

## The Overlooked Interruption

BY ETIEN SANTIAGO

*Note from the editors: This essay inaugurates a regular feature of Very Vary Veri, whereby a current student at the Harvard Graduate School of Design writes about a design executed by an alumnus. Our intention is not only to draw connections between the design-related concerns of different generations, but also to interrogate a culture specific to the GSD which carries through and continues to evolve beyond the provisional group that, at any given time, its faculty and student body constitute.*

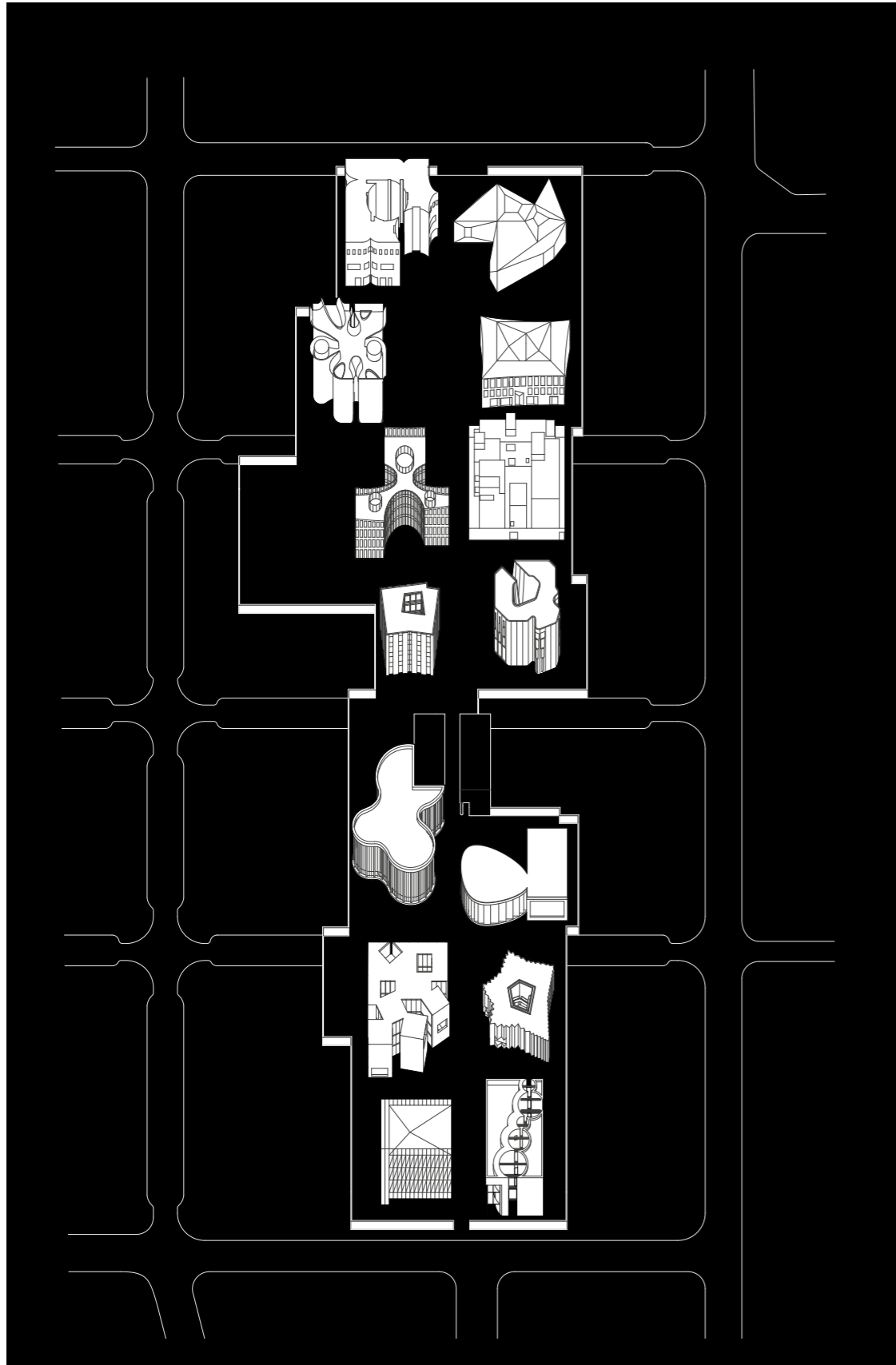
To a reader familiar with present-day architectural criticism, it should come as no surprise that some of the most interesting new architectural works are the ones least discussed in the printed and online press. The Astor Place office building completed in 2013 and designed by Maki and Associates belongs, in my opinion, to the category of recent interventions that have attracted far less attention than they deserve. Certainly this edifice does not startle the eyes with any radical visual manifesto; its subdued, minimalist style and shape almost begs to be read as an anonymous case of modern architecture. Yet its originality lies elsewhere, ready to catch the eye and spark the curiosity of an attentive viewer. The subtlety of its provocations in no way deprives them of their power. In fact, just as in the context of Freudian dream interpretation, it is precisely their hidden and buried aspect that endows them with strength.

