

# Not for the meek : Albert Frey's architecture in nature

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*«Nature was to be harnessed by means of intellectual apprehension, side by side with men's idealised and performative artefacts.»*

# NOT FOR THE MEEK— ALBERT FREY'S ARCHITECTURE IN NATURE

Guillem Pons

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In 1968 Michael Heizer first conceived his famous sculpture «Levitated Mass», a megalith mounted on a long concrete trench, today resting in the Resnick North Lawn at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It was not installed there, however, until 2012, long after the first attempt failed in 1969, when the boom of the crane to lift the boulder broke down, and the project was aborted. It was only in 2006, while Heizer was working on another project in the Jurupa Valley in California, when he found a second boulder of 340 tons—almost three times heavier than its failed predecessor of 120 tons—and decided to attempt the project again. Comparable to the titanic effort of Sisyphus<sup>(1)</sup>—but with the stone luckily remaining in its destination—, the endeavour of its transportation became a milestone in contemporary art installations: trees cut down, cars towed and traffic lights were temporarily removed during the 105 miles travel that took place over the course of eleven nights to bring the megalith to its current location.<sup>(2)</sup>

Such Herculean endeavour, to essentially displace a large rock in order to display it atop a concrete wall, turns out to be slightly controversial in the light of the technical requirements necessary to exhibit the boulder. Initially conceived to rest on the bare trench walls, it was eventually supported by protruding steel brackets visually compromising the floating effect and ultimately defying the very purpose of the staging, namely a «levitating mass». There is no doubt, however, that the sensorial experience achieved is certainly striking; one walks down the slope confronting the peril of a 340-ton boulder above one's head sadistically resting on these steel brackets. It has indeed a powerful corporal intensity and it forcefully conveys the idea of «stillness» and «longevity» through the visual narrative of mass against gravity, which in the words of the author himself «is meant to last 3,500 years».<sup>(3)</sup> In short, we could say that this monumental staging of a colossal rock, ready to crack your head open, stands significantly for the perpetual endeavour of man's will to harness nature.

Parallel to Heizer's artificial staging of his levitated mass, the Land art movement in the US of the 1960s and 1970s ambiguously navigated between the expression of man-made artefacts and nature's power of representation by means of monumental setups. In the quest of a genuine expression of form, these artists found paradoxically in the interaction with nature the ability to suspend time and create an almost purposeless stillness anchored in the experience of the present. In his famous essay *Entropy And The New Monuments*, Robert Smithson boldly described the ability of this new art to «reduce time down to fractions of seconds» and to «not only not remember the past (unlike the old monuments) but to forget the future».<sup>(4)</sup> An art whose ultimate goal was to eliminate the presence of time and ultimately the need of a purpose elevated itself to the status of a value-free form, namely one that annihilates any preceding or succeeding action, placed just in the fraction of the very moment of existence. In the light of this assumption, Heizer's «subversion of nature» was a hideout for the very representation of its own existence simply expressing in its striking performance the absolute absence of purpose. Toying perhaps with the idea of the divine intervention that

renders any preceding action superfluous, Heizer's exhibitionism of a harnessed nature can be read as a means to an end that questions the very idea of man's aimless creation power. It attempts to achieve at once a form that doesn't belong to man nor nature that nullifies laws and values or, as in the words of Smithson, an «all-encompassing sameness that performs no natural function but exists between mind and matter, detached from both, representing neither».<sup>(5)</sup>

