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An investigation of the function of the modern plinth. By elevating and isolating a building, the plinth posits the building as a singularity and consequently facilitates autonomous architecture.

Von Ledoux bis Mies: the modern plinth as isolating element

Tahl Kaminer

One of the most conventional architectural elements is the plinth. Neither a specifically modern nor Western element, it is a familiar feature of religious buildings, and associated in premodern societies with the altar. The plinth is commonly understood as an expression of the elevation of the structure towards the sacred and its separation from profane daily life. A number of fairly recent publications have discussed the function of the architectural plinth in the twentieth century. The architectural historian Fritz Neumeyer, architectural historian and theorist K. Michael Hays, and architect and theorist Pier Vittorio Aureli have all argued that the role of the plinth in the work of Mies van der Rohe is *mediation*.[1] In this, they modify a common modern conception of the plinth as an element that isolates and separates a building from its environment.

The conception of the plinth as the straightforward and literal expression of sanctity through elevation, which emerged in the absolutist era, diminished in importance in the modern epoch. In this era, increasingly characterised by the application of reason to diverse areas of life, religion in the West became a private concern, separated and compartmentalised.[2] The rise of individualism, the increasingly atomised society, and the retreat of religion all meant that the plinth acquired new meanings and roles that embodied new values – namely, robust forms of humanism, an enhanced sense of individualism, and emergent ideas of artistic autonomy.

Diverse terms have been used to describe the architectural base. There is the *crepidoma* of the ancient Greek temple, for example, which consists of upper stylobate and lower stereobates and, if the 'plinth' is common usage today in the context of architecture, sculpture and art history often use 'pedestal' and 'socle' as well. The socle describes a base with minimal height relative to the statue or object it carries, whereas the plinth suggests vertical support and the pedestal infers horizontal support.[3] The art gallery's plinth and monument's pedestal have utilitarian roles – elevating the work of art to the height of its audience in the gallery and above the height of viewers in public space, to enable long-distance visibility, to enhance the dramatic effect. The plinth and pedestal serve to protect the statues. Art historian Malcolm Baker, paraphrasing Degas's comments on the picture frame, suggested that the pedestal is 'the pimp of sculpture'.[4] Alexandra Gerstein proposed that the 'pedestal serves, partially at least, to clarify and interpret the idea implicit in the sculpture proper'.[5] The base is a stage of sorts. It contextualises the artefact and articulates the object's relationship with its environment. In both architecture and sculpture, the base is the foundation to what is above.

These considerations provide a context for questioning the use of the term 'plinth' in architecture. Formally, the dimensions of the architectural plinth do not resemble those of the art gallery plinth but, instead, the monument's pedestal or the statue's socle: the height of the architectural plinth is less than its length and width. The ubiquity of the term 'plinth', however, is not necessarily erroneous: as in the gallery, the role of the base in architecture is not so much horizontal support, but vertical thrust, even if this verticality is proportionally limited. The term therefore discloses the main task of the architectural base – the act of elevation, and with it, transcendence and separation, in contrast to the tendency of 'horizontality' – or of Bakhtin's 'grotesque' – to connect and relate. Other interpretations are, in comparison, either secondary or questionable, as will be argued.

This article will interrogate the readings of Mies's base by contrasting the recent interpretations of his plinths with the Enlightenment conceptions of the base, highlighting the tenuous aspect of the recent arguments. Rather than a history of modern plinths, or a comprehensive categorisation of the diverse attitudes towards and understandings of the plinth, the article will study a series of 'flagged' moments in which the meaning the plinth has been brought to the fore. In particular, the article will focus on architectural autonomy. This article argues that the role of the plinth in the modern era has principally been to realise the idea of architectural autonomy.[6] The article will first consider the recent studies of Mies's plinth; and then interrogate the monument's

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pedestal through a number of examples of Enlightenment sculpture that questioned the role of the base, and consequently aid in identifying the conventional understandings of the monument's pedestal. The article will proceed to discuss the uses in the same era of the architectural plinth as a means of isolating the singular building from its surroundings, and will conclude by contrasting the understandings of the plinth as 'isolation' and as 'mediation'.

The plinths of Mies

'[T]he central theme that preoccupied Mies all his life [...]', argued Fritz Neumeyer, '[was] the pavilion set asymmetrically on a classical base. In its compositional principles of order and freedom a dialectic of values oscillated, with classical and anticlassical tendencies, ancient and modern ideas locked in constant struggle.'[7] Neumeyer pointed out that already in the early Riehl House (1907), the extended retaining wall of the elevation resembles a plinth. The house had a regular Biedermeier elevation and on one of its narrow sides an asymmetrical elevation dominated by a one-storey-high extended wall, resembling a plinth, on which the house was perched *[1]*. Architectural historian Detlef Mertins described the impression of this elevation as 'decidedly classical and monumental'.[8] Neumeyer outlined the philosophical ideas that shaped Mies's architectural approach:

> *What characterized that [modern] need [for space] for Mies was a 'higher unity' between man, building, and surroundings, which had evolved from the philosophical tradition of German Idealism. Reciprocal perfectibility and autonomy combined with responsibility towards the whole – those were the principles Mies honored most in his philosophy of serving freedom.*[9]

Conceptually driven by sets of oppositions – freedom–order; inside–outside; life–form; unformed–overformed; nothing–appearances – Mies aimed, according to Neumeyer, at achieving not a synthesis but a balance that produces a limited 'whole'. This 'whole' required maintaining the elements' specificity – a 'whole' that allowed the binary elements their autonomy.[10] The plinth–wall here is a compositional element that posits a boundary between the other elements and allows each its relative freedom. Architecture (*Baukunst*), Mies exclaimed, 'is man's dialogue with his environment, and demonstrates how he asserts himself therein and how he masters it'.[11]

Not all of Mies's designs are easily categorised as a pavilion set on a classical base. The Urbig House (1915–17) is an example in which multilevel plateaus enable a gradual transition from building to nature/landscape, a means of organising the space around the building and the direct experience of visitors through a controlled approach to the building – very much confirming Neumeyer's argument of the plinth as a mediating element. Yet in order to become a mediating element, the plinth is here reduced to a series of plateaus, its rigid form de-composed.

In his article 'Critical Architecture' (1984), K. Michael Hays presented an argument that an architecture positioned 'in between' autonomy and



1 The elevation of Mies van der Rohe's Riehl House (1907) with the plinth-like retaining wall that inspired Neumeyer's paper.