Encountering this building for the first time already evokes comingled sensations of both discretion and imposition. Visible only from close-by, due to the compact urbanity of its Manhattan site, Fumihiko Maki's design immediately strikes us with its almost

oppressive flatness and darkness, the relentless shimmer of the façade, its utterly planar verticality, and its obstruction of sightlines that were previously available here (towards the quaint townhouses and commerce of the East Village). Yet the building also has a slippery quality that prevents us from latching onto it and thwarts our efforts to examine it as an object within a landscape. Reflectivity is of course typical of modern structures, many of which are cloaked in large spans of glass, but here this property appears to have been particularly emphasized. The darkness of the façade, despite imparting an effect of heaviness, draws our eyes away from it and towards brighter elements in the surroundings (as well as their mirrored images in the glass curtain wall), which visually assert themselves at its expense. Furthermore, the highly regular shape and clean lines of the architectural mass leave us with no place to rest our eyes. Reserve, slickness, and an almost featureless character manifestly carry the day, but the impressions of weight and somberness linger in the back of our minds.

Walking beside the ground floor of this building, it could easily be mistaken as just another modernist office tower: buttoned-down, matter-of-fact, conservative, and largely oblivious to the problems that block our path towards new architectural roads. However, the building's unmitigated embrace of its ominous qualities, as well as certain unusual exceptions within its west façade, tip us off to the fact that this is not the case. Maki and his associates have produced a design that shrewdly challenges certain architectural assumptions. The resulting ambiguity and contradictions force us to look twice, disrupting our expectation of finding a predictable set of architectural ideas at work in this building.

After being surprised by the almost sinister sobriety of this work, we should notice the odd and unbalanced juxtaposition of two different façade systems on its west side. This elevation, which faces Fourth Avenue, is principally covered in a dark, curtain-wall glass evocative of much corporate architecture. Almost



The 'energy pruners - the ecoteam' after the scan of a house.

nothing disrupts the inexorable planar surface of that system; only a minuscule, shadowy reveal separates one pane of glass from its neighbors. However, the lower right-hand corner of this façade deploys a distinct system made up of brighter, more metallic, and even more highly reflective glass panels that are half as wide as the dark ones and separated by quite visible, protruding, aluminum-colored mullions. This zone, which disturbingly appears off-kilter due to its position and takes up one-sixth of the façade (the right half of the bottom third), plays with and frustrates our reading of the architecture while prompting a number of interpretive games.

