

The Construction of a New 'ism'

– The Rhetorical Context of Architecture

by Thordis Arrhenius

OVER THE LAST FIFTEEN YEARS an interest in questions of theory and philosophy has developed in architectural education in Europe and the United States; in many schools contemporary theory is now included in the core curriculum. How is this newly gained theoretical knowledge applied within the field of architecture? And how should this increased interest in theory be understood?

By looking closer at the creation of Deconstructivism, an architectural 'ism' that established itself on the architectural scene towards the end of the 1980's, this paper will discuss some of the different desires and rhetoric that may underly the contemporary tendency for architects to establish working relations with philosophy. The introduction of the term "Deconstructivist" into architectural parlance can be traced back to the exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1988 and curated by architect and theorist Mark Wigley together with Philip Johnson. The paper, therefore, begins by considering the material presented in the exhibition at MoMA as documented in the catalogue.

Deconstructivist Architecture

The title of the exhibition makes an obvious reference to the field of philosophy by twisting the term "deconstruction"



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introduced by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. First presented to American audiences in 1966 at a conference organised by John Hopkins University, Derrida's writing made an enormous impact on the development of American criticism. Specifically within literature the conference marked the emergence of a 'literary' deconstruction that established itself in academic discourse. Derrida's deconstruction suggested a close and critical reinterpretation which challenged the logocentrism underlying any given text. Deconstruction in the Anglo-American version, however, took on a more general significance and ironically, given its massive institutional success, was heralded as a critical force aiming to dismantle the homogenising and absorbent tendency of academic criticism (Norris, 1991). The title of the MoMA exhibition suggests a similar challenge to accepted critical norms; however, the relationship between deconstruction and Deconstructivism was of a complex nature.

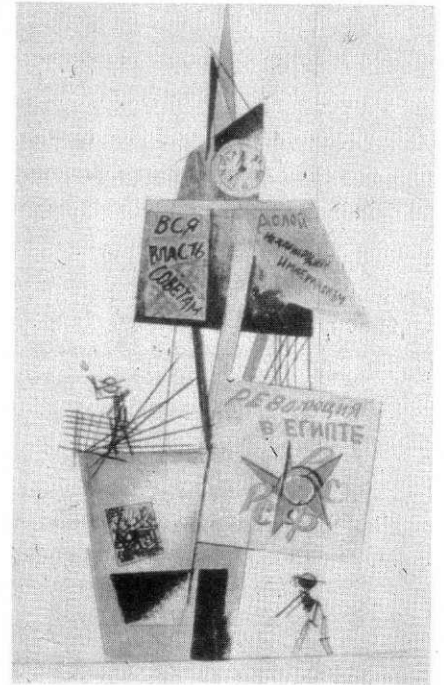
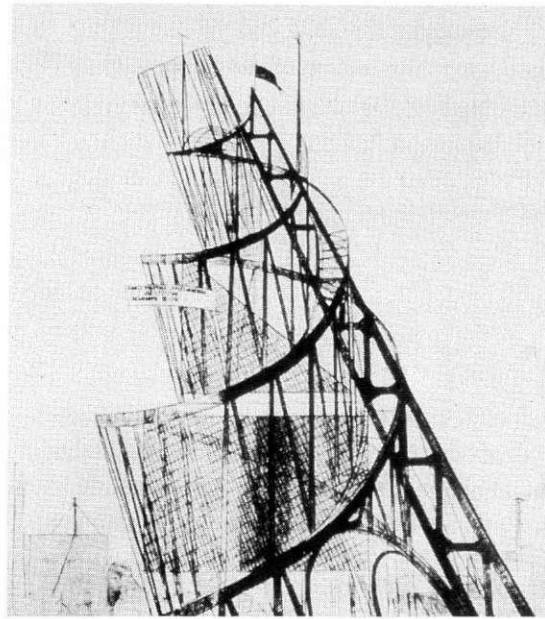
Deconstructivist Architecture featured seven contemporary architectural offices: those of Frank O. Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelblau and Bernard Tschumi, architects whose works were supposed to show a new sensibility towards deconstruction. But did they? The link between Derrida's deconstruction and the exhibited architectural work was not very obvious. Out of the seven exhibitors only Eisenman and Tschumi admitted that their methods of design had been inspired by the philosophy of Derrida, while most of the other architects participating rejected the label Deconstructivist for their work altogether. (McLeod, 1989) There was, then, an ambivalence about the relationship between deconstruction and Deconstructivism which was underlined by the curators themselves.

