A graduate of the University of Southern California and Harvard Graduate School of Design, Thom Mayne (b 1944, Waterbury, Connecticut) founded the firm Morphosis with Michael Rotondi in 1976. Morphosis established itself with such buildings as 2-4-6-8 House (Los Angeles 1978), Sedlak Residence (Venice, California, 1980) and the Kate Mantilini Restaurant (Los Angeles, 1986). Typical of their work is a fusion of complexity and diversity within an ordered framework, achieving a dynamic balance with the aim of reflecting the richness of our pluralistic world.

Although the relationship of architecture to its immediate political and economic context is illusive and complicated, we have no choice but to assert a position which redefines our intentions and our methods of intervention. What are the issues involved in this redefinition? First, it is important to articulate and integrate the public and the private nature of our work to develop an effective conception of coherency (order) as a necessary social condition. Second, it is essential to develop methods of supporting and contributing to idiosyncrasy. The importance today is to comprehend and utilise the complexity of everyday experience. Third, is our need to interpret our time authentically. Architecture's recent intoxication with literal historical precedent has shown us the hopelessness of such a regressive strategy in the face of the magnitude and complexity of our cities. It is necessary for architecture to be based in the present and to aspire to that presence . . .

[The] steadily growing polarity between the increasingly unwieldy 'public' sphere and the ever narrowing 'private' sphere raises questions about the fundamental fitness of groups versus individuals to resolve the problems inherent in our current circumstances. The existence of this polarity does not require a choice between one or the other . . . Architecture has an opportunity to choose to oscillate between these poles, maximising their conflicting status and their creative potential.

The physical manifestation of these destabilising forces is that our contemporary cities are no longer identifiable as entities. A coherency of place (order) is lost as is the perceptibility of an edge or boundary . . .

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Our proposals question the concept of boundary as it marks or delimits an urban territory and as it oscillates between notions of inside/outside and centre/periphery and its inverse. Our earlier projects, 2-4-6-8, Venice III, and 6th Street represented a progressive investigation of surface volume relationships which attempted to maximise the tensions inherent within their conditions . . .

The potential of the modern dynamic ought to take on a particular and human form, turning people outwards. The movement away from a way of life as essentially simple and orderly to a view of life as complex and ironic is what every individual passes through in becoming mature. The essence of development as a human being is in developing the capacity for ever more complex experience . . .

Our proposals must embrace difference, they are products of the complex systems that constitute our contemporary environment. The modernist penchant for unification and simplification must be broken. This, then, is the key issue – the recognition of diversity is the natural evolution of things. To accept this dynamic state rather than to look for a replacement with something fixed, or stable, is to utilise the tremendous energy of the city.

Manifest in the work are organisational strategies capable of representing a high degree of differentiation within a framework of order and continuity. The coexistence, between the wilful architectural elements and the augmented landscape, expresses states of both harmony and tension. The architectural-landscape elements confront, but are simultaneously at home with, their natural setting. The solutions are characterised by their fractured natures which provide a perpetual open-endedness and unfinished quality to the projects. It is part of an accrutive making process that allows inhabitant or observer to anticipate the next intervention. The end of our work therefore marks the beginning for the next . . .

[The] linkage of a benign architecture passively serving a status quo society is what is so apparent in our current situation. The culture of our cities is now overtaken by this frenetic reach for the past. This past is romanticised – seen as a place of safety and security to one who feels intrinsically unsafe . . .

This romanticising of an earlier time as ‘simpler’, fails to grasp that it is in the realisation of complexity and contradiction that we begin to find our way out of the psychological malaise we’re currently suffering. It is embracing hazard, nurturing an eye for the idiosyncratic, the phrases left unspoken, the unfinished – that allows us to utilise the potentiality of our cities. Our work is defined by its occupation of space and by the presence of the object(s). It is about the techniques of construction which provide for a frame of reference beyond beauty and history . . .

Modern urbanism has provided the world with a vast legacy of diminished expectations, if architecture has a role to play then we must realign its purposes with the aims of the modern city world. The modern, dystopian city we inhabit is made up of projects which offer hope and a meaningful future. (pp7-17)

Extracts. Source: Thom Mayne/Morphosis Architects No 23, Academy Editions (London)
expectations, if architecture has a single objective, it is to clarify its intentions and realign its purposes with the aim of reflecting the richness of our pluralistic world. The modern, dystopian city will overlay differences rather than segment them. We will hold to that which is difficult, because it is difficult . . . and by its difficulty is worthwhile. A city is a living organism, a work-in-progress, an impasto of forms made by successive waves of habitation. One should continue to choose to do only projects which offer hope of a complex, integrated, contradictory and meaningful future. (pp7-17)