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The Mesa

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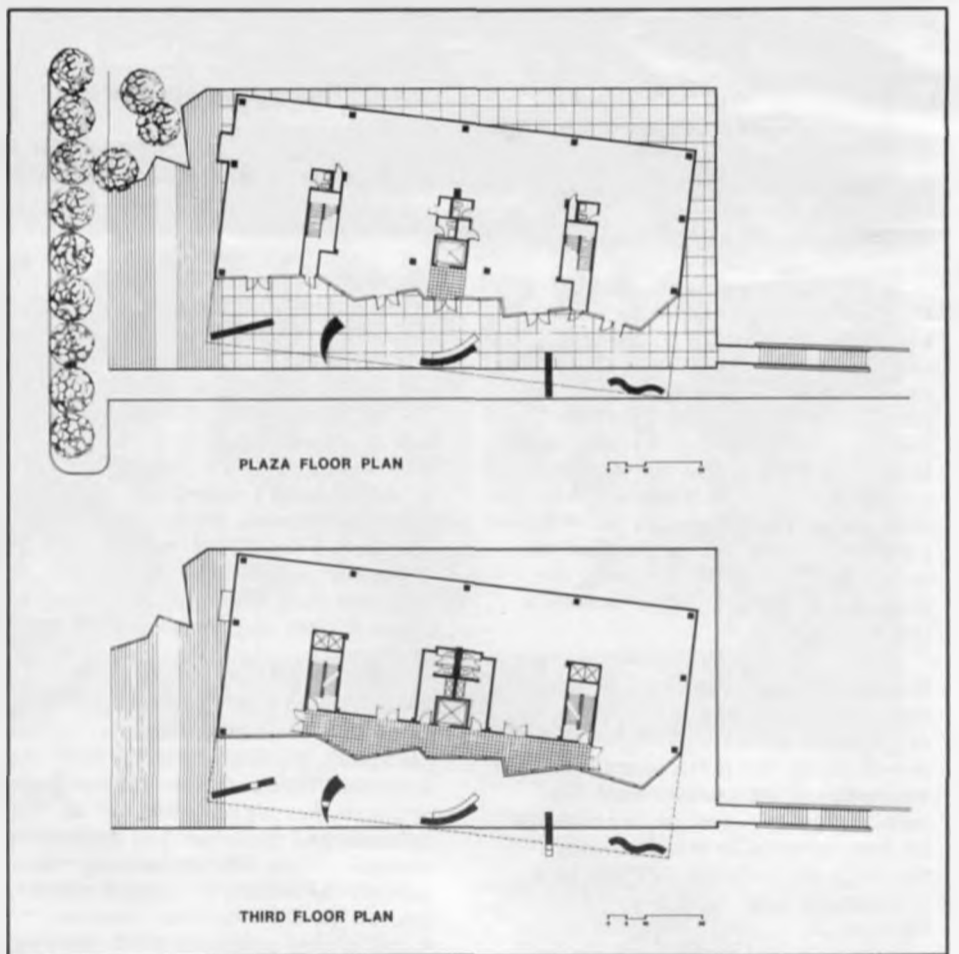
*The Mesa, 1985, Arquitectonica, architects
(Photo by Paul Hester)*



A certain irony is manifest in the Houston projects of Arquitectonica. This firm, founded in 1977 by five young architects with little practical experience, has gained an international reputation for a series of bold, high-rise buildings in Florida. That the firm would eventually do work in Houston, a city that takes pride in its own brashness, was inevitable. Ironically, the firm's Houston work consists not of tall buildings, but of small buildings, principally a series of townhouses and now *The Mesa*, a 30,039 square-foot office and retail building billed as a "Better Home and Living Center."

Though Arquitectonica's work is idiosyncratic, much has been written about the contextualism of their buildings. Contextualism is not missing from *The Mesa*. Driving west along Richmond Avenue from the direction of downtown, one hardly notices the building located on the corner of Richmond and Fountainview. Except for the random placement of windows in the east elevation, it could be any other four-story office building along the strip. In an area whose only architectural unity lies in its diversity, where fast-food establishments and low-rise office buildings dot the landscape, this bow to roadside vernacular is not inappropriate.

Driving in the opposite direction, however, the full visual pyrotechnics for which Arquitectonica is famous come into view. Although the building is vibrantly, tropically, polychromatic, it is in plan and massing a small, rather simple, almost conventional building. The basic, three-dimensional composition is almost classical, with a clear differentiation between base, shaft, and cornice. The ground floor is the base on which the top three floors sit in the guise of a separate building. This feeling is reinforced not only by the reduced square footage of floors two and three, but by twisting the upper floors out of alignment with the ground floor, as if a seismic jolt has knocked three-quarters of the building askew, crinkling the western glass curtain-wall in the process.



Top: *The Mesa*, plaza floor plan. Above: *The Mesa*, third floor plan

The Mesa is organized on a north-south axis with the longest and most prominent façade facing Fountainview to the west. Since the parking lot flanks this side, it is this elevation one confronts directly upon driving up to the building. The base is a low-key, beige-yellow stucco wall punctuated at regular intervals with large glass openings framed with fire-engine red window mullions. It's easy to imagine a series of small shops nestled behind this yellow wall, giving the feeling of a commercial arcade.

It is not the ground floor, however, that grabs the eye, but the large "pilotis," two-to-three stories in height, which structurally support the overhanging fourth floor. These are the dominant elements of the building, and the sight of them is arresting. They are a series of bent planes, randomly interspersed with geometric openings and no two are bent the same

way nor are placed at the same angle. In plan two are straight lines, two are supple curves, and one is a squiggle. They look like large pieces of construction paper with cut-outs stood on end. Their colors are vibrantly aquatic, ranging from a subdued gray-green to the deepest aquamarine. The effect is Mycenaean. Surely their apparently scattered placement is no accident. Nothing can appear this random and not be the result of careful design study. Behind the pilotis is the crinkled-glass curtain-wall of the second and third floors.

