we see, and I can trace several such

fascinations as they are reflected in the work of designers. When we designers started to work in factories, we were fascinated to see huge quantities of mass-produced goods that, in the outside world, usually appeared singly or in small groups. Photographs of these ranks and files of the same form frequently appeared in the press, and always created a sense of rhythm from their repetition.

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Fig. 183: Layout of work for *Die Schaulade*, Eva Zeisel, 1930.



When Modernist ornamentation appears, it too is generally based on this kind of repetition.

Fig. 185: Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago; Walter Netsch, architect.

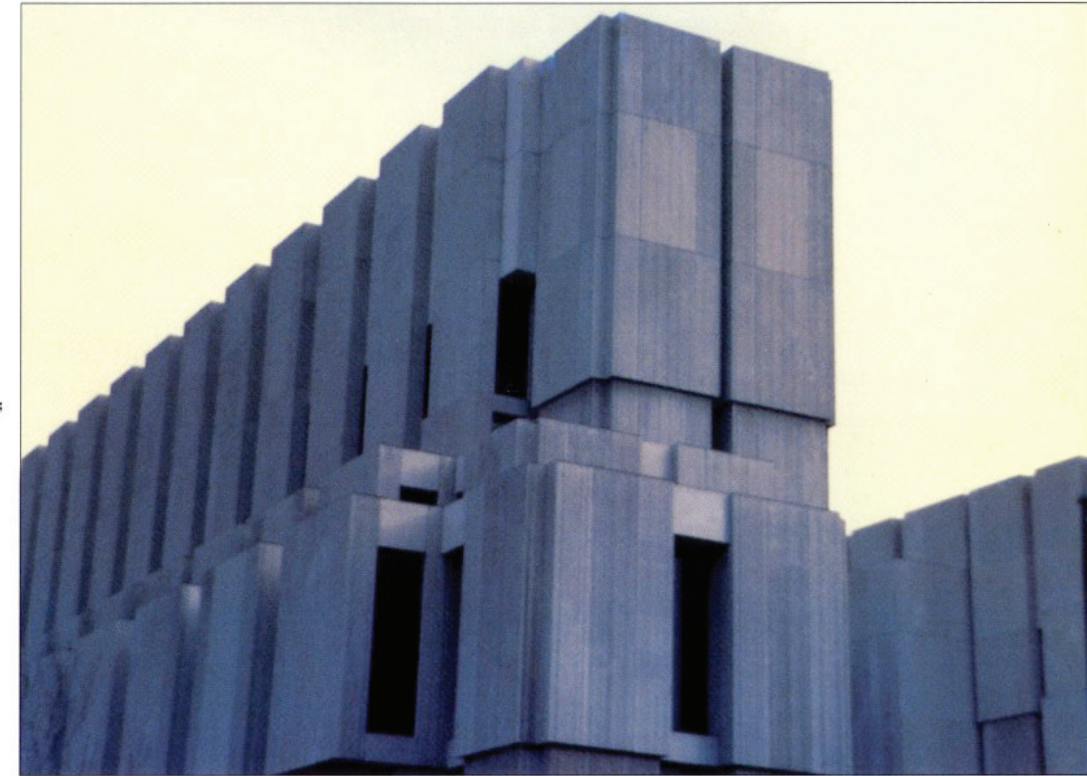


Fig. 186: Logo for The Tea Center, Eva Zeisel, 1954.







The most general influence can be called the spirit of the time. Queen Victoria, who gave her name to a style, seems in this picture to embody that style.

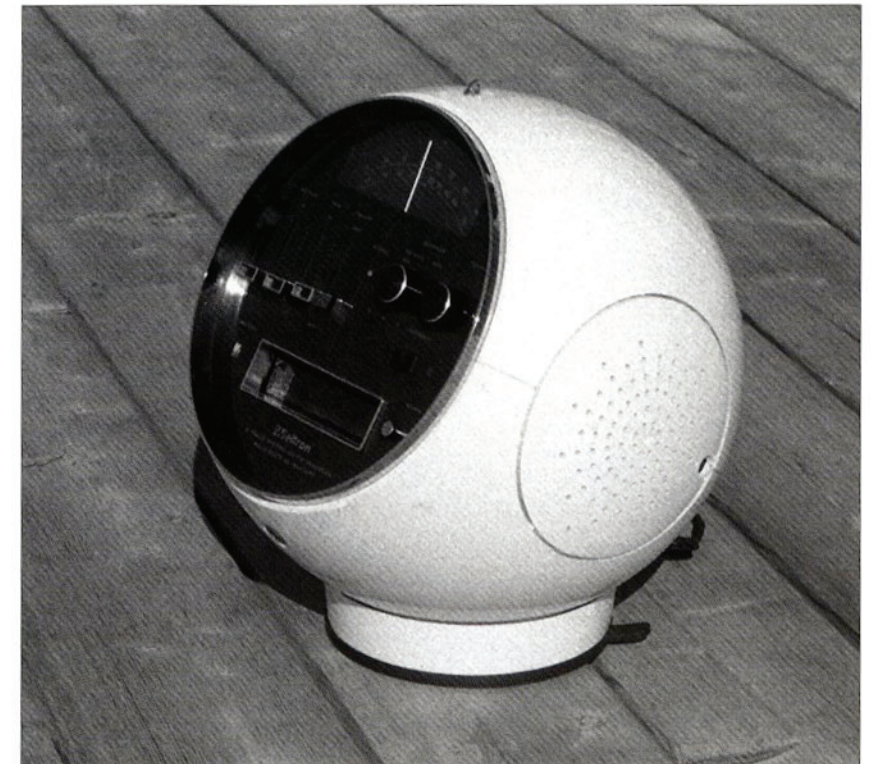
Fig. 194: Queen Victoria.