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2 The Seagram Plaza viewed from the building's lobby, 1958.

subjugation to society is 'critical'. In order to produce such a critical condition, architecture must distance itself from the world beyond it. 'It should be possible to recognize', wrote Hays, 'both the means by which architecture maintains its distance from all that is outside architecture and the conditions that permit the existence of that distance'.[12] Hays used the work of Mies to exemplify 'critical architecture', but only in a later article did he examine Mies's plinth – or, more correctly, the plaza of the Seagram Building *[2]*. The plaza is a plinth only to a limited degree – at its sides, full sets of stairs are needed to access it, but in front, all that separates it from the street's pavement are three stairs. Nevertheless, a separation that is vertical is created, and the plaza is as much a stage for the building as a pedestal is a stage for a statue. As the footprint of the building was no more than 25% of the plot, the New York Zoning Ordinance allowed the Seagram to extrude its thirty-eight storeys without need for gradual setbacks. This enabled the pure geometry of the tower and the creation of the plaza. Hays referred to the Seagram as a 'hand-made ready-made' in order to convey, on the one hand, Mies's appropriation of 'generic' type and industrialised elements, and, on the other, the Seagram as a perfected, singular work of art.[13]

The key element in the argument that the Seagram is 'of the world' and at the same time resistant to it, is the plaza–plinth. The plaza, according to Hays, becomes a mediating element. A public space, extending the public realm into the ground floor lobby of the Seagram and absorbing the public function of the lobby, the plaza–plinth is considered by Hays to be not only an isolating element but also one which relates the building to its environment. The 'simultaneous production of difference from and integration with the social city [...]', wrote Hays, 'is what the Seagram plaza, as built, tries to effect'.[14]

Pier Vittorio Aureli returned to the question of Mies's plinths more recently. He suggested:

> *the way the plinth reorganizes the connection between a building and its site affects not only one's experience of what is placed on the plinth, but also – and especially – one's experience of the city that is* outside *the plinth. One of the most remarkable things felt by anyone climbing a Mies plinth, whether in New York or in Berlin, is the experience of turning one's back to the building in order to look at the city. Suddenly, and for a brief moment, one is estranged from the flows and organizational patterns that animate the city, yet still confronting them. In this way Mies's plinths reinvent urban space as an archipelago of limited urban artifacts.*[15]

Here, Hays's argument regarding the mediating role of the plaza is transformed into a somewhat different 'in-between' condition, albeit, still premised upon a building–city binary. The building is described as an exalted 'generic' element separated

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by the plinth from the multiples that engulf it. This separation, Aureli claims, enables a contemplative, critical perception of the condition of urbanisation as a totality of mass-produced, homogenised space. Of the diverse examples that Aureli uses in his book to advance his argument regarding 'generic singularity', the work of Mies is the most fitting. The condition of singular, one-off artefacts, separated from the city by a plinth, contrasts Mies's explicit interest in industrialised materials and in designs which are generic and reproducible.[16] Hilberseimer's designs, which feature in Aureli's argument, are far too committed to mass-produced urban development to be 'singular', whereas Palladio's villas, similarly addressed by Aureli, were never, in effect, posited against an urban multiplicity of such scale and systemisation.[17] In Aureli's study of Piranesi's approach to city and architecture, the discussion of 'generic singularity' ends up as a discussion of architectural autonomy versus the subjugation of architecture to the city – re-entering, obliquely, the issues that animated Hays.

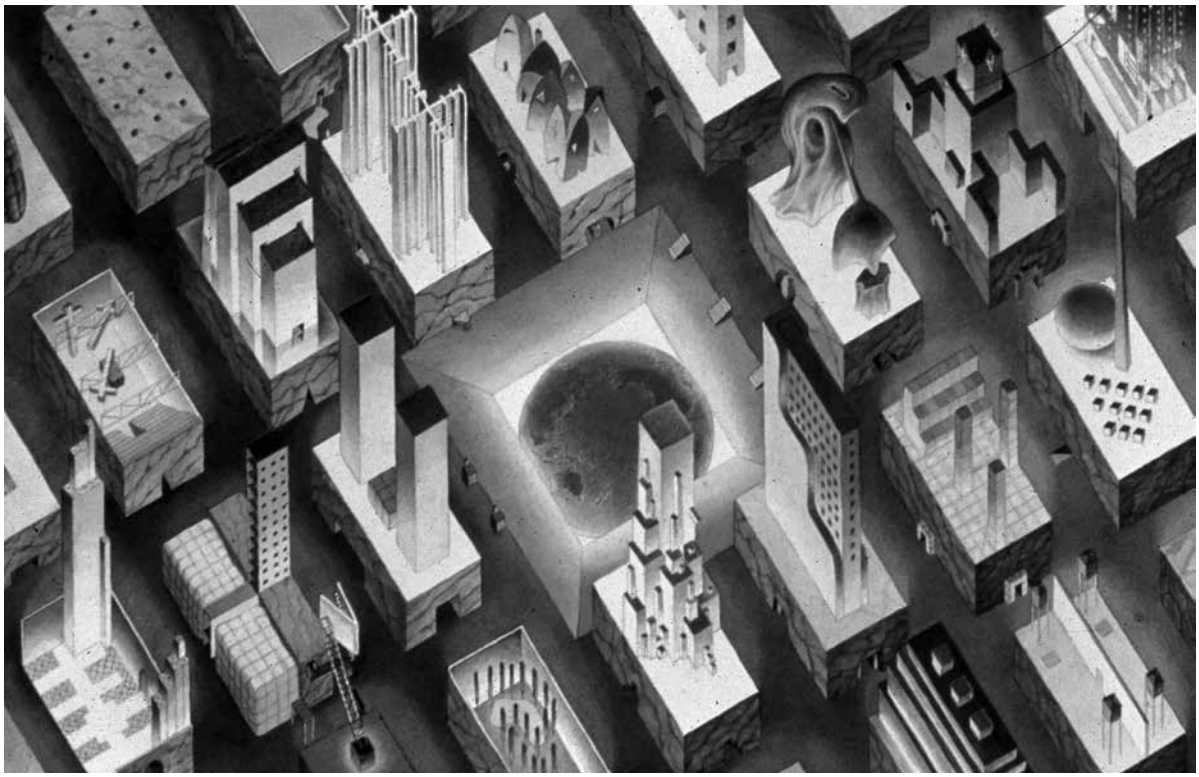
For Aureli, the plinth creates a limit, and the limit, in turn, prevents the assimilation of the singular object into the mass-produced urbanisation that surrounds it; the boundary created by the plinth is the locus of contestation, of both engagement and separation. It is a subtle yet significant modification of the argument regarding the elevation of a structure by a plinth as contributing to its transcendence. Aureli claims that the isolated fragment is political due to the positing of a limit, in the sense that any political community prerequisites exclusionary boundaries. Yet what emerges in Aureli's description is not so much the formation of a political community, but of critical consciousness: an awareness of the singularity of the one-off building within a sea of mundane structures. The plinth, then, induces a critical consciousness that is reminiscent of Hays's description of critical architecture as premised upon 'the distance established between architecture and that which is *other* than architecture'.[18]

In these interpretations of Mies's plinth, three similar conceptions of mediation are posited. The plinth, in all three interpretations, mediates between binary conditions, whether understood as building–city, building–landscape, subjugation–freedom, or other. These interpretations gravitate away from the modern conception of the plinth as an isolating device, which will be discussed in the following sections.