From the parking lot, the entrance of the building is questionable. There is a door facing the parking lot leading to an eleva-

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tor lobby on the ground floor, but it is hard to identify which of the many look-alike doors it is. The choices for access to the second floor are made clearer by the presence of stairs at either end of the building. The stair to the south is a simple, narrow, freestanding stair. It derives its visual prominence by being flanked on either side by two large, freestanding parallel planes, one curvilinear and fuchsia, and the other triangular and white. One is tricked into believing that this is actually a handicap ramp because of the gentle slope and extreme length of the triangular plane. The dishonesty of passing off one element or function as another veers comes from doctrinaire modernism. There is, however, playful irony in the gesture and it serves to extend the façade a bit further along the length of the parking lot, making what would be an otherwise insignificant element into a significant one.

The stair to the north, unlike its counterpart to the south, is monumental in scale, extending the full width of the building. It is an almost straight run from top to bottom relieved only by an intermediate landing. It is so large that a not-insignificant portion underneath it is leasable space. One wonders how the architects got this concrete hill past the city plan-checkers without having to add more handrails. In terms of noticeability it finishes a close second to the pilotis. Why such a large stair? The answer must be symbolism. Its width is at least ten times that required by city building codes for egress. On a street that has not seen pedestrian traffic for years (there is not even a bus stop on the corner) and where all other buildings are set back to accommodate parking lots, this one goes right up to the sidewalk. This is either a wry comment on the nature of foot traffic in the city or the architects have made provision for the day Houstonians forsake their cars. What the stair establishes is a symbolic front entry on Richmond Avenue.

Ascending the stair one appreciates a sense of ceremony so often missing in speculative commercial buildings. Walking up (if you are fit; walking down could give you a nosebleed), one wishes that some of the lively plays of color used so effectively elsewhere could have been incorporated into the stair. The huge mass of unfinished concrete is harsh and the placement of a few planters on the intermediate landing seems to be a leasing agent's afterthought.

Surrounding three sides of the second floor is a loggia. Walking along the Fountainview parking-lot side one imagines one is in Brasilia. Here the great width of the pilotis seems to serve some functional purpose by shielding the curtain-wall from the harsh western sun. Unfortunately, figuring out the location of the elevator lobby is no easier at this level than it was on the ground floor. Walking around to the opposite side there is no doubt that this is the back of the building. The space is totally dead. Considering that the loggia overlooks the truck-loading areas and garbage dumps of the building's neighbors, it seems some effort could have been made to shield the view. Except for a sliver of glass-block there are no windows or doors opening onto this walkway - a very poor aspect of an otherwise striking design.

This building is discussed piece by piece rather than as a totality because, like other Arquitectonica projects, The Mesa appears to be a large architectural still-life, assembled from a standard, slightly modified set of parts. These are seemingly added or subtracted randomly to form a cohesive composition greater than the sum of the parts. The triangles, curves, and squiggles seen in plan and elevation are to be found in the paintings of Kandinsky and Miró. The curved surfaces which writhe almost like fabric recall the curved surfaces seen in Aalto's work. The colors, which to the contemporary eye look like Miami moderne, can be seen in the color field paintings of the late 1950s and '60s. Modernist references abound: the ramp of the Villa Savoye, the geometric cutouts of Kahn's work in Dacca, the pilotis of Chandigarh, the repetitive openings of the Unité d'Habitation, and the Italian Rationalists, the shaded colonnades of Niemeyer's Brasilia, the free-floating colored planes and pipe handrails of Rietveld and de Stijl, and the overhanging upper-floor of Schindler's Lovell House. In looking at this building there is the feeling that we have seen it all before.

Why then does Arquitectonica's work seem so fresh and inventive? Part of the reason is that it looks so improbable. At The Mesa, elements are grossly out of scale and chromatics are pushed to the frontiers of garishness. Looking at the initial design drawings one might think the work is the product of the most naive of students. A "practical" architect would think these buildings unbuildable. Often the floor plans look unleaseable from the standpoint of floor-area ratios or depth-of-lease space. Form seems to be generated by nothing more than geometric whim. The "practical" architect is left to wonder: who are the developer clients paying for these follies?

At the time the principals at Arquitectonica received their first major commission they had little experience working in an established architectural office. Perhaps if they had, the playful and naïve wittiness so abundant in The Mesa would have been snuffed out. Instead we see work of bold, undiluted concepts and strongly felt convictions, untainted by practical experience. Arquitectonica's buildings look like giant toys, models not built to scale blown up to full-scale.

One wonders how long The Mesa will last. Though the detailing seems competent, the primary exterior surface is stucco, a material not known for its permanence or ease of maintenance in this climate. The color scheme, so vital to the design concept, could at some point be erased under a fresh coat of paint. In an area where the colors of buildings change with the seasons, such a thing happens. Perhaps, like the Catalán architect Ricardo Bofill, Arquitectonica will use materials in which color can be permanently integrated. Perhaps this building was never designed to have a very long lifespan. Perhaps the budget was limited, and this was never meant to be more than a suburban stage set.

No doubt, many architects see Arquitectonica's work as lacking in seriousness of purpose. Perhaps they see the work as a series of parodies of great masters like Corbusier or that it is too far-out to fit into the serious modernist mainstream. Nevertheless, who ever said a building could not, on occasion, make you smile? ■

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