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Derrida, Architecture and Philosophy



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The history of philosophy has always demonstrated a two-fold concern with architecture. The first is by philosophy either addressing architecture as an aesthetic form (eg in Hegel's *Aesthetics*), or deploying architectural examples in a more general discussion of aesthetics or art (eg Heidegger's discussion of the Greek temple in *The Origin of the Work of Art*). The second is the presence of architectural forms (eg Kant's architectonic) or architectural metaphors in the develop-

ment or construction of a philosophical argument. The second of these is, in this instance, the more relevant. To delimit a specific terrain of discussion into which Derrida's writings on architecture can be articulated, I will concentrate on the justly famous architectural metaphor developed by Descartes in the second part of the *Discourse on Method*. Despite the length of this passage I will quote it in full in order that its force may be made clear:

... there is not usually so much perfection in works composed of several parts and produced by different craftsmen as in the works of one man. Thus we see that buildings undertaken and completed by a single architect are usually more attractive and better planned than those which several have tried to patch up by adapting old walls built for different purposes. Again, ancient cities which have gradually grown up from mere villages into large towns are usually ill-proportioned, compared with those orderly towns which planners lay out as they fancy on level ground. Looking at buildings of the former individually, you will often find as much art in them if not more than in those of the latter; but in view of their arrangement – a tall one here, a small one there – and the way they make the streets crooked and irregular you would say it is chance rather than the will of men using reason, that placed them so. And when you consider that there have always been certain officials whose job it is to see that private buildings embellish public places you will understand how difficult it is to make something perfect by working only on what others have produced.¹

This passage refers, if only initially, to Descartes' attempt to justify both his own philosophical project as well as establishing the necessity of its being undertaken by a single philosopher working alone.

Descartes is attempting neither a reworking nor a refurbishing of past philosophy but a radical departure that thereby establishes a new and original philosophical system. Descartes' aim therefore is two-fold. On the one hand he wants to establish a total and unified system, and on the other, one that breaks fundamentally with past philosophical systems (in particular, of course, the Scholastics) and is thus not tainted by earlier mistakes and prejudices. It is this two-fold aim that is expressed in his metaphor of the activity of architects and builders.

The elaborate metaphor opens with a juxtaposition of the one and the many. Works produced by one craftsman have a greater degree of 'perfection' than those produced by a number. Buildings designed and built by a single architect are, as a consequence, far more attractive than buildings whose refurbishing has involved the participation of a collection of architects working over a number of years and inevitably with different intentions. Having made this point Descartes then extends the range of the metaphor, moving from a single construction to a city. Here the contrast is between a city which has developed through time, through consecutive and perhaps overlapping stages and which therefore contains ill-proportioned and irregular components, and a city or town conceived and built within an extended single moment. The force of this opposition is then reinforced by the further opposition between chance and reason. If there is anything attractive about the buildings, or even the quarters of an ancient city, then it is the result of chance. The beauty of a city designed and built during the single extended moment is the result of the application of reason. Before taking up the important opposition between reason and chance, it is essential to dwell on this single extended moment.

The moment is the enactment of that which reason dictates. The regulation of reason extends through the conception, the enactment

and its completion. Reason has what could amount to a universal and to that extent an atemporal extension. The singularity of the construction (a singularity excluding plurality), the singularity of the architect (excluding pluralism and thereby erecting the architect as God – one replacing the other within similar hierarchic principles) is reinscribed within the singularity of this moment.

The lack of order in the ancient city is marked by – as well as being the mark of – the lack of reason. It has the consequence that not only is the city in some sense 'mad',² it can also be thought within the totalising purview of reason, except of course as mad. Therefore when taken to its logical extreme the architectural metaphor indicates both the possibility of a unified totality – to be provided by the application of reason – as well as that which stands opposed to this possibility, namely, madness; presented here as the untotalisable plurality of the ancient city. The opposition between reason and madness is introduced by, and within, an architectural metaphor.

The triumph of reason over madness, Descartes is insisting, is the path to be followed by the philosopher as architect and the architect as philosopher. The activity of each is delimited not by reason as such, but by the oppositions between reason and chance, and reason and madness. There is of course an imperative within Descartes' metaphor. It indicates his understanding of the philosophical task. For Descartes the totality and necessary unity engendered by reason can be attained. Within the metaphor the old city can be razed to the ground. The new city will emerge without bearing the traces of the old. There will be no traces of the old to be remarked. As will be seen it is precisely the possibility of the absence of any remark, or rather the impossibility of its absence that is taken up, amongst other things, when Derrida writes of 'maintaining'. The chance of architecture is maintained by the 'interruption' between the traditional and the affirmative. This point will be pursued.

