

# DAVID LODGE

## Deconstruction: A Review of the Tate Gallery Symposium

**By far the best and most comprehensive review of the Tate Gallery Symposium, this article, first published in the 'Review' section of the Guardian, Friday, April 8th, 1988, is included here because of both the context it gives to the event itself, and the clear and general overview of the subject as a whole. Beginning with the Derridean notion of Deconstruction in philosophy and literature, it goes on to question the wider application of such ideas in the fields of art and architecture.**

The only way you could get into the auditorium for the Tate Gallery's one-day symposium on Deconstruction in Art and Architecture was through a swing door clearly marked with the international 'No Entry' symbol. Whether this was planned or accidental, it seemed appropriate that we should be transgressing the conventional meaning of this familiar sign all day long (and it was a long day), as we shuffled backwards and forwards between the auditorium and the lobbies; for one of the axioms of Deconstruction is that the bond between the signifier and the signified is not as stable as is generally supposed, but on the contrary 'always already' subject to slippage and the play of *différance*.

Some who pushed their way through the No Entry sign were hoping to find out what Deconstruction was. Others of us were curious to discover what it could possibly have to do with Art and Architecture.

Deconstruction is the brainchild of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Over the last 20 years it has been an important – some would say the dominant – element in that general movement in the human sciences known as post-structuralism. It's not so much a method, more a frame of mind – one that has tirelessly questioned the nature and possibility of meaning through *analysis* of and commentary upon texts – originally philosophical texts, then literary texts.

Taking their cue from Derrida's assertion that 'language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique', Deconstructionist literary critics, especially at Yale, have demonstrated, to their own satisfaction and in the teeth of traditional scholarship, that any text inevitably undermines its own claim to have a determinate meaning. Since this procedure opens up the text to multiple interpretations, its appeal to literary critics is perhaps obvious.

But how could a movement so deeply invested in the analysis of verbal language be relevant to art and architecture? My first reaction to the announcement of the Tate Symposium was incredulity.

Well, we live and learn. I soon discovered that Derrida himself had published a whole book about the aesthetics of the visual arts, recently translated into English as *The Truth In Painting*, and that he has taken a keen interest in architecture, to the point of collaborating with Bernard Tschumi and Peter Eisenman on projects for the Parc de la Villette, a kind of post-structuralist theme park now under construction (or should one say, under deconstruction?) on a cleared industrial site in the northern suburbs of Paris.

Tschumi and Eisenman are among seven architects whose work is to be exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York this summer under the heading of Deconstruction or Deconstructivism (there is some mystery and controversy about the exact title), an event awaited with keen interest and the audible sharpening of knives in the architectural fraternity. The Tate Symposium was in some sense a preliminary skirmish in the controversy this show is bound to provoke.

Peter Eisenman indeed complained that it would be the first time in history that an exhibition was being commented on before it had happened. What he was registering was the crucial place of the international conference as an institution in modern intellectual life.

New trends now start not from exhibitions or publications but from conferences. It was, after all, the 1966 conference at John Hopkins University, Baltimore, 'The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,' attended by Derrida and other Parisian savants, that first put the ideas of post-structuralism into circulation in America, where they were developed, institutionalised, and ultimately re-exported to Europe and the rest of the academic world.

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Not surprisingly, therefore, the Tate Symposium (jointly sponsored by the Academy publishing group, who are publishing two useful special issues of their handsomely illustrated journals *Art & Design* and *Architectural Design* in conjunction with the event) was over-subscribed long before the day, especially as Derrida himself was advertised as a participant. Cynical veterans of the international conference circuit were equally unsurprised when Derrida didn't show up.

Instead we were shown an edited videotape of an interview with him recorded a few days earlier by Christopher Norris, Professor of English at Cardiff and the leading British expert on Deconstruction. Perhaps after all it was fitting that the relentless critic of the idea of 'presence' in Western metaphysics should be a palpable absence at the gathering he had indirectly provoked.