Mark Wigley's introduction, written in an elegant Derrida manner, claimed that the purpose of the exhibition title was not at all to relate to contemporary philosophy :

It is not that they [the projects] derive from the mode of contemporary philosophy known as deconstruction. They are not an application of deconstructive theory. Rather they emerge from within the architectural tradition and happen to exhibit some deconstructive qualities.

Johnson, Wigley, 1988

Wigley, then, ignored the work of Tschumi and Eisenman, who declared themselves to be influenced by Derrida's philosophy; he inferred, rather, that the work was a continuation of the tradition



of Russian Constructivism which, in his view, carried the same critical potential towards its own discipline as does Derrida's deconstruction to the metaphysical tradition of Western philosophy. Wigley proposed that criticism can be carried out within architecture itself, not in the realm of theory but instead in its physical structure:

Critical work today can be done only in the realm of building: to engage with the discourse, architects have to engage with building; the object becomes the site of all theoretical inquiry.

Johnson, Wigley, 1988

Architecture is thus given a critical potential gained by returning to the strategies of the Russian avant-garde:

in dismantling the ongoing tradition, in which modernism participated, they find themselves inevitably employing the strategies rehearsed by the avant-garde.

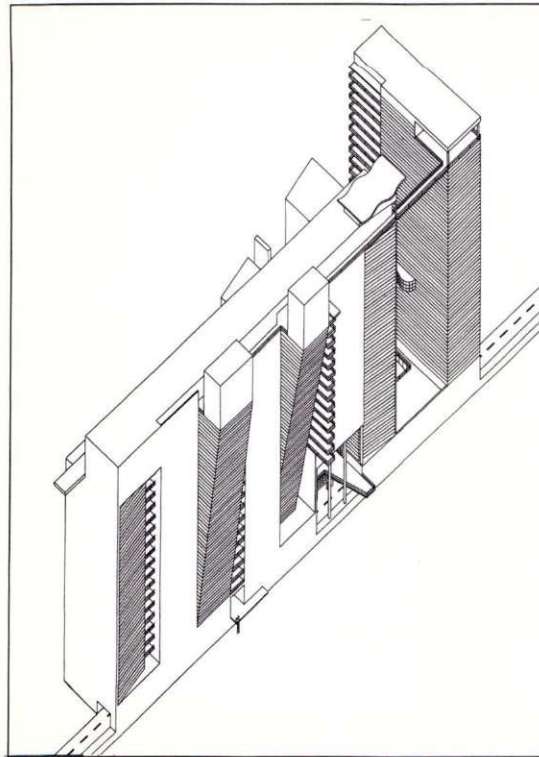
Johnson, Wigley, 1988

Wigley explains that Deconstructivist architecture is to focus on the canonical tradition of modernism; by challenging high modernism's orthogonal forms a deconstruction is performed:

They apply the cool veneer of the International Style to the anxiously conflicted forms of the avant-garde. Locating the

Vladimir Tatlin. Project for a Monument to the Third International 1919.

Alexandr Rodchenko, Design for a newspaper kiosk 1919.



tension of the early work under the skin of modern architecture, they irritate modernism from within, distorting it with its own genealogy.

Johnson, Wigley, 1988

Deconstructivist architecture in Wigley's construction becomes an interdisciplinary discourse in which architecture effectuates a criticism of its own discipline not, as traditionally, through a body of texts (the thesis, from Alberti to Le Corbusier) but through architectural form itself. Architecture becomes critical theory:

With these projects, all the theory is loaded into the object: propositions now take the form of objects rather than verbal abstractions.

Johnson, Wigley, 1988

Wigley explains the exhibited work as challenging the traditional status of theory in architectural discourse

No longer is it [theory] some abstract realm of defence that surrounds objects, protecting them from examination by mystifying them.