There are two important components of Descartes' architectural metaphor and the ensuing philosophical practice to which it gives rise. The first is the functional opposition between reason and chance (reason and madness). The second, far more difficult to discern, involves the opposition between the inside and the outside. The metaphor of the city, in order that it further Descartes' philosophical end, must be understood as a structured space, and therefore as a place to be re-deployed in the construction of the city of reason. Furthermore it must be constructed to allow the philosopher or architect the possibility of a place outside its own wall. Regulation and control must take place from the outside. The metaphor of the city is therefore also ensnared within the further opposition of inside and outside (as well as the one between theory and practice). I want to develop these two elements.

The intriguing element that can be seen to emerge from within the metaphor of the city is the implicit recognition that if the city of reason has an outside, then it is madness. The haphazard chance of *dérailson* is constrained to take place outside the city walls. The consequence of this is that the architect must be written into the city in order to avoid madness and yet the philosopher or architect must be outside the gates in order to exert control. The architectonic needs to be regulated from outside. Present here is the problem of the before and in front of. The philosopher (or architect) would seem therefore to be placed – and to have placed themselves – within a double-bind, that can, in historical terms, perhaps only be resolved by God.

The importance of the description of the opposition between reason and chance (reason and madness) as functional lies in the fact that it indicates that the opposition is neither arbitrary nor simply a result or conclusion, but plays a structuring role in the text. However in the present context it is the second component that is the more relevant. In spatial terms the distinction between the inside and the outside is perhaps best understood in relation to the labyrinth. The labyrinth is obviously the sign of the city. It is also the sign of writing.³ Both the labyrinth and writing are concerned with, if only because they give rise to, firstly the problem of the place, and secondly an epistemology of

the place. A philosophy of totality and unity positions itself, of necessity, outside the place – outside the labyrinth and writing – and as such, knowledge is invariably linked to the transcendental. In Cartesian terms this distinction finds its most adequate formulation in terms of the distinction between the understanding and the imagination. Only the understanding working with transcendental rules can determine and yield certainty. The understanding is always positioned outside and then comes to be applied in the world. This is not to suggest that for Descartes knowledge is empirical; rather knowledge is of the empirical. The conditions for the possibility of knowledge – the method to be applied and the rules governing clear and distinct perception, etc – are themselves transcendental. The imagination on the other hand is trapped in the labyrinth. The problem of the imagination is that in itself it lacks a limit. The imagination is essential for knowledge but only when its results can be controlled by the understanding. For Descartes the typology of consciousness necessitates a divide between the domain of the understanding and the domain of the imagination. It is clear that this distinction – one that is repeated and reinforced in other of his writings in terms of the distinction between the understanding and the will – has specific ontological and temporal considerations.

In tracing the implications of the architectural metaphor in Descartes' *Discourse on Method* what has emerged is a series of oppositions that play a structuring role within the presentation of his philosophical position. It is quite literally constructed in terms of them. It is of course precisely in relation to these oppositions that the force of Deconstruction can be located. It is by tracing through their implications – allowing their unstable logic to unfold – that the work of Deconstruction begins to take place. Derrida details this aspect of Deconstruction in the following terms:

De-construction . . . analyses and compares conceptual pairs which are currently accepted as self-evident and natural, as if they had not been institutionalised at some precise moment, as if they had no history. Because of being taken for granted they restrict thinking.⁴

Deconstruction, in this instance, is therefore a beginning. However Deconstruction is not the simple reversal of the dominant term within an opposition. This becomes increasingly clear in Derrida's writing on the work of Bernard Tschumi.⁵ A fundamental strategy of that paper (*Point de folie – Maintenant l'architecture*) is the retention of both madness and chance and yet they are not part of a simple opposition. They are not merely the other side of reason.