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This ambiguity in man's representation of nature can be observed as central in the work of the architect Albert Frey and his quest to establish himself as a modern architect.<sup>(6)</sup> After some influential years traveling through the vast American landscape, photographing and capturing the eye-catching reflective steel structures found amid the desert, Frey published in 1939 his seminal work «In Search of a Living Architecture», a publication that attempted to formulate his own idea of architectural form and space sensitivity through the observation and analysis of events and formations in nature; the flatness of the desert surface that provides a resting level from where to measure, judge and appreciate other shapes; the rock walls raising abruptly on the canyon producing a hard but startling composition of horizontal and vertical planes; the soft relief of the graceful lines of palm trees, et cetera. This approach to nature was interestingly woven with a claim for a modern architectural language, promoting new building techniques and refusing old conventional forms in favour of more rational ones. As a result, Frey's attempt to reconcile man's efficient creation and nature's universal forms unveiled an ambiguous relationship based on oppositions. Whilst claiming that «nature was an endless source of inspiration», he also endorsed modern techniques that provided «true, smooth, or polished surfaces» that were more attractive, easier to clean, and better suited to human use, no longer resembling those which nature could supply.<sup>(7)</sup> He found on this intrinsic contrast of the two the source of what he called «aesthetic satisfaction»—or beauty, for that matter—in which the involvement of nature was a *sine qua non* that authorized the noble practice of architecture:

«Modern structures and natural settings are not homogeneous, they are direct opposites, a contrast which emphasizes the precise appearance of the buildings and the irregular expressions of nature, to the advantage of both. With such uniformity of machine production and such wide distribution, the ever-changing natural surroundings become an indispensable element of composition for avoiding monotony.»<sup>(8)</sup>

Nature was to be harnessed by means of intellectual apprehension, side by side with man's idealised and performative artefacts. Paradoxically, by proposing a juxtaposition of the two against monotony, Frey was in fact anticipating what Smithson later called the «all-encompassing sameness», a new form (or monument) that nullified any natural function or action, representing mere existence and persistence.

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Michael Heizer, Levitated Mass  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Frey's 'new forms' are ostensibly performed in his subsequently built work, particularly in his own houses Frey House 1 (1939) and Frey House 2 (1964). The first one, a house of reduced dimensions built entirely in prefabricated components, investigated the minimum dwelling and the relationship with the exterior. The house, essentially a living room open to three sides, with a subsidiary kitchen and a bathroom unit on the north side, was covered by a flat horizontal roof supported by freestanding steel-frame panels arrayed around the corners, a scheme clearly influenced by Mies van der Rohe's patio houses, primarily addressing the exterior by means of projecting surfaces, a platonic encounter with nature that rapidly shifted with the successive extensions that followed, from a detached and observing position towards an actual insertion of nature by means of enclosures; a swimming pool surrounded by a pergola; a surrounding pond enclosed by a fence of corrugated fiberglass panels; and the addition of a 360-degree view room on the first floor surrounded by eight windows in a round fashion. Nature became no longer a canvas or a distant ideal but the element of composition par excellence, introducing an architecture based on the interrelation of both natural and artificial fragments supporting one another.

On his second house, Albert Frey spent few years of preparation, surveying the site, meticulously choosing its position, measuring the shadows and incidence of the sun, before attempting the actual construction of the house. Once it was planned it took merely few weeks to build. It was essentially composed of a concrete stepped platform, a steel-frame construction with floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors, a big boulder and a sloping roof tilted at the same angle as the terrain. As opposed to the former house, where the subsequent extensions to the simple box pursued contrasting shapes to relieve the straight lines, house 2 achieved this balance at once with the inclusion of a big rock, as an integral part of the space, and an extraordinary site-anchored location of the house. The experience on the arrival brings full awareness of the surrounding setup. One arrives at the carport, flushed with the access road, and takes the cement stairs up to the terraced platform with a kidney-shaped swimming pool. Following the contour lines, few shallow steps lead to the house, facing south and open to three sides. The building creates a roof pavilion with panoramic views, and the interior is effortlessly orchestrated by the boulder articulating a sleeping, living and dining area under the same roof. The stepped floor, following the natural slope, further enhances the subtle subdivision by slightly rising the dining table above the living area and dropping the view down to the pool where the built-in concrete benches for sunbathing surround the exterior platform. Pale yellow and green sage colours decorate the curtains along with a midnight blue corrugated steel ceiling. Wooden built-in furniture with sand-coloured upholstery add a subtle variance to

a colour palette that tries to liaise with the nuances of the outside world.