Johnson, Wigley, 1988

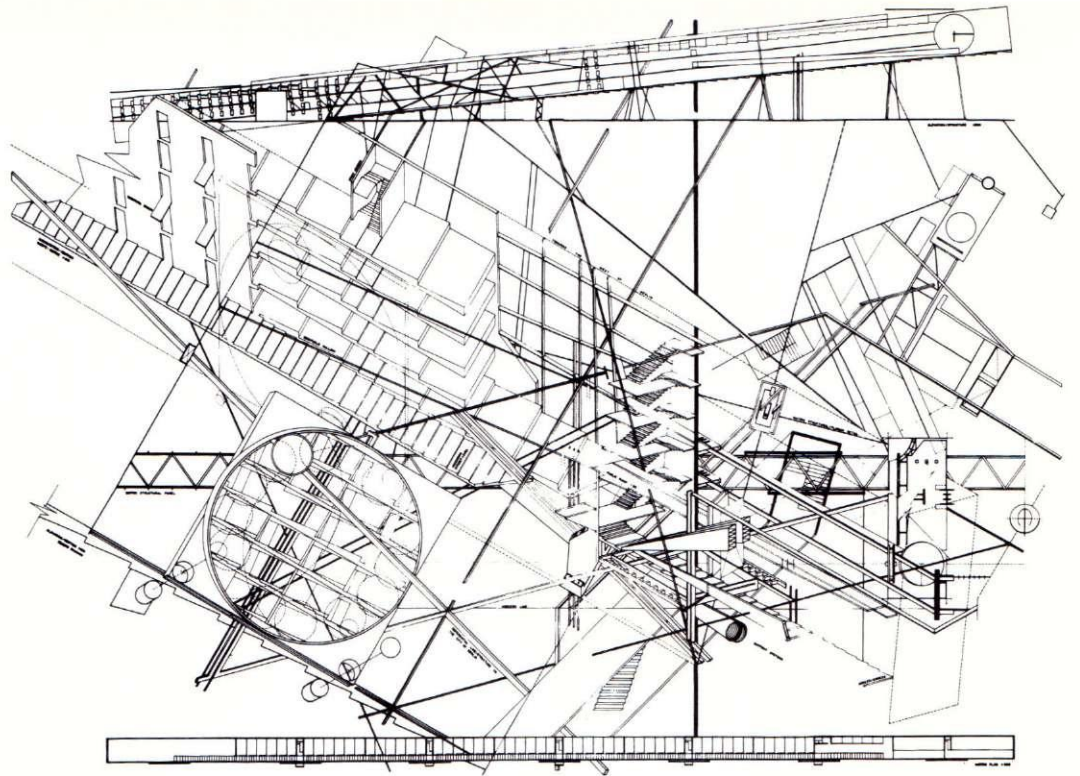
The questions raised by Wigley's "programme" for deconstructivist architecture are interesting. Is it possible for architectural form to exert criticism without dependency on a body of explicit theory to communicate that criticism? And if it were possible for the forms of Deconstructivist Architecture to communicate such criticism independently, why then the need of an exhibition authorised by that most established of institutions, the Museum of Modern Art in New York?

Construction of an 'ism'

Deconstructivist is not a new style. [...] Deconstructivist architecture represents no movement.

Johnson, Wigley, 1988

Philip Johnson assures in the preface of the catalogue that the exhibition is not intended to be a presentation of a new "group", "movement" or a "style". The exhibition communicated the same message; the different projects showed strong diversity in design strategies as well as stylistic outcome. No ensemble had existed



before the exhibition and the connection between the architects was created exclusively by the curators of the MoMA exhibition. Rather than a homogenous group, with a common attitude towards architecture, the exhibition showed seven independent architects. In their denial of the concept of a group, style or movement, the curators seemed to be aware of and to encourage this heterogeneity of the participating architects. But at the same time they successfully repressed the diversity by creating a common historical ground and by stressing the formal resemblances between the exhibited work.