On this fuzzy, jerky bit of video (Deconstruction, as I discovered last year in the process of making a film for Channel 4 about a similar conference, seems to have a bad effect on the focal properties of TV cameras) Derrida, seated in a glazed study surrounded by lush greenery, admitted that he had himself once been doubtful about the application of Deconstruction to architecture, but the persistence of architectural metaphors in philosophical and theoretical discourse ('foundation', 'superstructure', '*architectonice*' etc) had encouraged him to investigate further. Architects, he suggested, used Deconstruction to challenge the hegemony of architectural principles such as 'function' and 'beauty' reinscribing this challenge in their work.

What does this mean in practice? Well, it means warped planes, skewed lines, exploded corners, flying beams and what Dr Johnson, describing metaphysical verse, called 'heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together'.

Take, for instance, Frank Gehry's house in Los Angeles. This is an ordinary suburban shingle house, painted pink by the previous owners, to which Gehry added a visually disorientating extension made of corrugated steel, glass, chain link, black asphalt and cheap timber

posts, full of skewed angles and unexpected gaps, and generally suggestive of a school playground or the back of a film set.

It is unpopular with Gehry's neighbours, one of whom has described it as 'a dirty thing to do in someone else's front yard', but a source of intense interest among architects and designers – indeed it is possibly the most written-about house to have been built in the last decade.

Gehry himself is cheerfully untheoretical about his work – his answer to the question, what is the difference between art and architecture, being that 'the architect is willing to put a toilet in his structure' – but his exploitation of discord, discontinuity and distortion, to break down accepted architectural distinctions between form and function, beauty and ugliness, inside and outside, have made him willy-nilly a sort of figurehead in the Deconstructionist movement, and his work will feature in the MOMA exhibition.

Peter Eisenman is a more self-consciously theoretical architect, who has based his work (especially a series of houses known austere as House I, House II, House III etc) on linguistic models. His early work was inspired by Chomskian generative grammar, entailing a series of 'transformations' of a geometrical deep-structure with total indifference to the comfort and convenience of his clients.

His House VI, for instance, has non-functional columns which separate people sitting at the dining table, and a slit in the floor of the master bedroom that makes twin beds mandatory. When climbing the stairs you must take care not to bang your head on a second inverted staircase stuck on the ceiling. The architect's conversion to Deconstruction was marked by House X, which has a cantilevered transparent glass floor and no identifiable centre.

Eisenman was the first of a panel of speakers on architecture in the morning session of the Symposium, introduced by Charles Jencks, an American art critic resident in England, with a special, some would say proprietorial, interest in Post-Modernism. This he defines not merely as an architectural reaction against the severely functional cubic shapes of Corbusier and Gropius, but as a wider cultural phenomenon of 'double coding' to be found across the board of contemporary innovative art.

Whether Deconstruction is part of or the same as Post-Modernism was one of the recurrent issues of the day's debates. Jencks' view seemed to be that insofar as Deconstructionist architecture was distinguishable from Post-Modernism it was probably not architecture, but a kind of aesthetic joke. His introductory discourse was entitled 'Deconstruction: the sound of one mind laughing.'

Eisenman was not amused. 'I'm quite fond of Charles,' this feisty New Yorker drawled into the microphone, 'but enough's enough. Next time could we have an introducer who knows what he's talking about?' To have blood on the carpet so early in the proceedings was a good sign. The audience clapped and sat up expectantly. Jencks, who is used to being the man other people in the art world love to hate, didn't seem unduly disturbed.

Though Eisenman's buildings sound fairly loony in description, his ideas are interesting. His version of Deconstruction has a psychoanalytical slant: it breaks down dialectical oppositions to reveal what they have repressed. In the past, visual artists told us truths about architecture that architects preferred to conceal. Munch's paintings reveal the fear and loathing entombed within the bourgeois house. Piranesi deconstructed perspective and point of view by the insoluble riddles of his vaulted staircases. The medieval cathedrals acknowledged what they repressed in the form of decorative gargoyles. 'We want to make the repressed structural,' said Eisenman – to 'cut into the areas of greatest resistance.'