First, the artificial and image-like aspect of each façade system is exaggerated as a result of their conjoined divergence. Both curtain walls emit a distinct impression of planarity due to the sharp, understated, and minimal seam that links them; our minds translate each into a flat polygon. This effect conflicts with the interpretation of the building as a solid, three-dimensional mass, which gains currency via its polyhedral shape and the fact that the black glass wraps around its corners. When we look at the area of lighter-toned, narrower glass, certain graphic and two-dimensional references come to mind: pinstripes, a barcode, or the flickering lines of a video monitor. (Keep in mind that these effects in the lighter area of glass are made possible by the large swath of more muted black glass circumscribing it.) The associated notions of a woven cloth, a printed mark, or an electronic image—symbols and patterns that can perform a communicative role—all evoke impermanence as well as a synthetic quality. Therefore, the secondary structure and architectural enclosure visually melt into pictorial semiotic systems marked by instability and transformability.

Other factors contribute to the sense of elusiveness and imbalance, even though the precise architectural detailing teases us with the contrasting notion of staid and rigorous due diligence. It appears as if the designers have deliberately and consciously developed

a façade that, despite its decorum, questions its own reasons for being. For when the same, otherwise undifferentiated plane is thus gerrymandered into two areas harboring different types of curtain walls, with no obvious clues for why the transition between them occurs where it does, the viewer cannot help but be struck with the realization that the design of this elevation emerged from the subjective choices of the architect. An untrained onlooker might even wonder if a mistake has been made, or the façade were unfinished. Yet regardless of the observers' various levels of expertise, this composition impresses upon all of them the notion that the design of every façade is always, at least to some degree, the result of arbitrary decision-making: the architect imposing certain tastes at the expense of others.

Indeed, the arbitrary nature of this façade is confirmed by a fanciful illusion it gives rise to, which tricks us into imagining that the two opposing façade systems are caught in a dynamic struggle to cover the whole building. The partial and apparently unexplained intrusion of the lighter glass area into the darker glass produces an imagined chronological effect, as if the façade were in a process of mutation. On the one hand, we could imagine that the smaller, lighter area is in the process of being converted into dark glass, since the predominance of the latter appears ready to swallow it up. On the other hand, our mind struggles to reconcile this idea with the opposite notion that the dark glass surfaces are progressively being transformed into the more elaborate, shiny, and possibly more complete-looking curtain-wall system of the smaller area. These two ideas directly contradict one another, but neither is strong enough to impose itself. Consequently, the chronological aspect of this façade is ironically tinted by the feeling of a prolonged stalemate.

Both impressions of temporal conversion (from one curtain wall system to another and vice versa) are reinforced by the presence of hybrid areas adjoining the lighter glass area—one directly to the left of it and another



The meat, delicatessen and veggie counter of the BioPlanet supermarket.





Sorting line for building and demolition waste at De Coninck. Workers manually remove plastics, plaster, non-ferrous and wood from crushed rubble, as an overband magnet removes the ferrous metals. What is left is considered inert waste.

tangent to it, just around the southwest corner of the building—which present a cross of both systems. If we follow the hybrid façade located around the corner, we realize that its height matches that of a rear wing of the building, which is a third as tall as the one we had been analyzing and covered in the brighter, more tightly-spaced curtain wall system. Thus the portion of lighter façade on Fourth Avenue could be interpreted as the expression of the back wing as it volumetrically intersects the high dark glass tower. This concept is reinforced by the fact that, above the light-toned glass area on the west façade, the dark glass appears to dissolve into a kind of background, while the light glass area visually jumps forward. One easily reads the lighter area as a foreground object against the “recessive” space of the darker area. Yet this interpretation too must be thrown into doubt, since the other hybrid area, which is found in the middle of the west façade (a small, vertical span of glass near the center of the building), is slightly recessed. Even though this hybrid area is composed of the same kind of metallic, shiny glass as that found between the tightly-spaced aluminum mullions, it loses precedence to the surrounding black glass, which sits on a closer plane. Therefore we are once again directed towards the impression that the black glass tower is poised to consume the mass of lighter-toned glass. Here we are not so much witnessing a graft between two volumetric masses as an unsettled struggle for dominance between two systems, neither of which has the upper hand, and as a result of which traditional methods of architectural façade description break down.