Fig. 195: Overstuffed, Victorian chair.



Fig. 196: Astronaut in space helmet.

Fig. 197: Space helmet radio from the '70s.



## Visible Structure

### **The spidery web of steel construction, which is still fashionably chic in the**

design, for instance, of public buildings.

Construction forms, both useful and beautiful, have appeared since much earlier times, but they certainly were ubiquitous by the time the new iron monuments, such as the miraculous bridges, intruded upon the vision of the aesthetically sensitive. Their symbolic meaning became acute when industrialization became the pre-occupation of the young Soviet Union. The shapes of iron girders were then accepted into the new art movement of Constructivism and simultaneously appeared in the writings of all the greats of the new architecture.

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Fig. 213: Racetrack grandstand, France.

Eventually structure became one of the formal elements accepted in the form language of the modern movement.

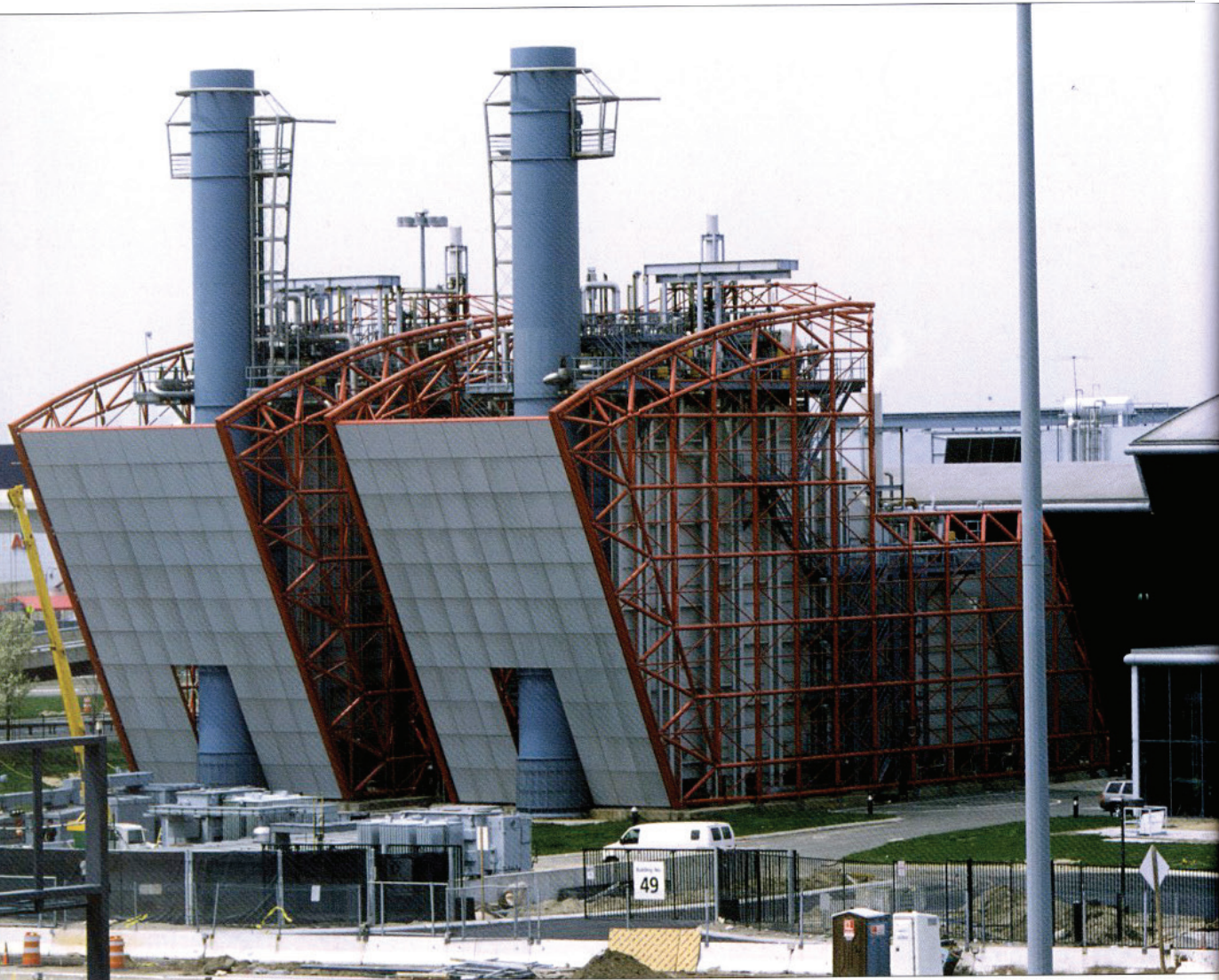


Fig. 214: New York Times printing plant, Polshek Partnership, architects.