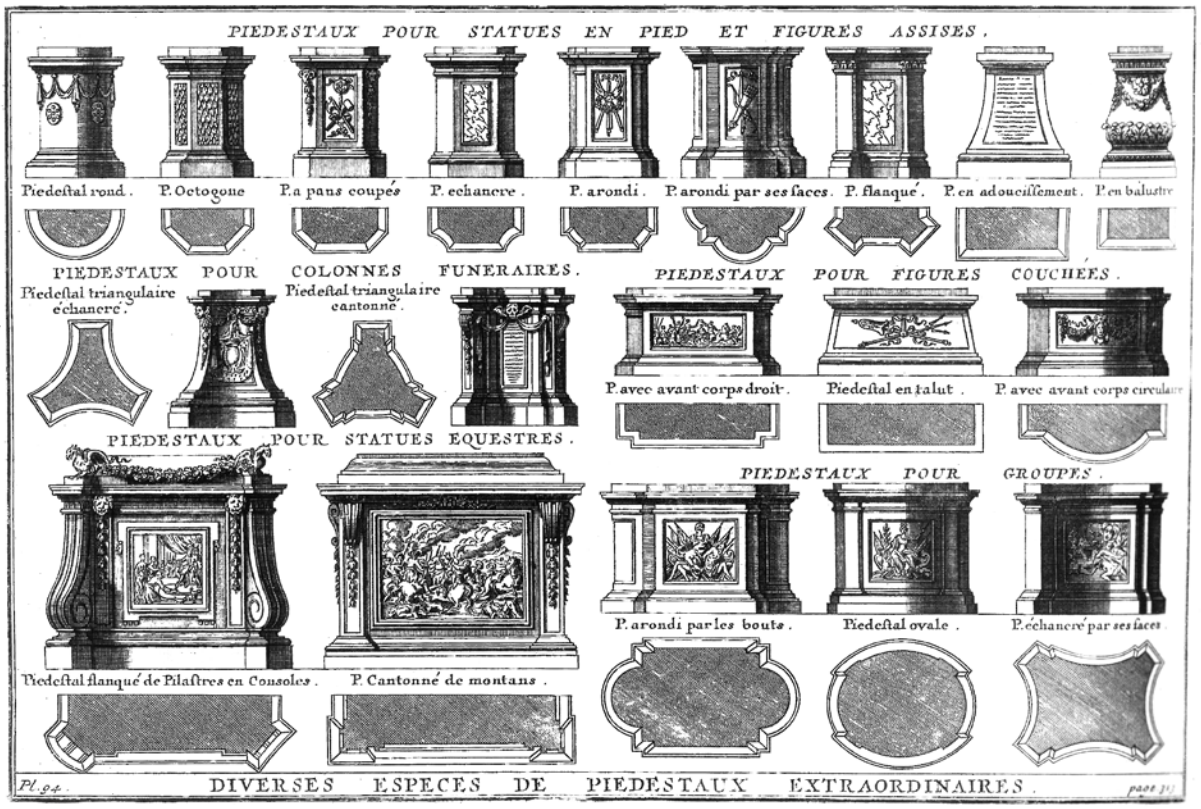
Enlightenment sculpture

One of the projects discussed by Aureli in his book *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, is The City of the Captive Globe, an OMA project from 1972 in which the New York grid creates 'islands' of urban block plinths on which diverse architectural apparitions are situated *[3]*.[19] Koolhaas, in the text accompanying the project, associated it with Oswald Mathias Ungers's 'archipelago model'. This model was originally developed to describe fragmented cities such as Rome and postwar Berlin. Koolhaas ingeniously applied it to Manhattan. But this project also articulates Manfredo Tafuri's argument regarding the North American iron grid: the decoupling of architecture and urbanism enabled by the reduction of the urban whole to a very loose system, the abstract grid.[20] The plinths of the blocks

3 Manhattan's iron grid and block 'islands' in OMA's City of Captive Globe, 1972.



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4 Pedestals and plinths in Aviler, *Course d'Architecture*, 1750.

in The City of the Captive Globe represent and caricaturise the emergence of plinths in Manhattan as a result of the 1916 zoning and the skyscrapers it shaped – the lower floors forming a solid plinth and a gradual series of setbacks as the tower extrudes – a spatial consequence, like the case of the Seagram's plaza, of local urban policies.

The project is relevant to this article's argument because the scene depicted in the axonometric view of The City of Captive Globe resembles an art gallery exhibition, in which the diverse artefacts, 'architectural sculptures', are all singular objects. Their autonomy is conceived spatially, created by the plinth, a protection against the encroachment of proximate artefacts into each other's space. The architectural objects visible in The City of the Captive Globe, then, are ordered as autonomous artefacts, exalting their singularity, difference and uniqueness, and placed on identical plinths – for Tafuri, the severance of the building from the urban whole, from the city, spatially expressed the emerging social forms, characterised as individualistic, capitalist, and atomised. The plinths, then, are the means of securing the autonomy of the artefacts. The buildings – the artefacts – are here presented as sculptures in an art gallery.

Sculpture and architecture are today distinct and disconnected disciplines, but up until two–three centuries ago this was not the case. Architectural treatises by, among others, Boffrand, Blondel, and Aviler, discussed statues and monuments as much as buildings *[4]*. Up until late nineteenth century, public sculpture was often conceived in relation to its nearby buildings – the sculpture being no less a 'set piece' than the buildings surrounding it. The pedestal of the monument was a means of according the statue such a role, preventing its diminishment by the overbearing scale of a nearby building and achieving the desired relationship and balance between the set pieces of the ensemble. This was particularly the case in the design of *place royale*s in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, in which the statue of the monarch was the focal point of an 'embellishment' project.[21] The public statue and monument pedestal, the gallery plinth and the architectural base are acutely related to both sculpture and architecture; they all have spatial consequences and articulate the artefact's relation to its environment. Eighteenth-century sculpture can thus aid in disclosing spatial approaches that are relevant to the emerging modern society and its architecture, and illuminate the spatial function of the base of the building as much as the pedestal of the monument.

In this era, a rethinking of the role of the base emerged in some of the more astounding sculptural work. Up until that moment, the base of the statue was at the periphery of sculptural concerns. The neutral approach to these elements was based on Renaissance and Baroque conventions. The pedestal was necessary for propriety – its absence 'was synonymous with devaluation'.[22] As the lowest element, it was perceived as 'lesser than' the statue: less sacred, more profane. The sculpture's base, then, was seen merely as support, despite its use to contextualise the statue and enhance its effect via inscription and ornamentation.