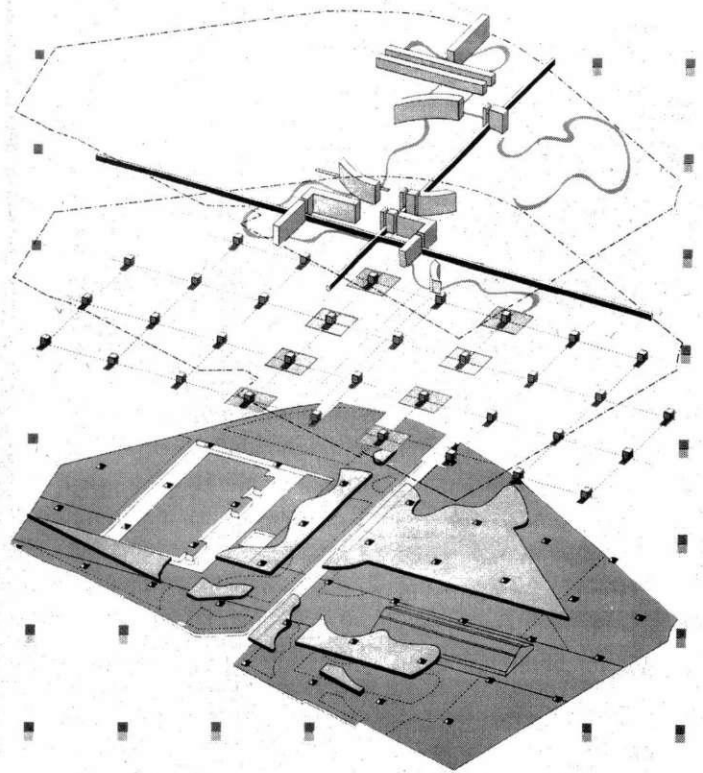
By naming the architect's work *Deconstructivist Architecture* Johnson and Wigley suggest that the works have something in common that qualifies them as Deconstructivist. By this suggestion the curators seem to slip into a traditional art-historical classification:

It is a confluence of a few important architects' work of the years since 1980 that shows similar approach with very similar forms as an outcome. [...] Since no forms come out of nowhere, but are inevitably related to previous forms, it is perhaps not strange that the new forms of deconstructivist architecture hark back to Russian Constructivism of the second and third decades of this century.

Johnson, Wigley, 1988

Daniel Libeskind, *City Edge*, Berlin 1987. Section and exploded axonometric of structure and circulation.

While first rejecting the idea of this being a group, movement or style, Johnson falls back on a formal definition of the projects and suggests that the group is put together for stylistic reasons speaking of a common source in the Russian Constructivism. Wigley promotes a similar stylistic classification:



Bernard Tschumi: Parc de La Vilette, Paris Axonometric; superimposition of points, lines, and surfaces.

The aesthetic is employed only in order to exploit a further radical possibility, one which the Russian avant-garde made available but did not take advantage of. [...] The projects can be called deconstructivist because they draw from Constructivism and yet constitute a radical deviation from it. They accomplish this by exploiting the aberration in the history of the avant-garde, the brief episode of about 1918–20, in which contorted architectural designs were proposed. [...] The forms themselves are infiltrated with the characteristic skewed geometry, and distorted.

Johnson, Wigley, 1988

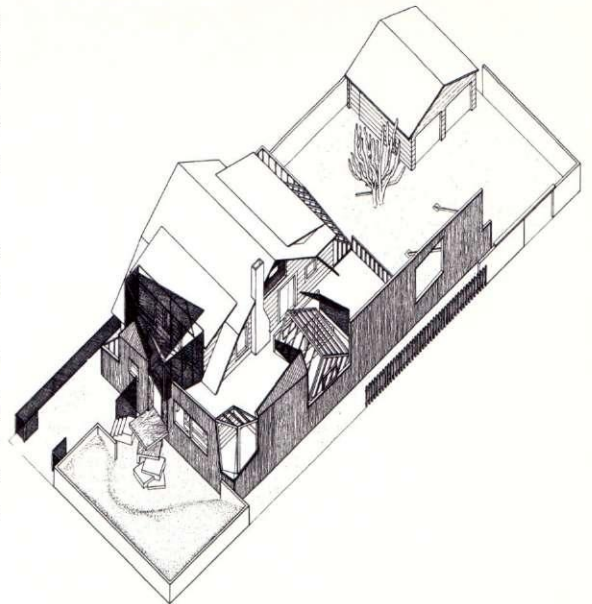
Thus the art-historical classification that both Johnson and Wigley eagerly try to avoid is highlighted by the connection they make between the exhibited work and the Russian avant-garde. The formal similarities were stressed by adding a retrospective of

Russian Constructivist architecture to the main exhibition. This historical section gave the otherwise unfamiliar forms of the new work a home in history, one which obviously some of the participants were unaware that their work originated from:

Some of these similarities are unknown to the younger architects themselves, let alone premeditated.