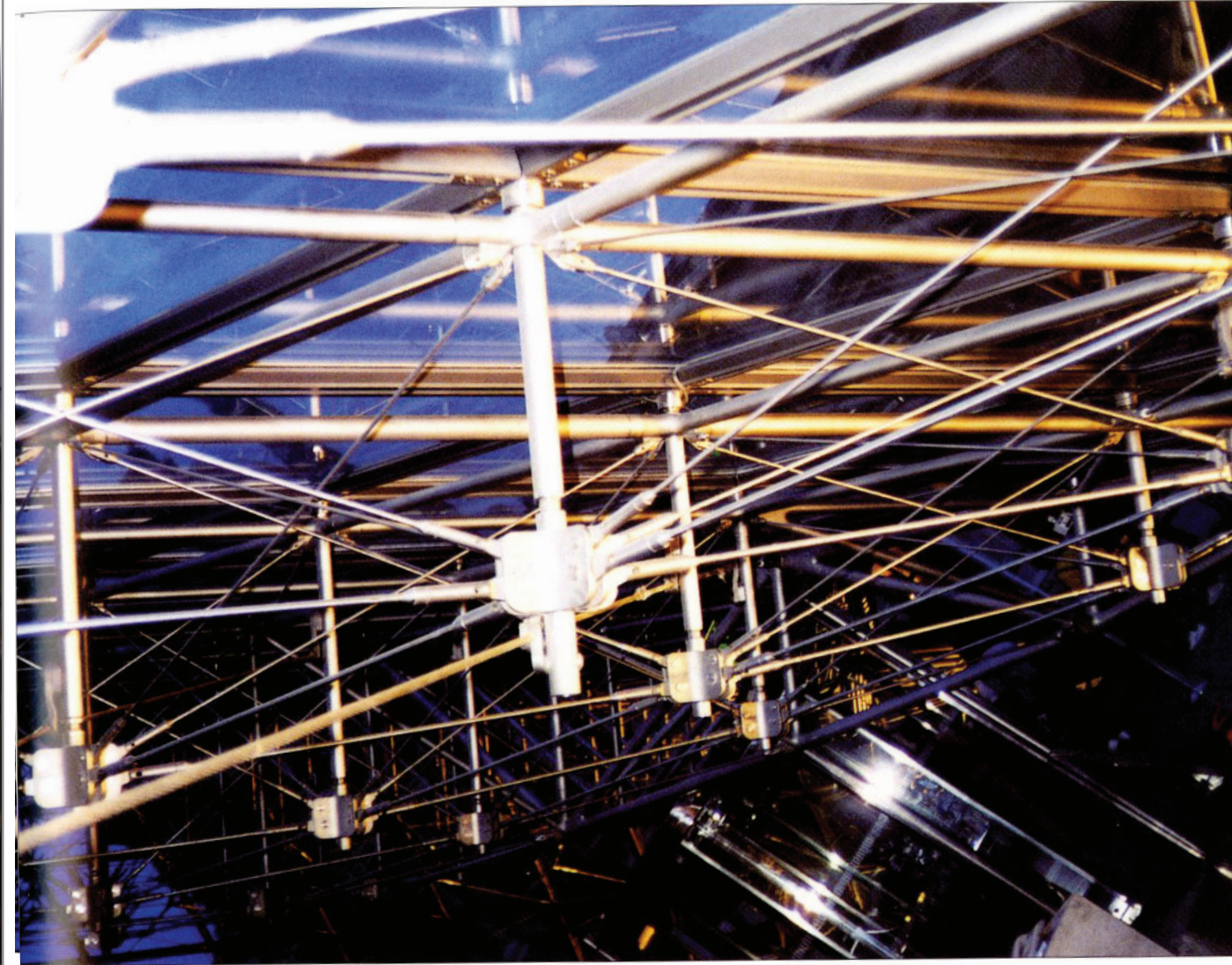


Fig. 215: Interior of Louvre pyramid entrance, Paris, France, I.M. Pei, Architect.