Jean-Antoine Houdon's (1741–1828) and François Roubiliac's (1702–65) monuments treated the pedestal

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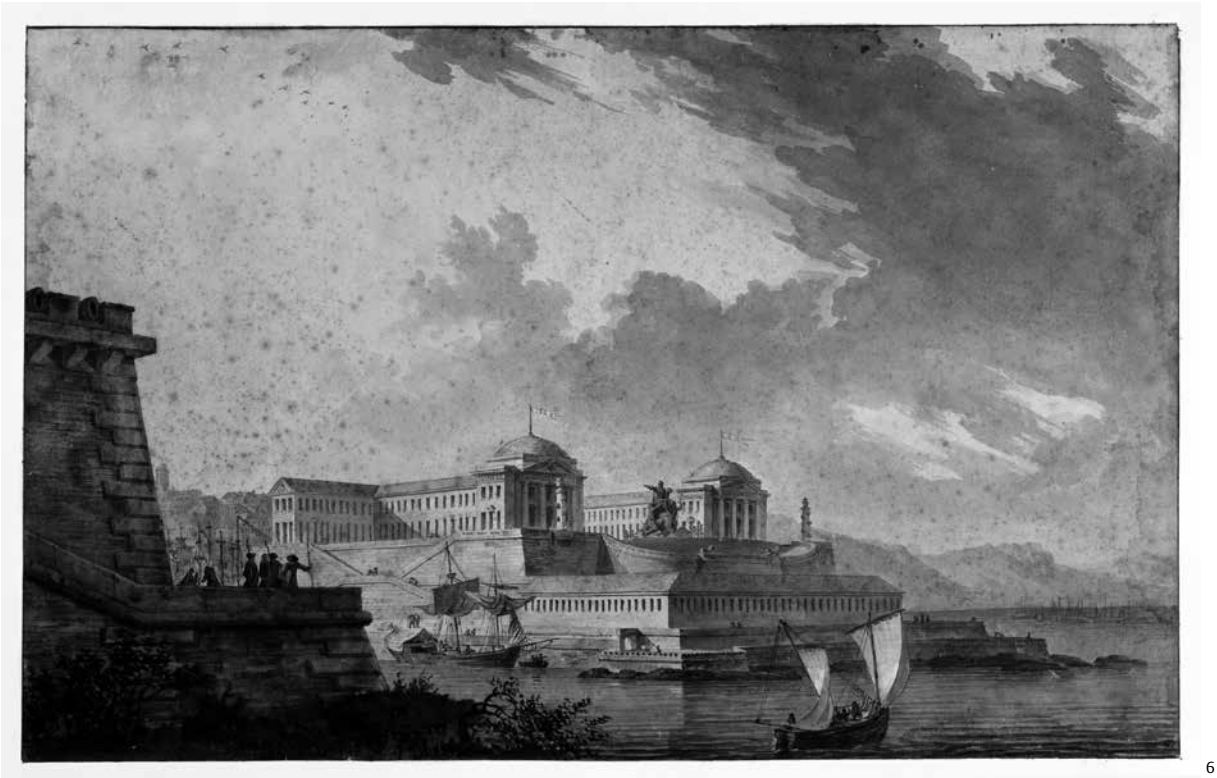
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5 The plinth as a 'prop' in François Roubiliac's monument to the Duke of Montagu (1749–54), Warkton.

6 The cliff as 'natural pedestal'. Jallier de Savault's project for a square for Louis XVI in Brest (1785–6).

in novel manners: the monuments' figures lean or lie on the plinths, turn them into an object incorporated into the sculpture. Roubiliac created 'sculptures in sculptures', played with artistic conventions and involved the spectators by positioning figures 'outside' rather than 'on' the pedestal *[5]*. This treatment of the plinth as a prop or *mise en scène* element rather than neutral stage called attention to the plinth and to the artifice of the sculpture. The art historian Etienne Jollet argued that the difference between the 'fictive' space of the statue and the 'real' space of the spectators is eroded in such work.[23]

Jollet emphasised two related aspects of Etienne Falconet's (1716–91) monument to Peter the Great in St Petersburg of 1762–82, in which the sculptor used a rock as a pedestal. One is that the figure of the monarch is both the subject and attribute – there is no 'splitting' of allegorical meanings, no need for the pedestal to compensate or 'add' allegory. The second is that the rock and diverse elements of the statue suggest a continuum of the space of the spectator – 'real' space – and that of the allegory of the statue proper.[24] The rock takes on the more technical, physical roles of the pedestal, but resists others. In the same article, Jollet described the creation of a *place royale* in Brest for Louis XVI in the years 1785–6. Jallier de Savault (1738–1807) designed the square with three features that were conceived to create a powerful and balanced composition. Houdon, one of the artists involved, created a statue of the monarch seated on a throne, and provocatively stated that 'there is no pedestal other than the steps of the throne'.[25] Houdon, wrote Jollet, 'calls into question the spatial presentation of the royal figure, by choosing to rethink the relation between the three elements of terrace, pedestal, and the ground on which the spectator stands'.[26] In Brest, the



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topography, a cliff above the port, was seen by Houdon as a 'natural pedestal' *[6]*. The role of the topography, of the ground, was to unite the diverse spaces 'created' by the monument: the 'natural pedestal' carried not only the statue, but also the spectators and the other elements of the ensemble.

These eighteenth-century experiments, then, placed the pedestal at the centre of an effort to rethink the monument. The examples listed above created a spatial continuum of spectator and sculpture by altering or eliminating the pedestal. Such experimentation has to be posited against the more normative uses of pedestals in the same era. In a much-cited passage, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe Mikhail Bakhtin's study of the classical and grotesque bodies:

> *the classical statue was always mounted on a plinth which meant that it was elevated, static and monumental. In the one simple fact of the plinth or pedestal the classical body signalled a whole different somatic conception from that of the grotesque body which was usually multiple (Bosch, Bruegel), teeming, always already part of a throng. By contrast, the classical statue is the radiant centre of a transcendent individualism, 'put on a pedestal', raised above the viewer and the commonality and anticipating passive admiration from below*.[27]

The pedestal and plinth have a 'distancing effect'; it is precisely this effect that the work of Houdon, Falconet, and Roubiliac undermined. The distancing allows the emergence of a singularity – the statue as a 'radiant centre of a transcendent individualism'.[28] The aura accorded to the singular object, the one-off work of art, is enhanced by the pedestal, by the physical separation from the environment. As the quote above suggests, such a distancing is encoded into the operation of the base, but the heightened significance of transcendent individualism was a novel development of the absolutist era.

At this moment, in Enlightenment, a transitional condition becomes visible: new, mature forms of humanism were forwarded by Fichte, Kant, and others, with an emphasis on pure reason and the autonomy of human will. Ideas regarding the autonomy from moral and utilitarian faculties of the mind in the reception of art were likewise circulating even before the 1790 publication of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*.[29] The centricity of the human subject, egalitarian ideas and individualism created friction with absolutist monarchies, hereditary privileges, and older values. The idea of the artistic object as autonomous would fully develop only in the nineteenth century; but the role of the base as an element that isolates the work from its environment, which allows the work a certain autonomy from its context, becomes vital already at this early moment. By accentuating certain properties of the pedestal and its ability to distantiate the statue from its environment, a shift of emphasis rather than a reversal of roles, the centricity of the human subject and the autonomy of art could be expressed and maintained spatially. The new visibility of this role and ideology of the pedestal enabled Houdon, Falconet, and Roubiliac to challenge it.