Then Bernard Tschumi (Swiss in origin, American-based), sombrely dressed in shades of black and dark grey, showed slides of his prize-winning plan for the Parc de la Villette. Its chief feature is a series of eccentric-looking red buildings, vaguely reminiscent of Russian Constructivism in shape, scattered over the flat site at 120 metre

intervals according to a point grid, and called *folies* – a Derridean pun on the English architectural folly and the French word for 'madnesses'.

Derrida himself has given the enterprise an approving commentary: 'the *folies* put into operation a general dislocation: . . . they deconstruct first of all, but not only, the semantics of architecture.'

The functions of the *folies* are flexible and ambiguous. One, Tschumi told us, originally earmarked as a children's centre, is now a video studio. Another has been designated at different stages a restaurant, a garden centre and most recently an art gallery. Another was designed with no specific function in mind.

Tschumi's approach to architecture is fiercely historicist in the Popperian sense. The speed of modern communications, he assured us, has made traditional measure redundant. It is no use trying to disguise the abolition of permanence. We live in a period of deregulation – of airlines, of the Stock Exchange and the laws of classical physics. The Parc de la Villette used permutation and substitution to attack the obsolete logic of cause and effect. This, Tschumi claimed, was a truly Post-Modernist architecture – the eclectic revivalism which claims that name being merely regressive, a desperate attempt to recuperate a discredited notion of meaning.

There is a bleak, fanatical consistency about Tschumi's vision which seems all too likely to be realised in the Parc de la Villette. Looking at the slides I kept imagining little groups of disconsolate people wandering through the Parc on a wet Sunday, staring numbly at the meaningless red buildings as the rain dripped from the functionless flying beams onto their umbrellas, wondering what was expected of them.

According to Zaha Hadid, a London-based architect of Persian extraction, who spoke next, the new architecture affirms that 'much about the 20th century is very enjoyable,' and for me her stunning architectural paintings, drawn as if viewed from the cockpit of a low-flying jetplane, expressed this hedonistic principle more successfully than Tschumi's *folies*.

Hadid's architecture has been described as 'anti-gravitational'. The prizewinning design for a club on top of a mountain overlooking Hong Kong is in her own words, 'a horizontal skyscraper,' but the cunning arrangement of its slabs and ramps makes it look as if it is about to slide down the side of the mountain. It's a pity the client has suspended the project because of some unspecified trouble with the Hong Kong authorities: it would be interesting to see if it could be built.

Mark Wigley, the young co-organiser of the impending MOMA show, stressed that the exhibits (they include Hadid's) were not utopian fantasies. Walls might be 'tormented', structure and materials brought to the very limits of tolerable stress, but they could all be built. Contrary to Tschumi, Wigley claimed that architectural Deconstruction was not a new 'ism' or avant-garde, but an effort to uncover the problematics of all architecture. It administered 'the shock of the old'. On that note we adjourned to a buffet lunch.

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Later in the afternoon, the session devoted to art and sculpture was rather more subdued, perhaps because the speakers were all scholars and critics rather than practitioners, perhaps because the quiche lorraine and chocolate gateaux they were digesting slowed them down, but mainly, I think, because the relationship of Deconstruction to the visual arts is less specific than in the case of architecture.

There are a few artists, such as Francis Bacon, who claim to have been influenced by Derrida, and some, like Valerio Adami and Gérard Titus-Carmel, on whom he has commented sympathetically and at length. But so much modern art is concerned with the interrogation of its own processes and the questioning of *a priori* assumptions about perception and the world, that the term Deconstruction can be applied loosely to almost anything, and precisely to almost nothing, from Post-

Impressionism onwards.

Geoff Bennington of Sussex University, the co-translator of Derrida's *Truth in Painting* (a task comparable in difficulty to serving spaghetti with a knitting needle) asked rhetorically whether to name a movement in art 'Deconstructionist', and gave the impression that only politeness restrained him from giving a negative answer.