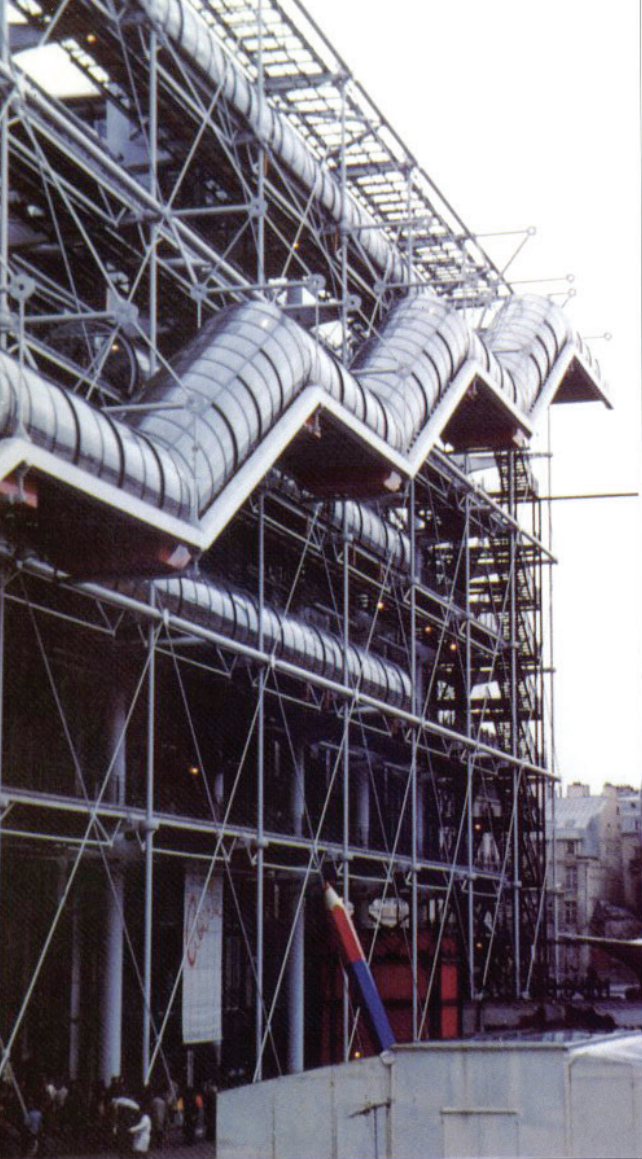


Fig. 216: Pompidou Center,  
Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano,  