Enlightenment architecture

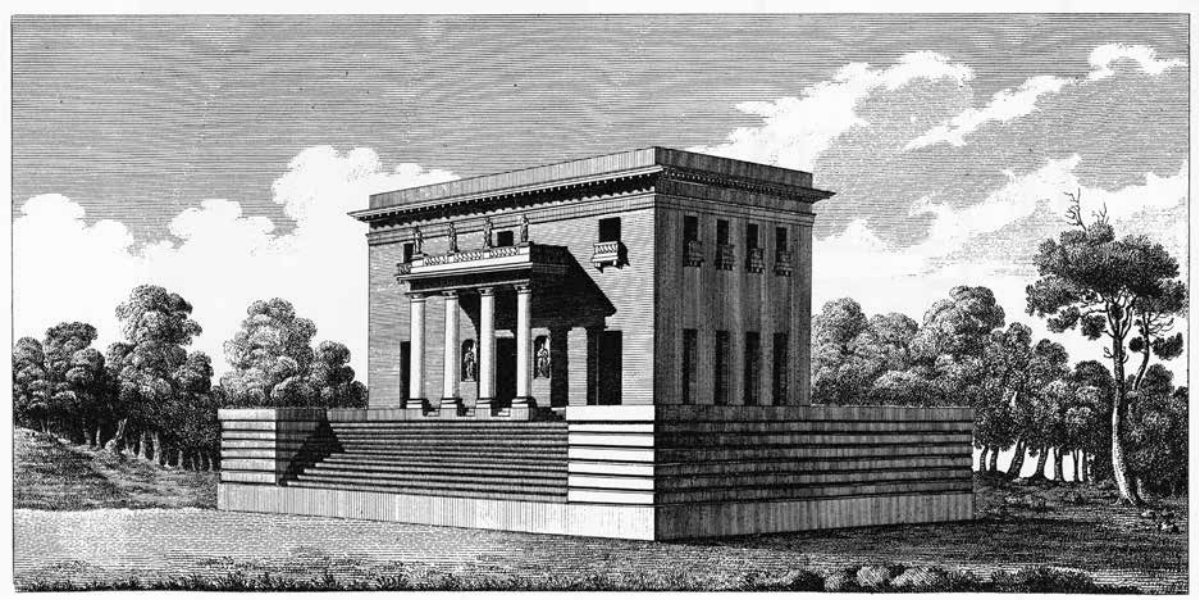
In architecture, as in sculpture, the plinth is seen to produce a sense of propriety. The positioning of a building on a plinth expresses the structure's importance *vis-à-vis* its immediate environment and the city, commanding, physically and symbolically, a position of respect. The plinth is a particular element of 'monuments', those one-off structures such as public buildings – the symbolic structures that are conceived as singular elements within the urban grain, the mass of 'normative' buildings. These 'monuments' increasingly included civic buildings such as courts and city halls by 1800, and a few decades later also museums, demonstrating the shift in values of modern society. New meanings and roles of the plinth began emerging in architecture as much as in sculpture.

The architectural historian Emil Kaufmann was the first to articulate a fully-fledged theory of architectural autonomy. It emerged in the differentiation of a loose, pluralist conception of the urban whole (*Vielheit*), identified with neoclassical architecture, from a unified, tight Baroque conception (*Einheit*).[30] Kaufmann's theory was formal in character: it relied on the geometrical purity of the architectural forms and on the emergence of the *Pavillionsystem* – a new, 'modular' system of spatial organisation, a loose idea of an urban 'whole' composed of independent and self-sufficient elements. 'The autonomisation of the parts', wrote Kaufman, 'is the most important aspect of the process of regeneration of architecture at the end of the 18th century.'[31] The *Pavillionsystem* is exemplified by the proliferation at the time of singular, detached houses of the rich merchants, imitations of the villas, stately homes, and country houses of nobility. Such singular buildings were described by Kaufmann as 'autonomous', no longer subjugated to the urban whole, expressions of the singularity of the human subject. Neoclassical architecture's tendency to isolate the building from its environment sharply contrasted the neoclassical urban layouts of the same era, in which the architectural 'set-pieces' were fully integrated into an overall, often symmetrical, 'tight' composition.[32]

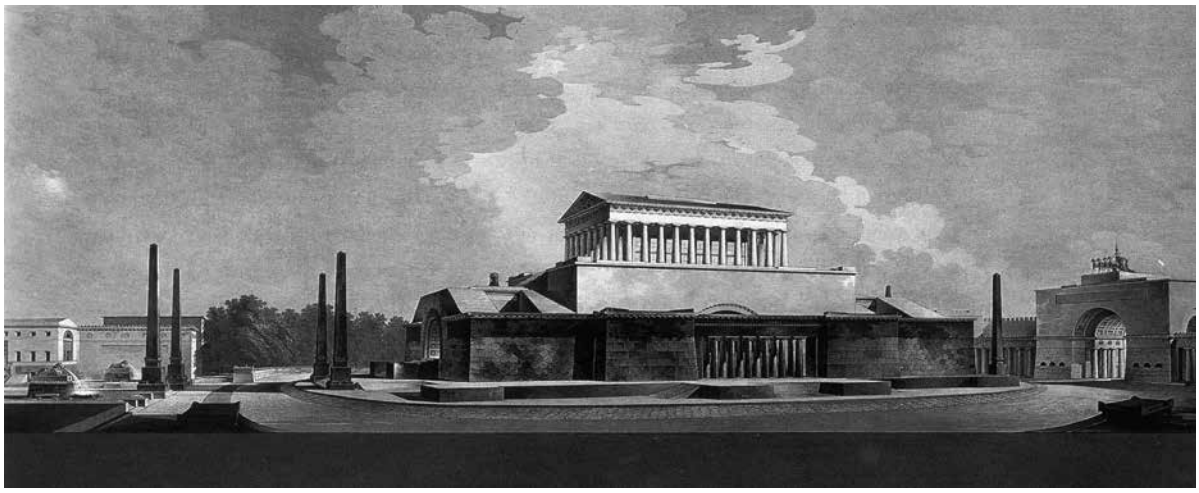
In his 1933 book *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier*, Kaufmann identified a process of transition in the work of Ledoux, the key figure in his argument, via a sequence of four phases, from a more heteronomous, Baroque-influenced design and layout, as in the first design of Chaux, to a more radical ('revolutionary') and autonomous spatial organisation and pure geometries.[33] One of the remarkable yet overlooked features of Ledoux's designs is the use of plinths or plinth-like elements to articulate buildings' relation to their surroundings. Ledoux's work mostly shunned Baroque's interest in creating a continuum of environment and building and rarely displayed a sense of neoclassical 'set piece' urban arrangement; much of his work explicitly detached the building from its environment. The plinth, for Ledoux, was mostly a means of articulating such detachment.

There are a number of techniques Ledoux used for this purpose. At one end of the scale is his Château d'Eguière, in which the plinth is a Baroque element, a 'natural' element in contrast to the building.[34] The

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7 The house as autonomous object: Jarnac House by Ledoux.