Ever since the days of humanism, a common way of organizing and interpreting facades has separated them into three stacked levels: a lower, middle, and upper one. Maki’s building alludes to this venerable tradition but offers no conclusive evidence that it is being drawn upon. Take another look at the lighter glass area on the west elevation; it could almost be seen as a form of classical rustication, since it sits near the base of the building, is more textured than

the dark glass above, and visually appears to push out into the sidewalk. (A horizontal strip of air vents near the top of the façade separates what could be read as an attic story from the middle floors of the building.) However, this rustication only covers one half of the building base, and thus appears ambiguously halted—prominent enough to be called to mind, but curtailed enough to be inconclusive. (Likewise, the strip of air vents terminates before reaching the southern corner, denying us the certainty of interpreting the area above as an attic story.) This façade teases us by employing a strictly modernist language and tectonics that, in their deployment, nonetheless harbor stilted suggestions of past historical styles.

It is ultimately fitting that this gleaming façade both frames and reflects—regardless of its division into lighter and darker areas of glass—a mirrored image of the 1900s office building on the opposite side of Fourth Avenue. That historic building clearly displays the tripartite organization (base, body, and attic) that Maki’s creation lightheartedly tempts us with. Depending on our point of view, the tightly-spaced aluminum mullions of the lighter glass area almost line up with the reflected grid of double-hung windows in the old building (one might say that our brains even yearn for them to). The new edifice does not mimic, derive from, or even echo its neighbor; instead, the former steps back and deploys a system for reading differences. Maki’s Astor Place building could be compared to an instrument endowed with a genetic array of possibilities, or the ability to move and change in response to a particular input. The edifice gains its meaning precisely from differences, rather than from any intrinsic content.

As we saw, this work of architecture cherishes its unresolved condition, or its appearance of having been temporarily stopped amidst a process of transformation. The façade could have been otherwise. In fact, its current state fills us with the sense that it should have been otherwise. What matters is not what is, but rather the spectrum of

options that, like an index, it points to. In the spirit of Robert Venturi's 1966 *Complexity and Contradiction*, our minds complete and extend the process of transformation, or the operative range of possibilities, thereby endowing the façade with life.

Thanks to Venturi's book, the cultivation of ambiguity has become widely recognized as an important part of architectural design. What makes Maki's design so interesting is not just its deft exhibition of polar opposite qualities—heavy and light, dark and bright, crystalline and opaque, modern and classical, autonomous and contextual, systematic and unruly—but especially its ability to do so with restrained means. Maki's office presented us with a design that unsettles us quietly, without hitting us over the head with its games, and discreetly employs its unorthodox façade design to both dampen and accentuate its looming, somber weight. Instead of striving to make the building appear—on the one hand—light, unfettered, and cheerful, or—on the other hand—heavy, oppressive and serious, the design team successfully straddled both sides in the most restrained way possible. Let us be clear: the building is not walking a fine line between various extremes, but *simultaneously plunging into both sides*, through the employment of very subtle differences, and without even breaking a sweat. The lesson for architects here is how little it takes—a limited number of precisely calculated, simple, and almost negligible maneuvers—to create such rich complexity.

However, this building distinguishes itself by more than just a sense of complexity: it exudes what I would call a significant form of complexity. As opposed to superficial manifestations of complexity, which please us due to the fact that we can rationally unfold their various intertwining parts, significant kinds of complexity keep us pulling at their threads without ever finding their ends. Maki's façade harbors a host of interpretive conundrums, but none ever come to a standstill. We keep returning to it in an endless attempt to tease out what exactly bothers and



View from East 8th Street and Lafayette towards the west façade of the office building designed by Maki and Associates at Astor Place, New York City.

pleases us about this building. It nags at us like the memory at the root of a neurosis. In doing so, such architecture constitutes a valuable reminder to architects that they should not aim to produce works that are satisfactorily conclusive ends, but rather ones that are unremitting and provocative beginnings.