architects, Paris, France.

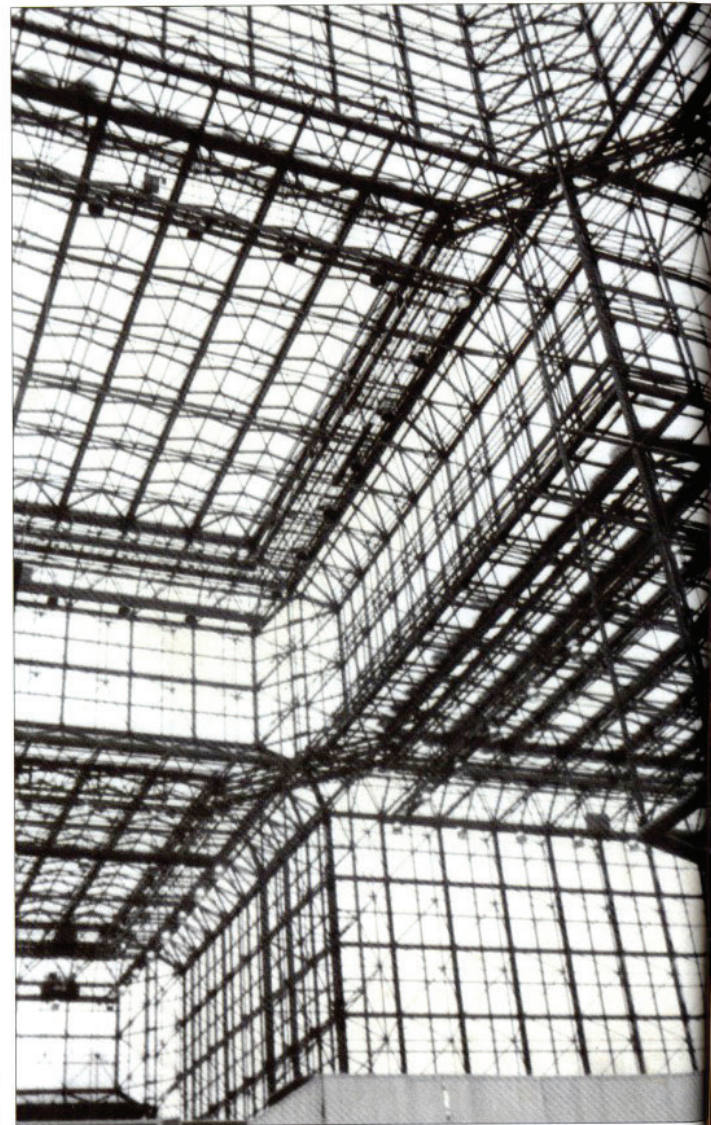
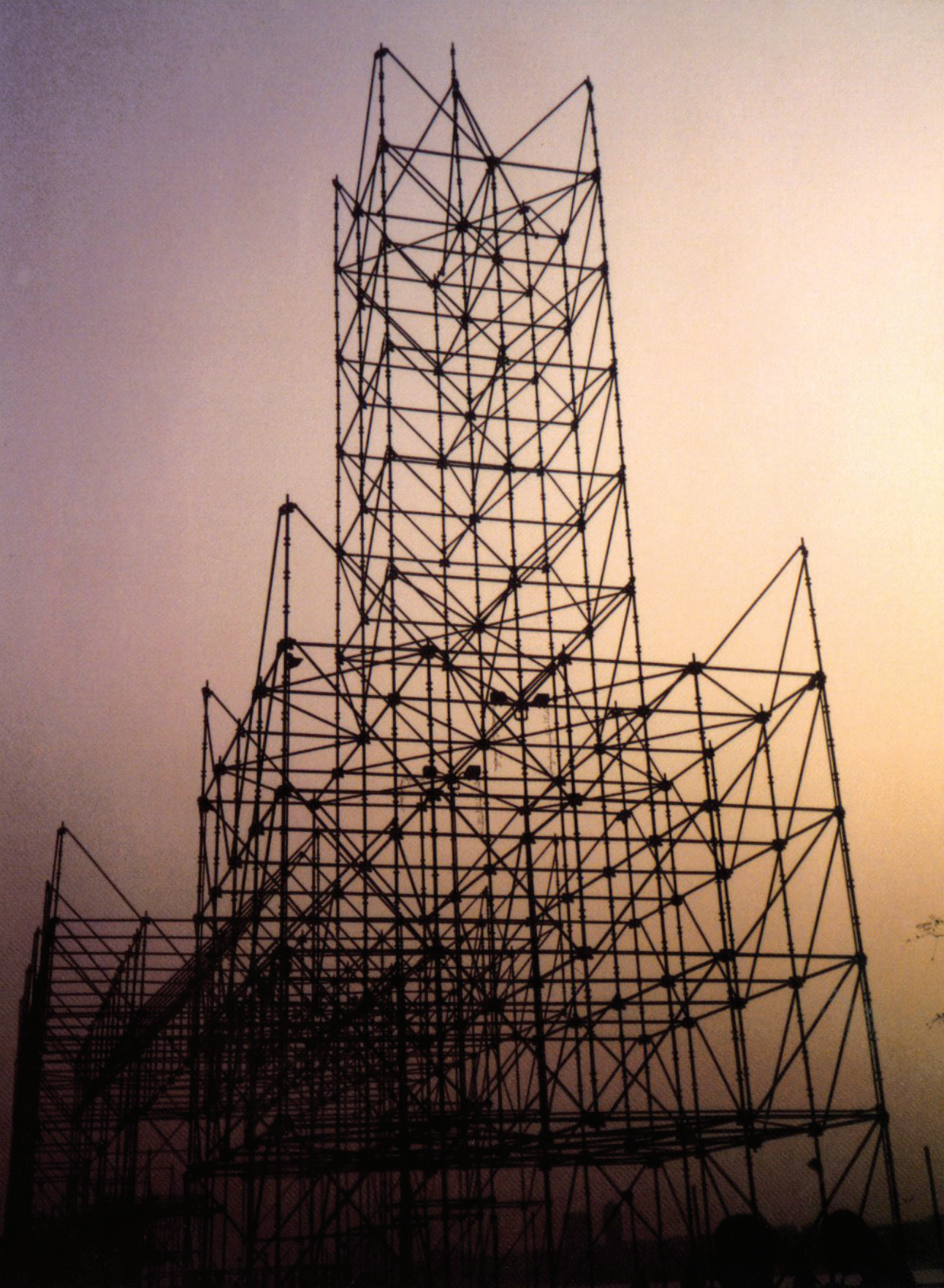


