



# FORMING **AND** CENTERING

Foundational Aspects  
of Architectural Design

**Kenneth M. Moffett**

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Kenneth M. Moffett

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# INTRODUCTION

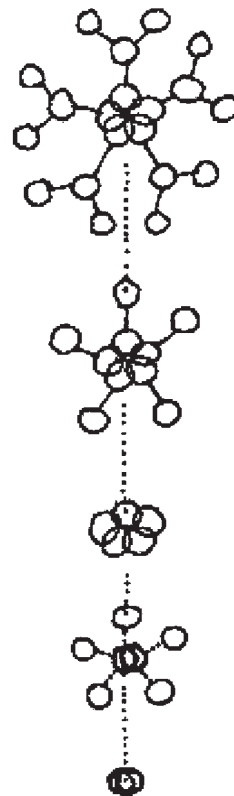
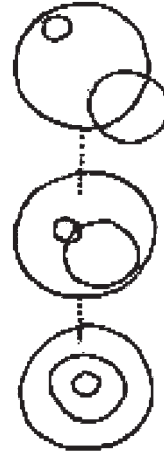
The design of buildings, even in this age of headlong technological change, is a process that can seem shrouded in mystery. It is a difficult art, as one might infer by the labored nature of much recent built form. It's an art—and a profession and a business—of many parts. Architects are steeped from their school years in the primacy of synthesis, of the need to put all the disparate pieces of the puzzle together systematically toward the final goal of the building in place and in use. But somewhere in this establishment of concepts and resolution of practicalities, certain elemental aspects of how architecture is comprised have never quite been elucidated. They sit in the background, almost as if too self-evident or prosaic to merit closer examination. Hidden in the “hindbrain” of the design process and buried in the multitude of factors competing for attention, these primal aspects remain rather vague and ill-understood, contributing to a sense of enigma. This discussion will focus on these aspects alone, dusting them off, lighting their dark corners and revealing their own internal sets of interrelationships.

“Forming and Centering” refers to architectural issues, although these terms can also evoke something of a new-age flavor, as in efforts to “center” one's life or psyche. Such pursuits, which may involve the paring away of life's complications in a search for irreducible meanings, actually do have fitting parallels: in the following discussion, much material normally considered basic to architectural theory

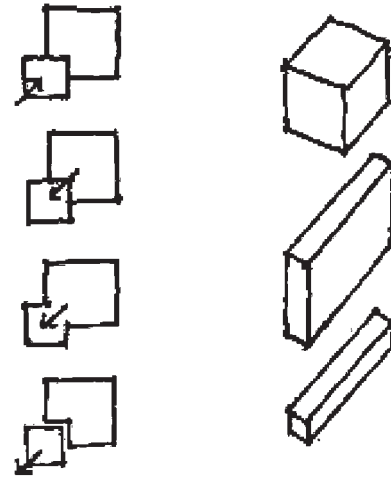
and practice has been set aside to help reveal some innermost fundamentals. The title may suggest yet another implication to anyone who has worked with clay and a potter's wheel, wherein "centering" is the specific skill of locating and keeping the clay on the center of the rotating wheel-head. Again, there are relevant implications for architecture, both in terms of this process of centering and in the act of forming in general: of taking an amorphous medium and giving it shape and structure.

I believe there is a discrete number of basic approaches to forming in architecture, and an exploration of this assertion is the subject of Part One. The less explored world of centering in architecture is examined in Part Two. The main thesis of this book is that forming and centering—the process of giving shape and the organization which gives it focus—together comprise a sort of elemental foundation or armature for the multitude of other ingredients involved in built form.

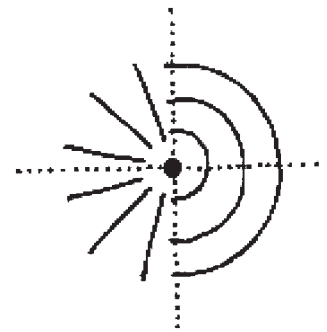
Architecture arises from a remarkably diverse, conflicted and confusing mix of factors. Building systems, materials, color, the site, light and orientation, vista and sequence, public safety, physical and sociocultural context, program, budget, sustainability, fashion, hubris, politics—not to mention the well of confusion called, for lack of a better word, "aesthetics"—clearly such a complex, interwoven mesh of issues must be synthesized with skill to achieve works of merit. The arguments which follow seek in no way to diminish the significance of these factors, but to retreat past them—to unlearn, in a sense, the taught compulsion to investigate architecture as a palimpsest or network of interrelated factors—in order to arrive at a clean slate upon which to examine the issues that remain. The arguments herein seek to support a view that these remaining primal issues are those that I have called forming and centering, preceding all the other aspects of detail and circumstance. This is not to assert that these issues arise first in the course of design: on the contrary, design is generally a complex iterative process from which a project's "form" and "center" recognizably emerge only at some intermediate point. The exercise of reversing this order and paring the scheme back is necessary to reveal or distill these underlying modes of the design process.



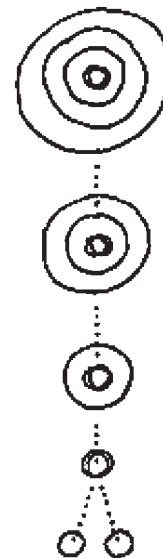
“Additive” and “subtractive” form, familiar topics in analyses of architecture’s fundamentals, will be visited in this discussion, but in terms of the multifaceted inner structure that characterizes these deceptively basic means of forming. And they have a place in a *larger order* of forming methods, the subject of Part One. Far from simple models for form, addition and subtraction are complex subsets of this larger interrelated series of approaches, capable of elucidating much of the broad gamut of built form. Issues of “dimensionality” supplement this examination of formative modes, leading with discussions of form that is dominantly volumetric, but proceeding to “planar” and “linear” form and the implications of the formative modes as manifest in works that embody these dimensionalities—and their combinations.<sup>1</sup>



In like fashion, a continuum of approaches to the center—to a work’s focus, hub or heart—will be developed in Part Two, which likewise finds a place for many if not most works within the full pantheon of architectural form as presently understood. In the spirit of this search for ultimate essentials, illustrations are honed to the simplest format that will directly communicate the issue at hand, while still affording a general sense of form and scale. Most figures vary in scale as required to adequately make their point, though in a few cases sets of figures are adjusted to the same scale for the sake of pertinent comparisons. A benefit of our times is that further information in the form of narratives, photographs, delineations, and contextual views of most of the projects referenced here is readily available online.



This paired distinction of forming and centering arises in part from the immiscible nature and purpose of these processes, despite their intimate mutual involvement both spatially and temporally during the design process. As the last step in “paring away” the veiling effect of design’s multitudinous factors, the thesis here is that these two remaining primal matters must in turn be disentangled from each other to reveal the nature of each in fullest clarity. Ironically, given the symbiotic nature of the two processes, they must be treated separately to be explained most effectively. Some case studies



1. Talk of planar and linear form may seem paradoxical or counterintuitive, but these terms are used informally; they refer to basic distinctions of proportion.