Johnson, Wigley, 1988

At the same time as the two curators denied that they were creating an “ism” they clearly inscribed the group within a traditionally conceived art-historical classification depending on style and origin.



Frank O. Gehry. Gerhy House. Santa Monica, California 1978–88. Axonometric, first stage.

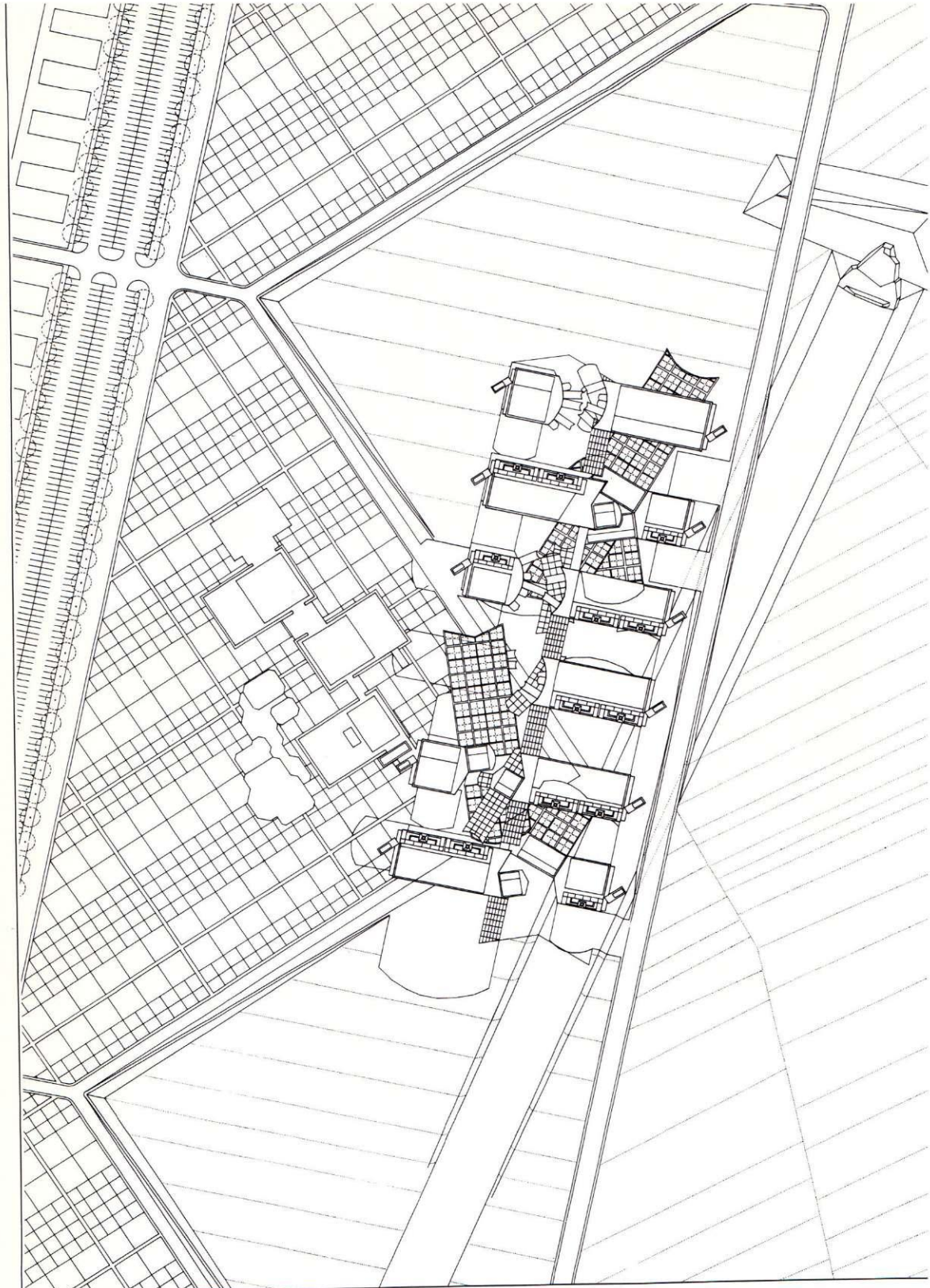
Affirmation and Commodification

But creating an “ism” has more than stylistic consequences it also has political implications. In this case the identification of Russian Constructivism as a single formal source emphasises the critical potential of architecture. The curators could have acknowledged a variety of sources for the work in Deconstructivist Architecture: contemporary sculpture (Gehry), German expressionism (Coop Himmelblau) or conceptual art (Eisenman). Instead they chose to look back to the Russian avant-garde, in which architecture was seen as an important force for the change of society, and in which it was given a high status as the only of the arts able to combine form and utility. This choice of emphasis made by Johnson and Wigley originated, surely, from a desire to reconstruct (rather than deconstruct) architecture’s political and critical position:

since architecture is so intertwined with society, the social revolution requires an architectural revolution

Johnson, Wigley, 1988

To understand the implicit rhetoric of the Deconstructivist Architecture exhibition, one should take a brief look at the architectural climate in United States and Europe at the time. The pluralistic Postmodern Movement in America as well as Europe had its roots in a growing dissatisfaction with the utopian and elitist tendencies of the Modern Movement. This generated a criticism of the aesthetic and social parameters which had guided the modernist manifesto and led to a rekindled interest in areas that the Modern Movement had rejected, areas such as



Peter Eisenman, Biocenter for the University of Frankfurt, Frankfurt 1987.

mainstream culture, tradition and regionalism. By the end of the 1980's in the United States Postmodernism had effectively defeated Modernism, however its populist bias had also opened up architecture to forces of commodification and the critical potential of postmodern architecture seemed largely to be exhausted. American Postmodern architecture seemed to a great extent to have abandoned its critical transgressive dimension and was creating an eclectic and affirmative culture strikingly in accord with the tone of contemporary Reaganism of political life. (McLeod, 1989)