Fig. 217: Jacob K. Javits Convention  
Center, New York City, I. M. Pei.

Fig. 218: Temporary park  
structure, New York City,  
125th Street at the  
Hudson River.



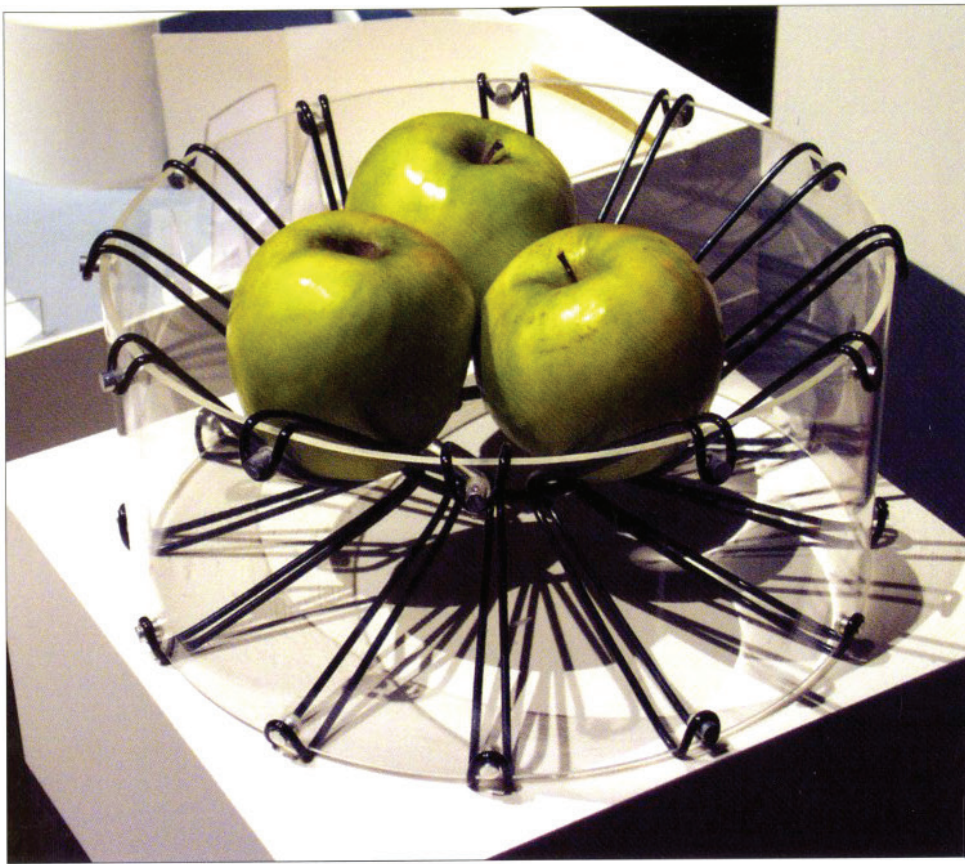


Fig. 219: Fruit basket.  
Yuni Jie, Pratt Institute, 2001.