8 Friedrich Gilly, a perspectival view of the Friedrichsdenkmal, 1797.

plinth is here primarily a mediating element belonging both to nature and to the building. At the other end is the Jarnac House [7], in which the plinth brutally conveys the detachment of the building from its environment: a full floor high plinth, carrying a regular box-shaped house, with no perforations and articulated by horizontally-striped masonry in contrast to the setback house. Here, the idea of the plinth is distilled, simplified, and effectively deployed.[35]

Ledoux uses the plinth to produce a complexity of levels; plinth, wall, and fortification mix, as one element becomes another. The level and element play provide Ledoux with a strikingly rich palette. But first and foremost, the role of the plinth here is to articulate the structure's relation to its environment, and this relation typically appears as one of difference and isolation. The physical detachment produces and expresses the building's autonomy and a self-perception of a discipline detached, and hence free, from society.[36]

Whereas Ledoux's designs bring to the fore the question of the plinth, similar formulations are visible in other neoclassical designs from the 1800s. Of particular relevance, due to his standing within architecture, his influence on Mies, and his significance to Neumeyer, is Karl Friedrich Schinkel.[37] Neumeyer highlighted the manner in which Schinkel attempted to 'free' the architectural object from the urban whole.[38] One means of achieving this was the plinth. Peter Blake argued that Schinkel's neoclassicism was dependent upon 'placing his structures on wide pedestals or platforms that gave the buildings a considerable nobility'.[39] Neumeyer wrote that '[c]iting "Greek freedom", Schinkel was highly critical of the self-containment of Baroque building as a univalent authority requiring subjugation of the individual'.[40] 'The freestanding cube', he continued, 'diverging from axial system of the Baroque and emancipating itself from traditional seigneurial claims, correspondingly stood for the modern self and for the middle class appropriation of space'.[41]

Schinkel's Altes Museum (1830) reflects some of the interests of Schinkel's teacher, Friedrich Gilly, as expressed in the latter's unrealised design for the

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monument to Friedrich II. The Friedrichsdenkmal (1797–8) consisted of three key elements: a 'heavy' base–substructure–wall with hexagonal masonry at the ground level perimeter, a more refined plinth at the centre, and an elevated Doric temple on the plinth *[8]*. The siting of the monument and design of the related square were meticulously calculated by Gilly *vis-à-vis* the city as a balance between dependence on the city and an autonomy from it. Gilly ensured full view of the monument from its surroundings, while an architectural promenade within the monument led, via stairs, to a spectacular view of the city from above.[42] Similar considerations can be detected in some of Schinkel's work – particularly in the Altes Museum. Schinkel's remarkable perspectival view of the Altes Museum's upper vestibule, staircase, and colonnade demonstrates the consideration of the view of the city and the Lustgarten from the building itself *[9]*. Gilly and Schinkel relate their buildings to the city by reinterpreting the city through vision, creating a specific relation of the 'monument' to the city's other 'one-off' buildings. The importance of the landscape and garden design, of achieving a balance between nature and building, meant that Schinkel's buildings were never conceived as fully detached or isolated from their environment, at least not in the sense that some of Ledoux's designs propagate, yet neither are they fully and formally integrated into the urban whole. Schinkel preferred a much looser form of spatial organisation.

The plinth, then, emerged in Enlightenment as a devise for isolating the building from its environment, for positing the singular building as a self-sufficient 'whole' rather than an element within a 'tight' urban ensemble. The spread of its use from key symbolic buildings to the new housing of the bourgeoisie resulted in a proliferation of plinths. Rather than being limited to the one-off 'monuments', the public or quasi-public buildings, plinths increasingly became a feature of the 'urban grain', the multitude of homes in the new quarters of the wealthy merchants, each seeking self-elevation and isolation from the urban mass. An important step towards this occurred in the 1800s, once affluent rather than excessively rich traders adopted the villa as their preferred home. While the early villas of the bourgeoisie in Venice and England imitated the country houses of the nobility and sought to reconfigure the relation of countryside to city, these later villas, lacking the grand gardens of their predecessors, emphasised the social status of their owners in conditions of proto-suburban extensions in cities such as Liverpool.[43] Many of these neoclassical villas, like their grander siblings, boasted of plinths as signs of respectability and individuation.

Mediation versus isolation

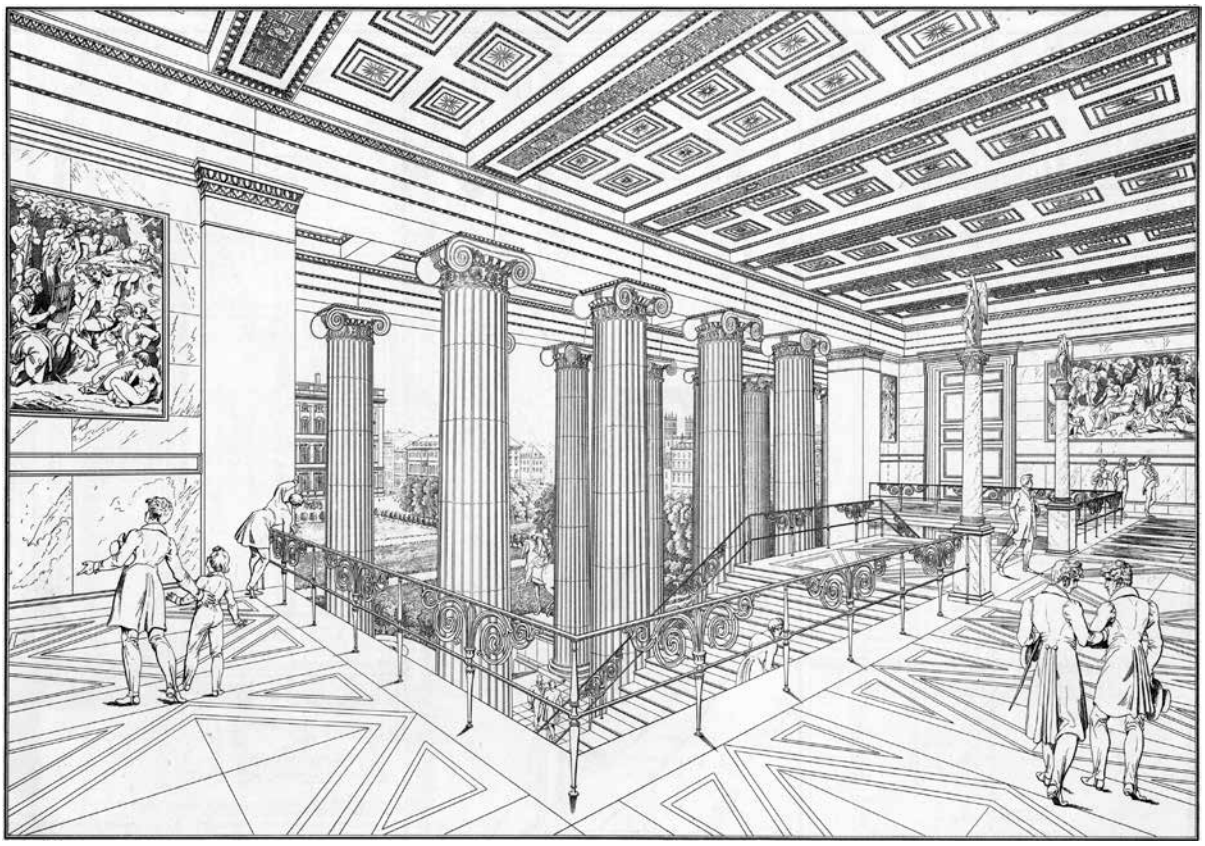
During the Enlightenment, then, certain attributes of the plinth were accentuated and emphasised as a means of uncoupling architecture from urbanism, building from city. The autonomy of the singular building was associated with the emerging ideal of the autonomy of the human subject. The plinth emphasised and symbolised such autonomy. The understandings of the base expanded in the interpretation of the plinths of Mies by Neumeyer, Hays, and Aureli. The plinth was no longer seen only as an element that separated, but also as a mediating element: physically, it mediated between the building and the ground; spatially, between the building and the city. On the level of thought, for Neumeyer, the mediation achieved in Mies's architecture was between nature and 'man'. In the articles of Hays, the argument regarding the mediating role of the Seagram plaza–plinth is more fraught: the general conditions of a set back skyscraper and public plaza were not restricted to the Seagram. They were created by the effects of zoning, and are found in many midtown skyscrapers of this era, particularly after the amendment of the zoning ordinance in 1961. Hays's argument, then, is applicable to all of these corporate towers, they all become exemplars of a limited autonomy and 'criticality'. Aureli, in turn, conflates Taylorist–Fordist forms of urbanisation, from Cerda onwards, with capitalism, and posits autonomous architecture as the adversary of such processes. He conveniently ignores the Fordist impetus of Soviet modernisation, or that fragmented urbanisation – and with it, the production of architectural 'singularities' – is often free-market driven.