ETIEN SANTIAGO (PHD '18, M.ARCH II '11)

Etien Santiago is a PhD student of architectural history and theory at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. His research focuses on the interrelation of technologies, ideas, and aesthetic practices in the modern era. Trained in architecture at Rice University and the GSD, Etien worked several years for the Renzo Piano Building Workshop in Genoa and Iu+Bibliowicz Architects in New York.

## Bus Wars

by Jerome Byron Hord

*Without a doubt, the New York City Department of Transportation and the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration terminated "Chinatown" Bus Service company Fung Wah to gain price control over the market. Adding insult to injury, corporate bus giants Greyhound and Peter Pan team up and quietly debuts "Yo! Bus" to plug the vacuum, wrapping a whole bunch of clichés into one package, and charging you and I more for it.*

Upon hearing the news in 2012 that before the year was up, most of the budget Chinatown bus lines connecting New York, Boston and Philadelphia would be shut down for safety concerns, I was devastated. Okay sure, some of these allegations seemed legit. Anyone who has spent the four and a half grueling hours (I've seen it take ten) traveling back and forth from Boston's South Station to New York Chinatown has most definitely seen some wild shit go down. Besides the complete lack of driver supervision and the occasional breakdown, the Chinatown bus simply attracted some of East Coast's weirdest. Personal space simply doesn't exist on the Chinatown bus, meaning your shoulder inevitably becomes a pillow for the stranger sitting beside you. And then there are the smells and sounds. Believe me, I get it, the Chinatown bus could be a total bummer. But hey, it was ten bucks for a one-way ticket and as a broke college student living in New York City, it was all I needed.

The now defunct Fung Wah began in 1988 by a restaurateur with a mission. Pei Lin Liang wanted to move commuting workers from Brooklyn to Manhattan as quickly and cheaply as possible. Chinese immigrant parents wanting to visit their children in Boston took notice, and soon the curbside bus line was established. Other Chinatown bus companies like Lucky Star were founded in

the late nineties, and in a fairly short time the Chinatown bus lines had secured a competitive edge on the low-end market. A number of larger companies began to imitate the curbside model of the Fung Wah and Lucky Star by opening subsidiary bus companies (à la Bolt Bus), but this move did little to intercept the flow of loyal Chinatown bus riders. Then, a few years ago, the charming myths—which centered around the possibility of riding with live chickens—turned into vicious rumors, focused on death by decapitation. The seed of Chinatown bus hysteria was planted.

In April 2013, US Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood created a new division of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) called "Operation Quick Strike," an imitation SWAT team comprised of bus inspectors that would revoke bus licenses on the spot. In short order, Lucky Star was suspended by Operation Quick Strike inspectors. FMCSA reported a "broken emergency exit," which in actuality was out of alignment and easily snapped back into place by one of the onsite officers. Other reports issued by FMCSA found it "damning" that Lucky Star broke down as often as it did—whopping once per every 38,750 miles on the road! (By the way, a flat tire constitutes a bus breakdown.)

Not long after, Fung Wah met its demise at the hands of the FMCSA too. This time, over allegations of frame cracks found in multiple buses. As it turns out, frame cracks have no effect on the structural integrity of buses. But it didn't matter. Even more painful is the fact that only a month after Fung Wah was forced off the road, the Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance began rewriting its own guidelines aimed at "alleviating any misdiagnosed violations" derived from frame cracks.

So, with the major Chinatown bus players out of the picture, what on earth were commuters to do? The corporate coaches were too expensive and worse, they didn't offer the relaxed booking policies the Chinatown buses offered. But all of a sudden, without notice, the deus ex machina of New England interstate