The result was a hedonistic consumption of architectural form not much different from that which resulted from modernism's affiliation with capitalistic power that the early Postmodernists had been so critical of. A similar tendency could be traced in Europe but with less emphasis on mainstream culture and more on traditionalism and historicism. In Europe, and perhaps especially in England, Postmodernism became a synonym for antimodernism. (Rustin 1989) Even here the initial crusade against the Modern Movement's exploitation of the inner cities and its lack of respect for historical sites faded in the 1980s into an affirmation of the status quo or a "back to basics" attitude. By the end of the 1980's both American Postmodernism and European Traditionalism seemed to have alienated themselves from the contemporary problems of architecture.

Critical Edge

In the climate of affirmation and commodification that dominated the architectural debate in the 80's the creation of Deconstructivism can be understood as a rhetorical move, a move to challenge what were perceived as Postmodernism's conservative dimensions: its historicist imagery, its commonplace contextualism, its conciliatory and affirmative properties, its belief in cultural consensus and its repression of the new. By using architectural form to engage contemporary cultural dilemmas – estrangement, loss of centre, lack of common consensus – Deconstructivism aimed at regaining for architecture the critical edge it had lost. It is with that rhetoric in mind that one can understand the exhibition at MoMA, both its emphasis on Russian Constructivism, recalling a time when architecture had a revolutionary rather than affirmative role, and the significance of the philosophical associations caused by the exhibition title.

But how is Deconstructivist architecture to engage in criticism? For Wigley the answer to this question is highly specific and pertains to architecture's use of form. Wigley suggests that Deconstructivist architecture, even though it refers to

the tradition of Russian Constructivism, does not imitate historical forms (as does eclectic Postmodernism): instead it uses an inherited geometrical configuration to destabilize the structures of high modernism. And by not being involved in imitation Deconstructivist Architecture returns to the social realm that the eclectic Postmodernist has forgotten:

The use of the formal vocabulary of Constructivism is therefore not a historicist game which deftly extracts the avant-garde works from their ideologically charged social milieu by treating them as just aesthetic objects. The true aestheticization of the early formal investigation was actually effected when the avant-garde itself made them ornamental rather than structural. The projects in this exhibition, however, do make the early investigation structural and thereby return them to the social milieu.