At the end of the day, Mies's Neue Nationalgalerie and Seagram Building have different relations to their environment. These relations are shaped by their disparate functions (public building and corporate headquarters) and urban condition – the Seagram is, in effect, not so much a 'monument' in full sense of the term, but rather a singularity among a multiplicity of singularities in the condition of the iron grid. The robust plinth of the Nationalgalerie delineates a far more pronounced isolation than the modest plaza–plinth of the Seagram. The 1811 iron grid that enabled the Seagram's singularity, was, as Louis Mumford argued, a vehicle for real-estate speculation, reflecting the *laissez-faire* of the period.[44] It enabled, as Tafuri pointed out and OMA illustrated, the creation of a city comprised solely of singular, autonomous buildings, eliminating, in effect, the urban grain.[45]

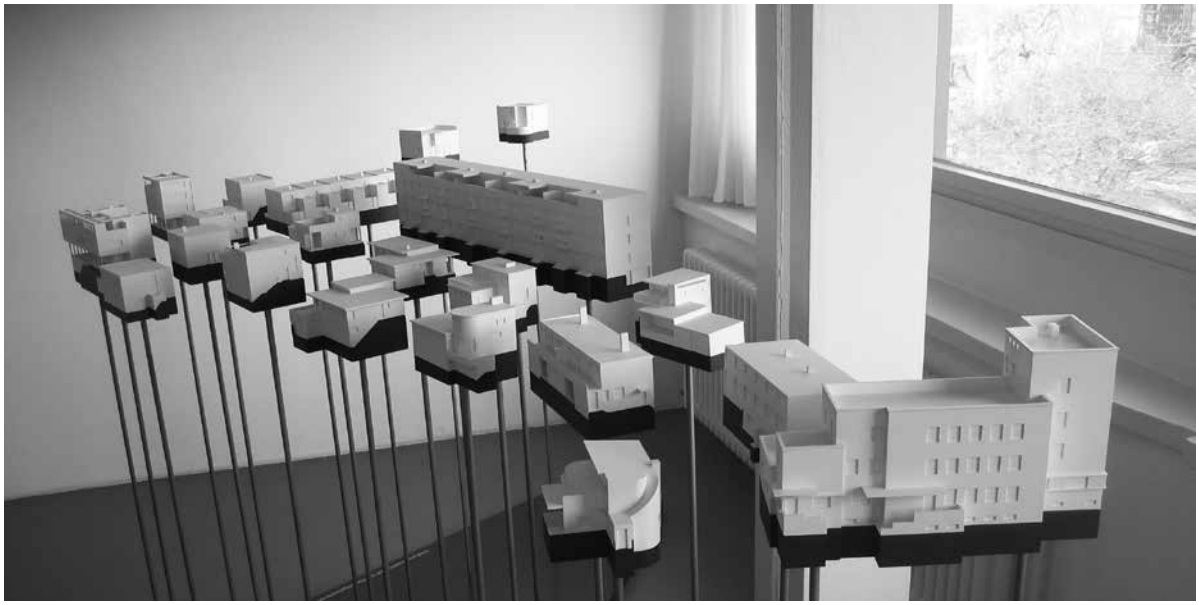
Whereas Neumeyer was interested in reconstructing the intentions of Mies, Hays and Aureli offered interpretative readings. Nevertheless, in one aspect Aureli provided a reading probably not dissimilar to Mies's own intentions. The German architect was a great admirer of Schinkel's work. Schinkel and Gilly's use of visual linkages to establish the relation of building to city is echoed in Mies's Neue Nationalgalerie – precisely the experience described by Aureli. Aureli, then, reinterprets the effect of this view of the city, which is 'curated' by Mies to produce a specific relation of the 'monument' to the city's other 'monuments', a view enabled and constructed by the plinth.

Diverse degrees of autonomy manifest themselves in Mies's work: in the Riehl and the Urbig Houses, there is no specific question of relation to urban

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9 The view of the garden and city from Schinkel's Altes Museum, 1830.

10 A model of the Weissenhofsiedlung, illustrating the autonomy of the singular buildings, each building placed on a 'plinth–island'. Model by Space 4.

morphology, but of spatial organisation of elements and partial integration of architecture into the landscape. This is achieved by a de-composed plinth – a mediating element. The de-composed or 'minor' plinths of the Riehl and Urbig Houses limit the overall autonomy of the building and act, indeed, as mediators. In the Neue Nationalgalerie, however, a robust plinth physically isolates the building while proposing a relation to the city construed through vision. Mies's work appears to inhabit precisely the territory associated with artistic autonomy, understood as a limited freedom from moral, political, economic, or other concerns.[46] The freedom of the singular building from the city is, in effect, a freedom from the *cité*, from the political community. The degree of autonomy of the building appears dependent on the form and robustness of the plinth.

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The approach of Houdon to the pedestal re-emerged in the avant-garde's desire to merge art and life by creating a spatial continuum of spectator and artefact. This was achieved by the rejection of the plinth and pedestal, as demonstrated in the work of artists ranging from Alberto Giacometti and Anthony Caro to Joseph Beuys. In architecture, the avant-garde's desire to merge art and life materialised as the project of merging building and city, architecture and urbanism, featured in urban layouts by Hilberseimer, Le Corbusier, and Team X. Such 'tight' and rigorous layouts intentionally dissolved any iota of architectural autonomy, fully integrating every structure, every building, into the overall logic of the city.