Fig. 220: "Architectural  
Morphosis" necklace.  
Designer: Gretchen  
Raber, 1996.

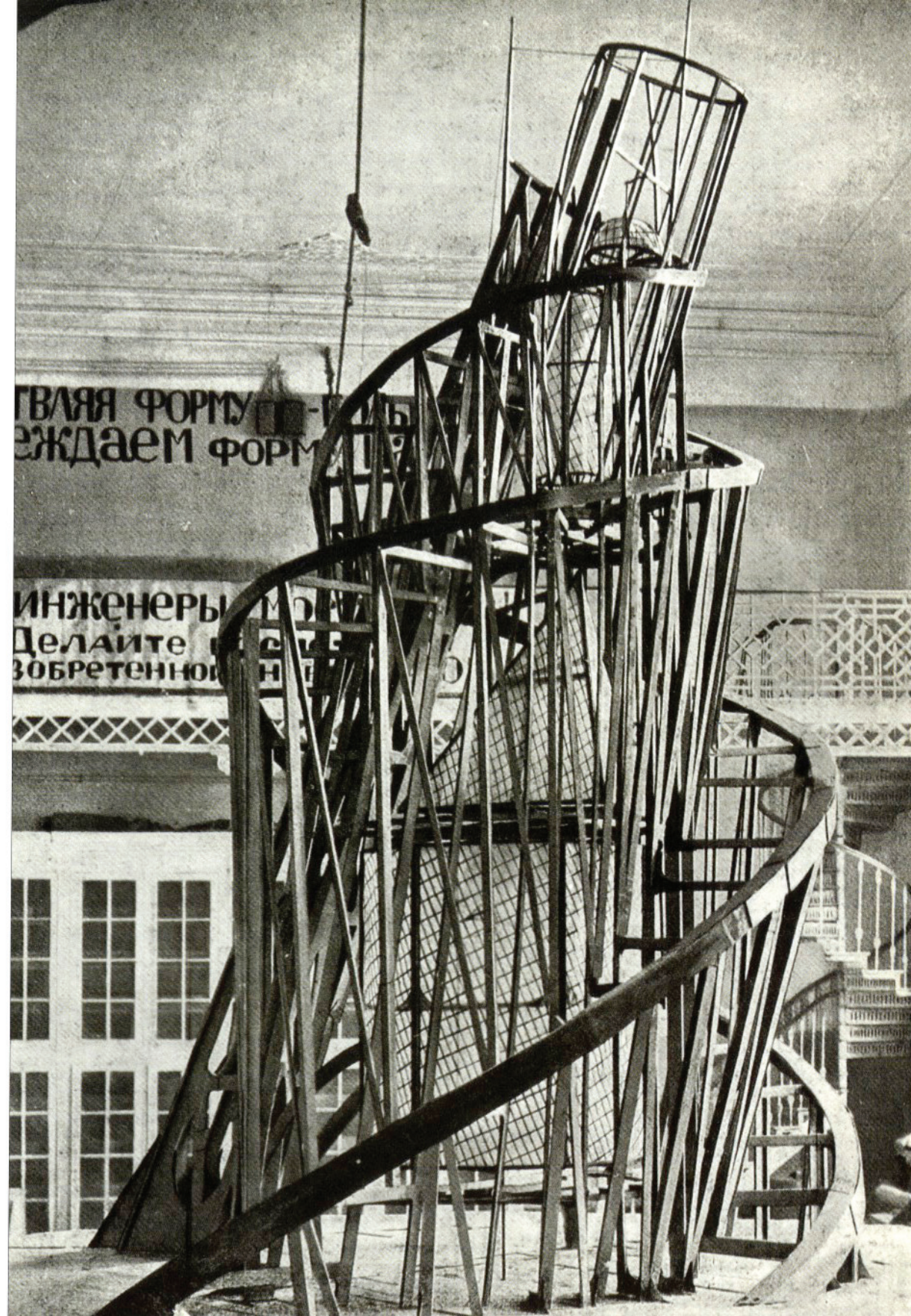
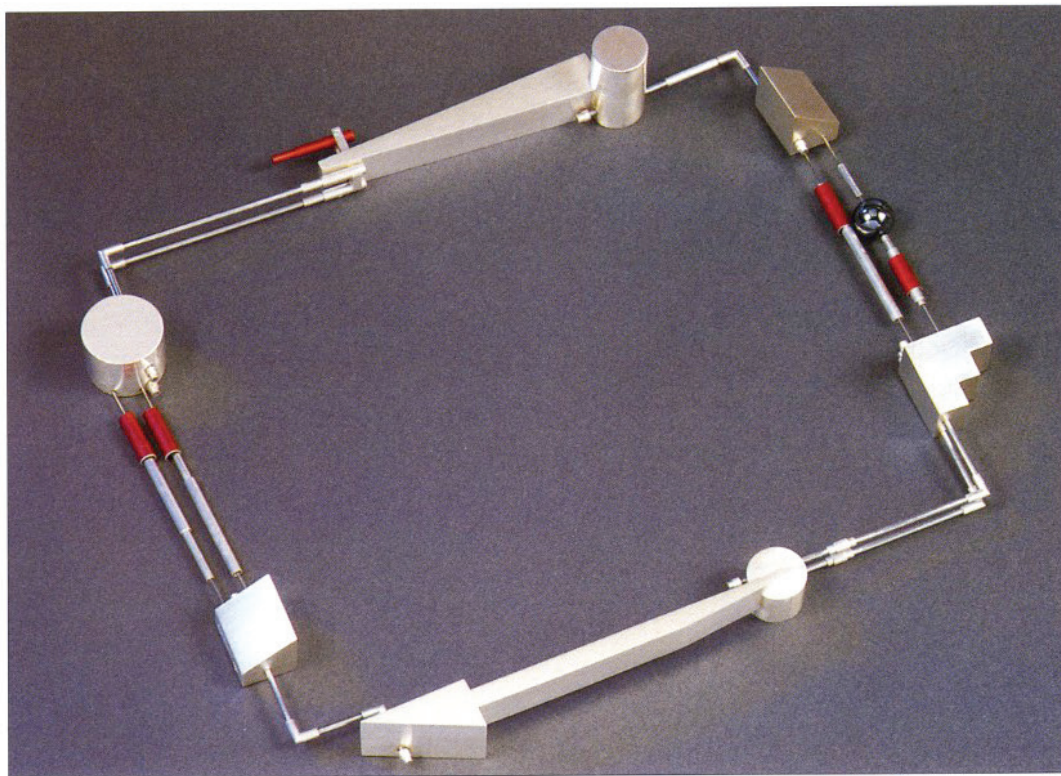