The fact is that the term Deconstruction is in danger of being appropriated indiscriminately by artists and art critics searching for impressive-sounding theoretical concepts with which to explain and justify the varied assaults of modern art upon common sense. Derrida is on record as saying that 'Deconstruction is a word whose fortunes have disagreeably surprised me', and one suspects that he would get some unpleasant shocks browsing through the special issue of *Art & Design* on 'Deconstructive Tendencies in Art'.

Arguably the application of the term to architecture is just as specious, but the existence of a number of practising architects with some understanding of the theory behind it makes a focused debate possible. This was perhaps one reason why the audience at the symposium rebelled against the organisers' provision for two discussion panels, one on painting, one on architecture, to close the day, and insisted on a single panel of all the speakers. (Another reason was that because the programme was running late, they would have had to miss their tea to attend both panels. Of course, the audience always objects to the way things have been arranged towards the end of such events: enforced silence for hours on end while being lectured at generates a kind of collective resentment which has to be discharged somehow.) It became clear in the last session that the key to the whole symposium was another event that, as Eisenman pointed out, had not yet happened: the MOMA exhibition. What makes this show potentially so important is that it has been 'instigated' and co-organised by Philip Johnson, the doyen of American architects.

When he was a young man, in 1932 to be precise, Johnson co-organised another exhibition at MOMA called 'The International Style,' which launched the work of Corbusier and the Bauhaus in America, and thus in due course changed the face of the modern world. In the late 1970s Johnson was spectacularly converted to Post-Modernism (he is the architect of the notorious 'Chippendale' skyscraper for AT&T in New York), and now it seems he is putting his enormous authority behind a group of architects previously thought of as marginal and eccentric. Is it conceivable that Deconstruction could become the new International Style?

A lady of mature years in the audience obviously expressed the misgivings of many when she observed that the architecture displayed

in the course of the day had seemed to her both 'elitist and sprawling'—what relevance did it have to today's overcrowded world?

In reply, Tschumi said his architecture was expressing a revolution that had already happened (he meant an information revolution). Eisenman said his architecture was a critique of architecture. Hadid said architects could inject new ideas into society by rewriting the architectural brief. In short, they retreated behind a shield of professionalism.

It was interesting, and perhaps predictable, that the attack on Deconstructionist architecture should have had a political slant, because the same thing has been happening in the field of literary studies. Deconstructionist criticism is in retreat, especially in America, from something called the New Historicism, a quasi-Marxist, quasi-Foucauldian situating of literature in its socio-economic context—so much so that J Hillis Miller, one of the luminaries of the Yale School of Deconstructionists, felt impelled to rally the troops in a remarkable presidential address to the Modern Language Association of America in December 1986, 'The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base', in which he affirmed that 'the future of literary studies depends on maintaining and developing that rhetorical reading which today is called 'Deconstruction.'