The work of Tschumi under consideration by Derrida is his plan of the *Parc de la Villette*, and in particular a series of constructions within the park known as *Les Folies*. Of this title, name, signature, Derrida makes the important point that they are not 'madness (*la folie*), the allegorical hypostasis of Unreason, non-sense, but the madresses (*les folies*)'. In sum what makes Derrida's writings on architecture of particular interest is the way he tries to indicate in what sense a philosophical argument or position can be incorporated into a different activity. Two elements need to be stated in advance. The first is that Derrida is emphatic that despite appearances Deconstruction is not itself an architectural metaphor. Not only is he suspicious of metaphors; it is also the case that Deconstruction does not amount to a simple dismantling, it is at the same time – and in the Nietzschean sense – affirmative.

The second point is that logocentrism is evident in the way in which architecture, habitation, dwelling, living, etc are understood within both philosophical and architectural thinking. It is the evident presence and structural force of logocentrism that provides a possible entry for Deconstruction. It enters via the rearticulation of metaphysics. It is of course a rearticulation that is housed architecturally and yet extends beyond architecture. It is at home in the history of Western metaphysics. As Derrida suggests, the 'architectonics of invariable points . . . regulates all of what is called Western culture, far beyond its architecture.'⁶ However it also takes place – and finds a place – in its

architecture. It is this that makes a Deconstruction of architectural thinking possible. It is furthermore what makes an affirmative architecture possible. Derrida says of Tschumi's *folios* that they: '... affirm, and engage their affirmation beyond this ultimately annihilating, secretly nihilistic repetition of metaphysical architecture.'⁶

There is an interesting parallel here between Derrida's discussion of architecture and his discussion of literature. Without returning to the question – what is literature? – it is essential to point out that in Derrida's work there is no privileging of the literary as opposed to the philosophical. Both can be and usually are logocentric. They are both sites, inhabited and constructed by the repetition of metaphysics. For Derrida literature is something to-come. It is this element that he locates in the work of the French writer Roger Laporte. Derrida writes of his work *Fugue* that '... in inscribing itself in an historically, libidinally, economically, politically determined field ... no meta-language is powerful enough today to dominate the progress [*la marche*] or rather the un-folding [*la dé-marche*] of this writing.'⁷ He goes on to add: '*Fugue* ... takes away in advance all metalinguistic resources and makes of this quasi-operation an unheard music outside of genre.'⁸

Taking into consideration Derrida's own writings on genre⁹ – his Deconstruction of the possibility of genres as all-inclusive – further serves to indicate that in the place of texts dominated by logocentrism and which therefore count as a rearticulation of metaphysics, as well as themselves being inscribed within 'conceptual pairs', Laporte's text *Fugue* is, in the sense alluded to above, affirmative. It is *as* a work – and *in* its work – the literature-to-come. There is therefore, within Derrida's own philosophical undertaking, an important connection between the works/writings of Tschumi and Laporte. Their futural dimension, their being works-to-come, is located in their connection to that which preceded. The hinge connecting them marks a type of sublation.

What has to be traced in Derrida's understanding of Tschumi is this affirmative dimension. The point of departure is provided by the oppositions between reason and chance, and reason and madness. It is already clear in what sense these 'conceptual pairs' are operative in Descartes' architectural metaphor. The question is how are madness and chance taken over by Derrida?

The first point to note is that Tschumi's *folios* are not, as has already been mentioned, simply the other side of reason. They are marked by the opposition reason/madness and yet not articulated in terms of it. Connected to the act of affirmation is the equally important process of what could be called a form of displacement or distancing. The process of distancing is found in Derrida's description of the *folios*:

Tschumi's 'first' concern will no longer be to organise space as a function or in view of economic, aesthetic, epiphanic, or techno-utilitarian norms. These norms will be taken into consideration, but they will find themselves subordinated and reinscribed in one place in a text and in a space that they no longer command in the final instance. By pushing architecture towards its limits, a place will be made for 'pleasure'; each *folie* will be destined for a given 'use', with its own cultural, ludic, pedagogical, scientific and philosophical finalities.¹⁰

The distancing or displacement – and indeed the hinge marking or remarking their connection to logocentrism/metaphysics/'conceptual pairs' – is captured by Derrida when he writes of 'norms' being 'taken into consideration'; being 'reinscribed'; present but no longer in 'command'. Norms become, in Nietzsche's sense, 'fictions'¹¹ – thereby opening up, though always in a way to be determined, the possibility gestured at in what Derrida calls 'transarchitecture'.