Fig. 221:  
Vladimir  
Tatlin, Tower  
for the 3rd  
International,  
1919-1920.

## Geometric Forms & Patterns

### **The artistic demonstration of the geometry of solid shapes in rectangular**

arrangement appeared at the end of the nineteenth century. This style of geometry began in the design of architectural ornament and expensive furniture. It was later bestowed with social meaning by the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) and became more generally accepted in all aspects of the modern movement. This basic geometry became the aesthetic ideal and the symbol of eternal values.

Rather early in the twentieth century, these so-called basic shapes were already being used in both high and low-brow art and had been endowed with moral principles in the rarified sphere of style. The Bauhaus, the Suprematists and other "ists" created geometric fantasies some of which are remarkably like our present-day cityscapes.



Fig. 229: Schramberg pieces, Eva Zeisel, 1929–30.

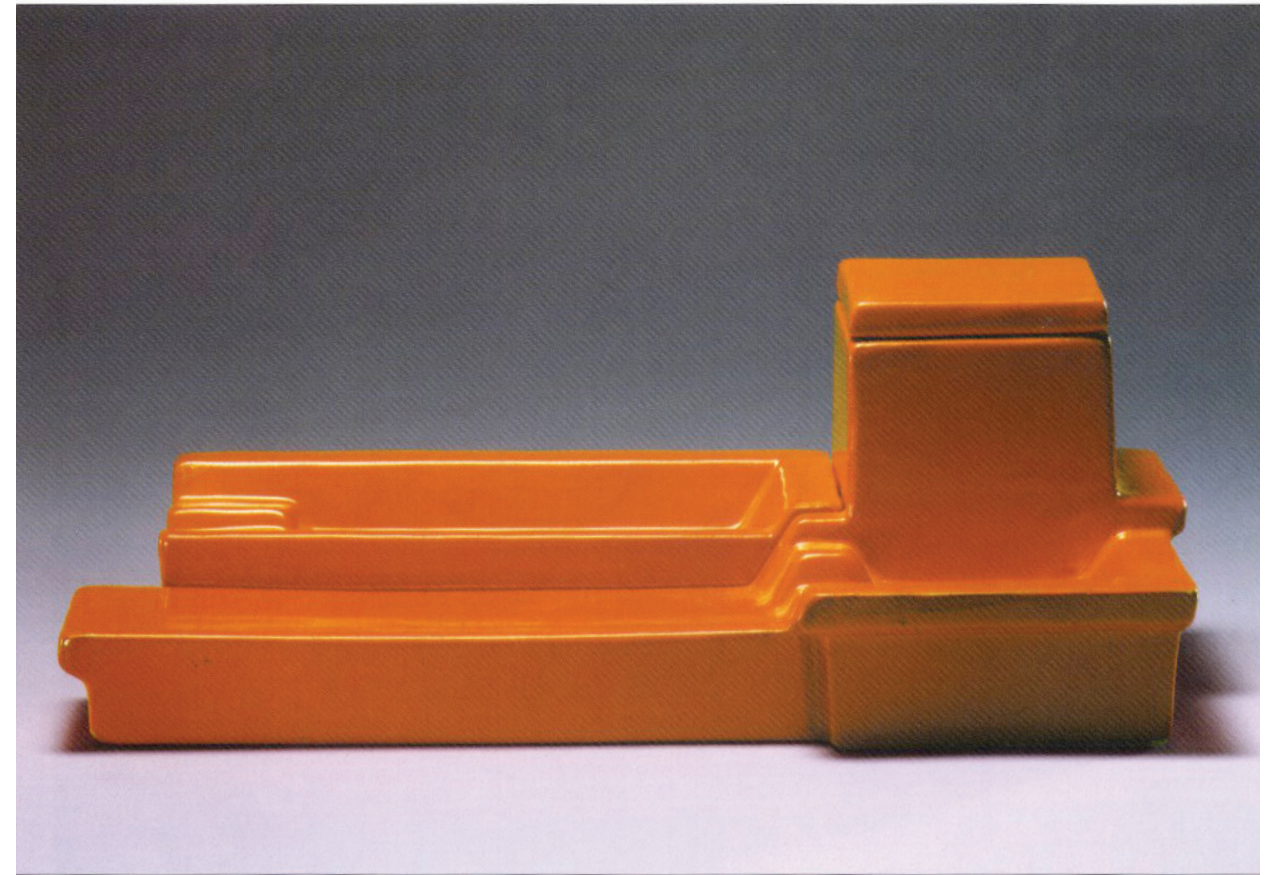


Fig. 230: Schramberg ink stand, Eva Zeisel, 1930.

## Curves: Stress & Compound

### The curve of the Thonet chair, which continues from a line of the circle into

one in the opposite direction is an example of the compound curve, also known as the "S" curve—was considered objectionable by Modernists, who called it gratuitous and extravagant.

The stress curve, the only curve accepted by modernists, bends the straight just a bit. It evokes the feeling of speed and elegance, in contrast to the soft, friendliness of the "S" curve. It might express tension or movement. It reminds us of the wing of a bird in flight, the forced bend of a bow. The word "stress" explains the feeling it evokes.

Fig. 238: Thonet chair.

Fig. 239: Kurve Chair  
for Neinkamper,  
by Karim Rashid, 2002.





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Fig. 241: Nesting bowls, designed by Gerald Gulotta.

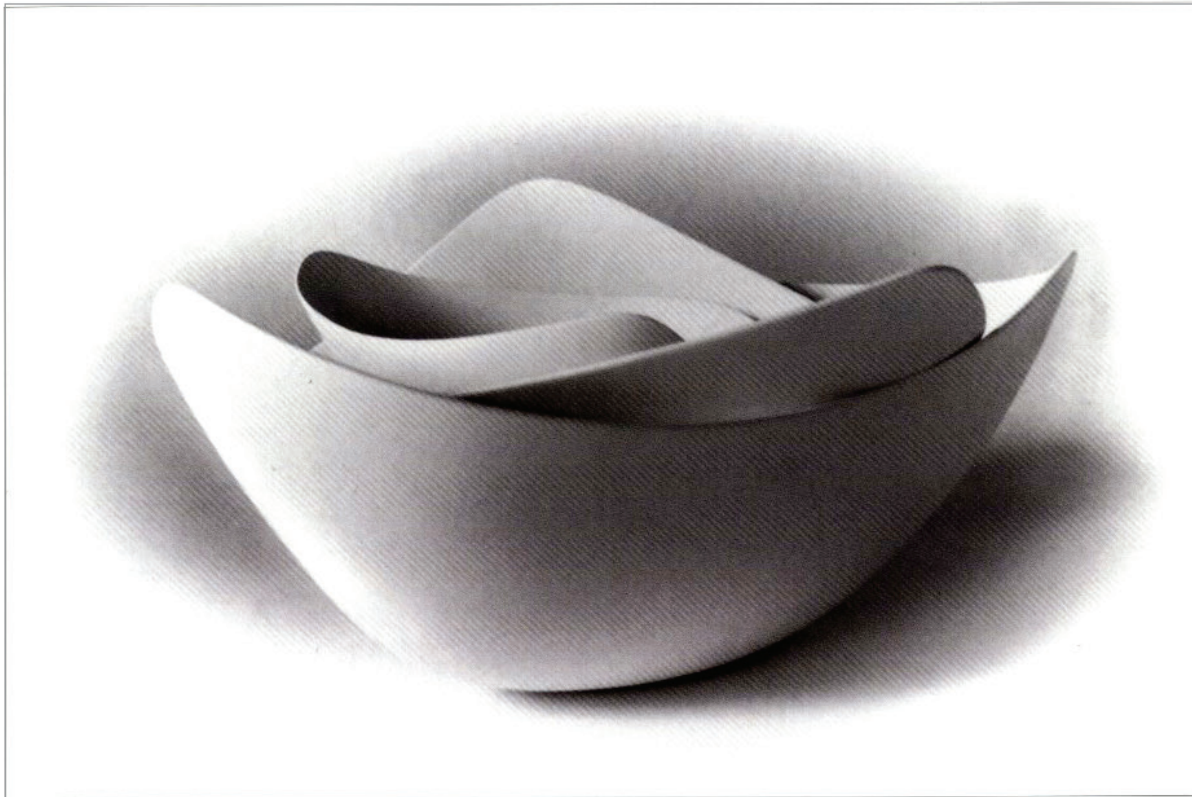


Fig. 242: TWA terminal, JFK airport,  
by Eero Saarinen.

Fig. 243 Barcelona Chair,  
Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1927.