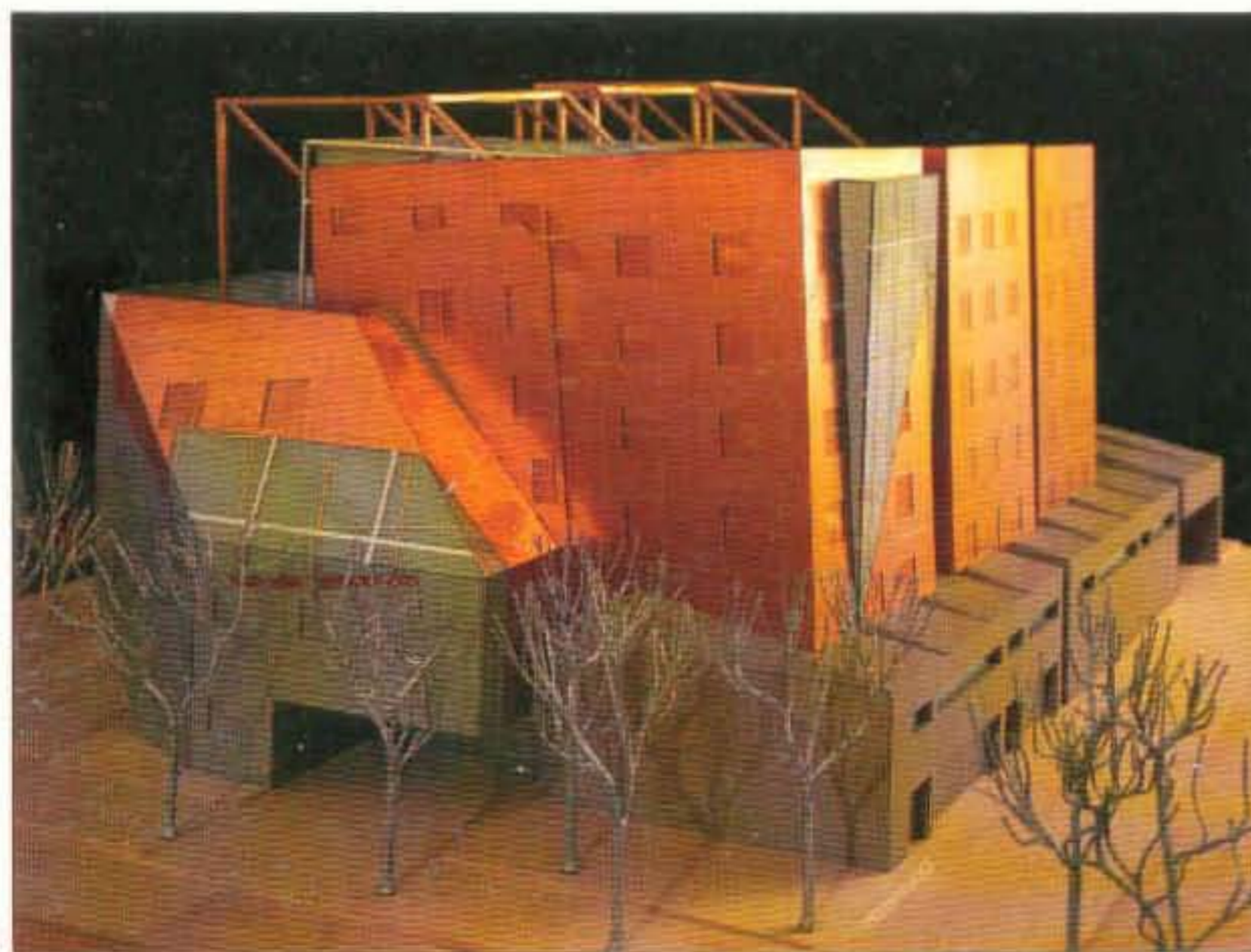
In the scholarly journals, however, there is an increasing sense that Deconstruction is on the wane. Derrida's own late work has become increasingly whimsical, fictive and difficult to methodise (he himself always denied that it was a method).

More recently, the prestige of Deconstruction has sustained a blow from which it may never recover in American academic circles: the discovery (noted recently in these columns by Desmond Christy) that Paul de Man, the most revered and authoritative member of the Yale School of criticism, who died, much mourned, in 1983, had, as a young man in occupied Belgium, published a great many newspaper articles sympathetic to the Nazi cause.

Imagine that F R Leavis was discovered, shortly after his death, to have once been a member of Mosley's blackshirts and you will have some idea of the impact of this revelation on American academics.

It has been a gift to those on the intellectual left who have always suspected that Deconstruction is dangerous to moral health, that its critique of reason is a pretext for evading social and political responsibilities.

Architects, in short, appear to be scrambling onto the Deconstructionist bandwagon just at the moment when literary intellectuals are jumping off. It remains to be seen whether this will save the cause of Deconstruction or consign the architecture to limbo.



PETER EISENMAN, PITTSBURGH TECHNOLOGY CENTER OFFICE BUILDING, 1989. MODEL