Distancing is still connective. There is no pure beyond. In any adventure there is still the remark. The Cartesian desire for the absolutely new, for the completely unique, is, for Derrida, an impossibility. It forms part of logocentrism's desire for a self-enclosed totality. The remark can always be remarked upon. It is in terms of 'maintaining' that this interplay is described. In addition however it is

also exemplified, stylistically, in the aphorisms which Derrida chose to preface a collection of recent papers on philosophy and architecture. The uniqueness and self-referring nature of the aphorism is deconstructed via that aphorism itself. Self-reference is an impossibility. Perhaps even the act of citing the following aphorism (its citation rather than its contents, especially as it is incomplete) is sufficient to make this point:

An authentic aphorism must never refer to another. It is sufficient unto itself; world or monad. But whether it is wanted or not, whether one sees it or not, the aphorisms interlink here as aphorisms, and in number, numbered. Their series yields to an irreversible order ...¹²

Derrida locates the work of Tschumi within a paradox and also within the *maintenant*. The presence of what could be described as a logic of paradox within Derrida's work is too large a theme to be taken up here. It is, however, at work in his discussion of Tschumi. When, for example, he argues that the 'red points' (deployed by Tschumi as part of his project) both disperse and gather, they become and articulate this logic. However the dispersal and gathering is held together and is maintained: 'The red points space, maintaining architecture in the dissociation of spacing. But this *maintenant* does not only maintain a past and a tradition: it does not ensure a synthesis. It maintains the interruption, in other words the relation to the other *per se*.'¹³ It is of course precisely in terms of 'maintaining' that an affirmative conception of architecture is allowed to take place. Furthermore it is one that involves and deploys chance and madness in the 'interruption' with the 'conceptual pairs' within which the history of philosophy has placed them. Chance becomes the wager. And madness, that which by a fascinating etymological gamble is freed from one madness, becomes, amongst other things, the 'madness of an asemantics'. The importance of chance lies in its breaking of a conceptual closure. 'Disassociation' takes place – yet it takes place in the 'space of reassembly'. Maintained, it could be argued, within a logic of paradox.

The oppositions within which Descartes' architectural metaphor took place are no longer either authoritative or central. Madness and chance have been freed not just from their subordinate place within those oppositions, they have also emerged as affirmative 'concepts' within which to think the possibility of a Deconstructive architecture. The nature – and, it must be added, a nature beyond essentialism – of such an architecture is described by Peter Eisenman in the following way:

What is being proposed is an expansion beyond the limitation presented by the classical mode to the realisation of architecture as an independent discourse, free from external values; that is, the intersection of the meaningful, the arbitrary and the timeless in the artificial.¹⁴

The challenge presented by Deconstruction to architecture is the 'same' as the challenge it presents to all the arts, and of course to philosophy, literary criticism, etc. It is a challenge that, initially, takes place on the level of thinking; here in the example of architecture thinking maintaining. Thinking that comes to be enacted – or can be seen to be enacted – in the architectural work of Eisenman and Tschumi amongst others.

Having come this far it is worth pausing to try and place Deconstruction before architecture, or architectural thinking before Deconstruction. In either case the 'before' does not mark the presence of a universal and transcendental law – eg the work of the understanding within the Cartesian texts, or Hegelian 'absolute knowledge' – that would regulate architecture or Deconstruction as philosophy. Does Deconstruction allow for what within traditional aesthetics is of fundamental philosophical importance; namely, evaluation? Derrida has tried to delimit the relationship between Deconstruction and architectural thinking: 'Architectural thinking can only be Deconstructive in the following sense: as an attempt to visualise that which establishes the authority of the architectural concatenation in philosophy.'¹⁵

The 'architectural concatenation' is itself repeated within the his-

tory of metaphysics. A repetition that is found throughout the texts – and in part structures the texts – that are included within the history of philosophy. (It has been observed in Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, though it could just have easily been traced in a diverse range of texts, including Aristotle, Kant, Hegel and Heidegger.) Its authority is precisely the object of Deconstruction. Deconstructed authority is retained but without its authority, although when it comes to the question of evaluation, the criteria are themselves articulated in terms of that authority. In *The Critique of Judgement* Kant subsumes the evaluation of architecture under the rubric of design which is then joined to taste. Taste becomes the universal and self-referential form of legitimation working before, during and after the construction: 'In painting, sculpture, and in fact in all the formative arts, in architecture and horticulture, so far as fine arts, the design is what is essential. Here it is not what gratifies in sensation but merely what pleases by its form,