Mies, in contrast, adopted an approach that guaranteed the singularity and autonomy of each element within a compositional whole. The loose and 'suburban' final layout of Weissenhof [10] was, in effect, a *Pavillionsystem* layout, providing each element maximum autonomy from the urban whole. The elements that formed the Riehl or Orbig Houses were not synthesised into a whole but were allowed their autonomy. The Seagram and Neue Nationalgalerie were conceived as one-off singular buildings, and their autonomy was formed and enhanced by their isolation from the environment, achieved through their plinths. The robust modern plinth is thus not a means of mediation, but of isolation.

Notes

1. Fritz Neumeyer, 'Spaces for Reflection: Blocks versus Pavilion', in *Mies van der Rohe: Critical Essays*, ed. by F. Schulze (Cambridge, MA and New York: MoMA & MIT Press, 1989), pp. 148–71; K. Michael Hays, 'Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form', *Perspecta*, 21 (1984), 14–29; K. Michael Hays, 'Abstraction's Appearance (Seagram Building)', in *Autonomy and Ideology: Positioning an Avant-Garde in Americas*, ed. by Robert Somol (New York: Monacelli Press, 1997), pp. 276–91; Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).
2. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (1977; repr. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity* (1985; repr. Cambridge: Polity, 2007); Stuart Hall, David Held, Dan Hubert, Kenneth Thompson, eds, *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies* (1996; repr. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).
3. Nicholas Penny, 'The Evolution of the Plinth, Pedestal, and Socle', *Studies in the History of Art*, 70 (2008), Symposium Papers XLVII: Collecting Sculpture in Early Modern Europe, 460–81.
4. Malcolm Baker, 'Playing with Plinths in Eighteenth-Century Sculpture', in *Display and Displacement: Sculpture and the Pedestal from Renaissance to Post-Modern*, ed. by Alexandra Gerstein (London: Courtauld Institute and Holberton Publishing, 2007), p. 62.
5. Alexandra Gerstein, 'Introduction', in *Display and Displacement*, ed. by Gerstein, p. 11.
6. Tahl Kaminer, *Architecture, Crisis and Resuscitation: The Reproduction of Post-Fordism in Late-Twentieth-Century Architecture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011); Sanford Anderson, 'Thinking in Architecture', in *Ptah 08 Yearbook*, ed. by E. Laaksonen (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Academy, 2009), pp. 72–86.
7. Neumeyer, 'Spaces for Reflection', p. 157.
8. Detlef Mertins, *Mies* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2014), p. 24.
9. Neumeyer, 'Spaces for Reflection', p. 169.
10. Fritz Neumeyer, *Mies van der Rohe: On the Building Art* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 197–206; Mertins, *Mies*, pp. 20–1; this is also evident in Mies's writings, such as in the following paragraph:
It must be possible to heighten consciousness and yet keep it separate from the purely intellectual. It must be possible to let go of illusions, see our existence sharply defined, and yet gain a new infinity, an infinity that springs from the spirit. Mies van der Rohe, 'The Preconditions for Architectural Work', in Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT, 1991), p. 301.
11. van der Rohe, 'The Preconditions for Architectural Work', p. 299.
12. K. Michael Hays, 'Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form', *Perspecta*, 21 (1984), 27.
13. Hays, 'Abstraction's Appearance (Seagram Building)', p. 289.
14. Ibid., p. 283.
15. Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture* p. 37.
16. Martin Pawley, *Mies van der Rohe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), p. 13.
17. Reinhard Bentmann and Michael Müller, *The Villa as Hegemonic Architecture* (New Jersey and London: Humanities Press, 1992).
18. Hays, 'Critical Architecture', 27.
19. Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, pp. 21–4; Kaminer, *Architecture, Crisis and Resuscitation*, p. 146.
20. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (1973; repr. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1976), p. 38; Kaminer, *Architecture, Crisis and Resuscitation*, pp. 146–7.
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23. Ibid., 51–77.
24. Ibid., 61–2.
25. Ibid., 53.
26. Ibid.
27. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 21; see also D. S. Sechelski, 'Garrick's Body and the Labor of Art in Eighteenth-Century Theater', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 29:4 (summer 1996), 374.
28. Baker, 'Playing with Plinths in Eighteenth-Century Sculpture', p. 64.
29. See Jerome Stolnitz, 'On the Origins of Aesthetic Disinterestedness', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 20:2 (winter 1961), 131–43.
30. Georges Teyssot, 'Emil Kaufmann and the Architecture of Reason: Klassizismus and "Revolutionary Architecture"', *Oppositions*, 13 (summer 1978), pp. 47–74; Georges Teyssot, 'Neoclassic and "Autonomous" Architecture: The Formalism of Emil Kaufmann', *Architectural Design*, 51:6/7 (1981), 24–9; see Emil Kaufmann, *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier: Ursprung und Entwicklung der Autonomen Architecktur* (Vienna: Passer, 1933); and to a lesser degree Emil Kaufmann, *Three Revolutionary Architects: Boullée, Ledoux and Lequeu* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1952); Emil Kaufmann, *Architecture in the Age of*

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Reason: Baroque and Post-Baroque in England, France, and Italy (1955; repr. New York: Dover, 1968).
31. Kaufmann, *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier*, p. 43, trans. by the author.
32. Neumeyer, 'Spaces for Reflection', p. 159.
33. Kaufmann, *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier*; *Three Revolutionary Architects*.
34. Claude Nicolas Ledoux, *L'Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), pp. 253–8.
35. Ibid., p. 204.
36. Consequently, Kaufmann could associate Ledoux with his era. See Kaufmann, *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier*, p. 12, as well as Anthony Vidler, 'Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism, 1930–1975' (doctoral dissertation, TU Delft, 2005), p. 34; published as Anthony Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).
37. See, for example, Philip Johnson, *Mies van der Rohe* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1978), pp. 12–20; Martin Pawley, *Mies van der Rohe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), pp. 10–11; Franz Schulze, *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 42; See also W. Tegethoff, 'Catching the Spirit: Mies's Early Work and the Impact of the "Prussian Style"', in *Mies in Berlin*, ed. by Terence Rilet and Barry Bergdoll (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), pp. 135–51; F. Stahl, *German Bestelmeyer* (Berlin: 1928), p. xiii; Neumeyer, *The Artless World*, p. 76.
38. Anthony Vidler wrote that '*von Schinkel bis Mies* seemed [to Philip Johnson] a natural corollary to Kaufmann's *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier*'; Anthony Vidler, 'The Ledoux Effect: Emil Kaufmann and the Claims of Kantian Autonomy', *Perspecta*, 33: Mining Autonomy (2002), p. 26.
39. Peter Blake, *The Master Builders* (New York: Knopf, 1961), p. 160.40; Penny, 'The Evolution of the Plinth, Pedestal, and Socle', 460–81.
40. Neumeyer, 'Spaces for Reflection', p. 159.
41. Ibid., p. 159.
42. '[T]he visitor commands a view from the top of the steps across that large expanse of the royal capital city that is Frederick's own creation.' Friedrich Gilly, *Essays on Architecture 1796–1799* (Santa Monica: The Getty Center, 1994), p. 133.
43. James Ackerman, *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995).
44. Louis Mumford, *The City in History* (1961; repr. San Diego and New York; London: Harvest Books, 1989), pp. 421–2.
45. Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*.
46. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), p. 133.

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