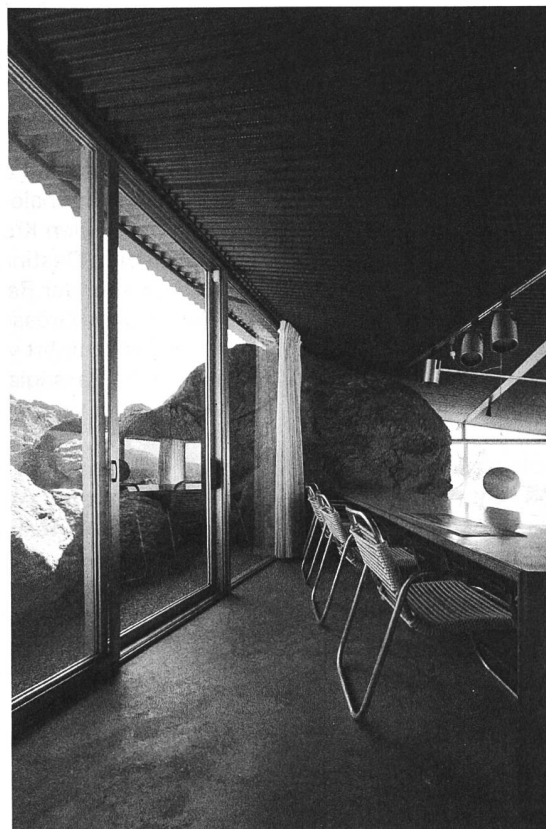
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Mass-produced and prefabricated building components grew popular in the US with the advent of Modernisation during the post-war period due to the need of rapid development. The light, clean and reflective surfaces they provided became tokens of a 'new society', and particularly in the sunny weather of the Californian west coast, the Case Study Houses programme—instigated by editor John Entenza<sup>(9)</sup>—led a movement that provided the architectural world with a coherent style endorsed by efficient means of production. This new aesthetics of modern design were based on standardised, cheap and ready to use products, such as the Eames' moulded plastic chairs, the light steel frame constructions of Craig Elwood, or the refined houses of Pierre Koenig, to name a few. Even though Albert Frey also fervidly channelled this building ethos since the beginning of his career, he never became part of this movement, diverting from the puritanism and subtlety it embodied. Frey's use of ready-made systems was less dogmatic and bold, and thus used only when necessary; the lightest roof possible to simply protect from the sun; steps casted in situ following the slope for best comfort; tilted position of the box to enhance views, and so on. He regarded mass-production as a pragmatic technological improvement available to his own goals facing the challenges of the environment: the sun, the views, the climate. It was perhaps Albert Frey's virtue to subordinate mass-produced systems to the accommodation of nature the reason why his modern approach endured the West Coast context longer than his peers. He managed to avoid the temptations of signalling and self-representing the goodness of the new building aesthetics, and he learnt to use them in a more laconic and measured way to surmount nature. Interestingly enough, the benevolent style of the Case Study Houses did not last long, and by the 1960s it was no longer fashionable.<sup>(10)</sup>

Time helps us to put in perspective Frey's body of work. It reveals the bulk of his attempts and the finds and solutions he explored in his own 'search for a living architecture'. It provides us with both the burden and the apex of his career, culminating in the simplest and most striking solution: a house as a monument to man's will to harness nature. And it is perhaps similar to Heizer's 'levitated mass', that it is neither about the celebration of nature nor modern architecture for its own sake, but instead about the battle against time and endurance, a courageous architecture that stands as a means to an end, where the struggle is both the futile effort and the very purpose of man's existence. In the words of Albert Camus remembering Sisyphus: «the struggle itself is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy».<sup>(11)</sup>



Albert Frey, House II,  
outside view on pool



Albert Frey, House II,  
rock in living room