that is the fundamental prerequisite for taste.'¹⁶

In other words the vocabulary of evaluation – the language of aesthetics – does itself form part of the philosophical architectonic. The consequence of this is that if there is to be a language of evaluation stemming from Deconstruction then it will necessitate what Nietzsche described as a 'revaluation of all values'. Even though Derrida may appear to privilege the uniqueness of a specific work, this is not a recourse to a fundamental pragmatism. In fact the thing/event can never be unique and self-referential; hence gathering and dispersal; hence *maintenant/maintenir*; hence the always already-present remark. A Deconstructive aesthetic and the plurality of a Deconstructive criteria for evaluation are yet to be written. Derrida's writings on architecture, while on architecture, are also an aesthetics-to-come. The potential for a Deconstructive aesthetics is to that extent always already written.



1 R Descartes, 'Discourse on Method', in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol 1, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p 116.

2 Derrida has written a number of texts on 'madness', including critiques of Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation* and Blanchot's *La folie du jour*.

3 Derrida makes similar points in an interview, 'Architettura ove il desiderio puo abitare', *Domus*, No 671, April 1986. While it is perhaps a transgression, I have rewritten some of the arguments he presents so as to link them with more general, if not conventional, philosophical concerns. Perhaps, again, this is translation as transgression.

4 A point made by Derrida in the above-mentioned interview.

5 'Point de folie', trans Kate Linker, *AA Files*, No 12, 1986.

6 *ibid*, p 69.

7 J Derrida, 'Ce qui reste à force de musique', *Psyché*, Galilée, 1987, p 96, (my trans). For an amplification of the point made about literature see R Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, Harvard University Press, 1986, pp 255-318. I have discussed the importance of Gasché's book in 'Naming Deconstruction', *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol 1, No 2, 1988.

8 *ibid*, p 96.

9 J Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', *Glyph*, 7, 1980.

10 Derrida, *op cit*, p 69.

11 See F Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans by W Kaufman, Vantage Books, New York, 1966, Section 21.

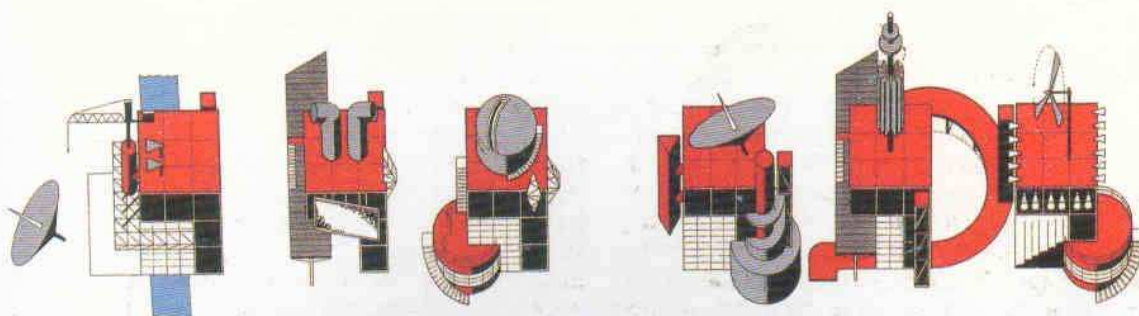
12 J Derrida, 'Cinquante-deux aphorismes pour un avant-propos', *Psyché*, Galilée, 1987, p 513 (my trans). This text formed the preface to *Mesure pour mesure: Architecture et philosophie*, Cahiers du CCI (Centre Georges Pompidou), 1987, a book emerging from a meeting between philosophers and architects organised by the Centre International de Philosophie.

13 Derrida, *op cit*, p 75.

14 P Eisenman, 'The End of the Classical', *Perspecta*, No 21, 1984. Derrida has written on Eisenman in, 'Pourquoi Peter Eisenman écrit de si bons livres', *Psyché*, pp 496-508. For an introduction to Eisenman's work see *Investigations in Architecture: Eisenman Studies at the GSD: 1983-85*, Harvard University, 1986, and P Eisenman, *Fin d'Ou T Hou S*, Architectural Association, 1985.

15 See the interview with Derrida mentioned above.

16 I Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans J Meredith, Oxford University Press, 1986, p 67.



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