Johnson, Wigley, 1988

Zaha M. Hadid. The Peak, Hong Kong. Site plan.



The suggestion is that by avoiding the ornamental surface (a quality emphasised by eclectic Postmodernism) and declaring (twisted) structure, architecture becomes socially engaged. These remarks begin to uncover a paradox which underlies Deconstructivist Architecture's relation to deconstruction in general. The rhetoric visible in Wigley's comments is precisely that of high modernism: that ornament must be suppressed in favour of structure. Although, Deconstructivist Architecture may destabilize the *architectural* structures of high modernism it leaves its philosophical structure intact. The *a priori* qualitative hierarchy between structure and ornament is not challenged or deconstructed, but affirmed. Further, Wigley's ar-

gument carefully avoids architecture's potential for criticism through means other than the formal. As with eclectic Postmodernism, the political impact of architecture is considered to derive only from its formal qualities. The role of program, site, client and production are not considered as possibilities in challenging the existing structures of architectural politics. Rather Deconstructivist Architecture, as exhibited in the MoMA, accepted the economic as well as institutional power structures that traditionally govern architecture's role in the society. The political role of Deconstructivist Architecture was then reduced to that of a cultural object where political force was understood to reside in the physical structure of architecture, in its nature as an object.

The Retorical Role of Deconstructivism

But architecture's subversive power as a cultural object shouldn't be underestimated. The formal experiments of Deconstructivist Architecture have a political force because they challenge the conservative connotations produced by eclectic Postmodernist configurations. The architectural forms of Deconstructivism partake in a *rhetorical* discussion in which different forms take on varying political connotations. In this rhetoric "mute" architectural forms become codified with different architectural "meanings" which challenge or conform with the political climate in the society. Architectural form is circumscribed in a field of theory in which architectural criticism, research and education as well as publications and exhibitions create a rhetorical discourse which interprets as well as surveys the cultural and political connotations of form.

The political impact of architecture in the society is then of necessity twofold: both that of economical force and that of cultural object. In that twofold condition the "rhetorical field of architecture" can play an important role by formulating a position for architecture in society which surpasses the strictly economic. In the contemporary society, distinguished by a lack of master narratives or a common consensus (Lyotard 1984), theory can take on an important role as a mediator producing the agreement (more or less temporary) which makes practice possible. Architectural theory, then, should not be understood as a passive observer of praxis; rather, its role can be seen as that of creating the possibility to build by establishing new foundations for architecture.

Retrospectively, one can see how the creation of Deconstructivism through the MoMA exhibition, together with the following architectural debate, established a framework for a new

group of architects, a framework that allowed many of them the possibility to move from theoretical to built projects. The subsequent successful careers of the participating architects should partly be understood as a result of the exhibition's ability to communicate their concepts of building by rhetorical means. The rhetoric of the new "ism" could challenge the Postmodern Movement and open up architectural discourse to new approaches in architecture.

Conclusion

This creative role of theory and criticism in formulating new possibilities for architecture can explain the increasing interest in theory in contemporary architectural education. The creation of the new 'ism' of the eighties – Deconstructivism – is a clear, but also curious, example of how and when an architectural rhetoric has been used to create a new foundation for architecture.

The MoMA exhibition, followed by several publications on Deconstruction in the architectural press, established Deconstructivism as a new architectural concept on the American and European architectural scene in the late 80's. The catalogue for the exhibition shows how theory can be used as a tool to communicate and to inscribe certain interpretations on a group of architectural projects. A rhetoric was created that, even though inspired by Derrida and Post-structural thought, constructed rather than deconstructed an origin, a meaning and a centre for a group of diverse architects' work. Even if the curators themselves rejected the rhetorical use of theory –

Indeed the force of the objects makes the theory that produce it irrelevant
Johnson, Wigley, 1988

– this paper has argued that the built form of Deconstructivism gained its critical edge *because* of the drawings, lectures and lectures and writings about it. In opposition to Wigley who suggests that the force of the *form* of Deconstructivist Architecture makes the theory that produces it irrelevant, this paper has explored how a skilful production of an architectural rhetoric surrounding the MoMA exhibition created itself the political force Deconstructivist Architecture aspired to.

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Iris from the western pediment of the Parthenon. The British Museum. Photo by Mikko Putkonen.