

When I was first invited to give a paper at a conference on the Enduring Principles of Architecture I got a nasty attack of conspiracy theory. The first day was given over to philosophers, the second to architectural historians. I am neither. I am an architect presently preoccupied with the making of architecture. My credentials in the field of philosophy are limited (I am to speak on the first day as the sole representative of continental philosophy outside a circle of British School philosophers): a half-finished thesis at school of philosophy which orbits around the inward-looking vortex which is the University of London philosophy degree. But it is not really an orbit - that would suggest some gravitational attraction - more like a tangential irritation.

And so there I was, an architect full of contingent anecdotes, an amateur philosopher dabbling in the shifting margins, addressing a conference of philosophers and historians talking about enduring principles. That is why, as potential man of straw, I felt a conspiracy theory coming on. Feeling vulnerable, the natural reaction is move away from any fragile ground and move towards more stable heights. Philosophy provides two well known examples which provide comfort to the threatened architect, and so it is to these that I turn. The first is Aristotle who uses the figure of the *'architecton'* to illustrate the relationship of theory and practice.¹ The architect has recourse to theory as a stable knowledge base, which he can then use to inform action. He crosses the divide between theory and practice, bringing the systematic and detached area of rational thought into the practical arena through the agency of labourers, who are incapable of independent thought. The architect is thus held up as an exemplar of practical philosophy and with this Aristotle introduces an alliance between architect and philosopher which has maintained itself through Western thought. It forcefully reappears again in Descartes, who uses the analogy of the architect in the *Meditations* and the *Discourse*. He writes:

there is not usually so much perfection in works composed of several parts and produced by various 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

1 For instance in the *Metaphysics*, Book III, Part 2 and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, Part 4.

which several have tried to patch up by adapting old walls built for different purposes. Again, ancient towns which have gradually grown from mere villages into large towns are usually ill-proportioned, compared with those ordinary towns that planners lay out on level ground. Looking at the 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, you would say that it is chance rather than the will of man using reason that placed them so.²

The banishment of chance, the authority of the individual, the triumph of the rational, the building of the new on cleared ground - these are identified by Descartes as the defining attributes of the architect, and so by analogy are then assumed as the attributes of the philosopher as rational subject. It is an alliance of mutual convenience. For the philosopher there is a necessity to reflect the metaphysical in the physical, because without the material world as grounding the immaterial remains just that - immaterial. So the analogous actions of the architect (as originator of stable constructions) serve as a useful source of legitimation for philosophical discourse. For the architect the reflection of the philosopher (and in particular the Cartesian philosopher of the rational) is a means of establishing authority through establishing a supposedly detached, objective knowledge base. And so the figure of architect/philosopher is created.

In reading Descartes' piece, one might assume that he is referring to the actual actions of the architect and thus that the figure of the architect/philosopher is based on some kind of worldly reality. It may be necessary for both sides to maintain at least an illusion of this reality - without this illusion the figure loses credence - but it is in fact a conceit. It is not necessary to regale you with anecdotes of chance, of gender, or of collaboration, to indicate that Descartes' description of the architect is a doctrinal figment of the rational mind with little basis in reality. The figure of the architect/philosopher which the tradition of Western metaphysics conjures up may in fact be read in one of two ways - either as an idealist vision or else metaphorically. The idealist version, where the figure assumes a kind of detached, purified authority, is the one convenient for architectural profession - maintaining as it does the myth of

2 Descartes, *Discourse*, Part II, Paragraph 1.

the heroic individual genius overriding the vagaries of time, flattening the lumps of chance and asserting rational dominance. However, it is the metaphorical version which is probably the one which most usefully describes the architect/philosopher association, each drawing on the other for representational sustenance. The danger is when the metaphoric gets confused with the literal -when the architect assumes that the guise of the philosopher as purveyor of truth and arbitrator of knowledge is something that can be applied literally. In the Cartesian version, the figure of the architect/philosopher thus identifies the problematic relationship of pure theory to practical action. Even a cursory glance back over the given list of architect heroes suggests that this problem has manifested itself, with the theoretical values of the philosopher figure issuing out of the architect's pen as brute form.

I introduced the figure of architect/philosopher in a sly attempt to establish my credentials, but now cannot recognise myself in it. Maybe, however, solace can be found in a less instrumental relationship between the two disciplines of architecture and philosophy, a relationship constituted around the common use of language. The terms of architecture are used to underpin the foundations (and I use these words knowingly) of metaphysics, to structure knowledge. Thus Descartes begins the *First Meditation* with the words -

.....to start again from the foundations.³

The new philosophy is demonstrated in terms of a new construction. And later when Heidegger will describe Kant's project in terms of the building trade, with Kant (as architect) laying the foundations from which the construction of metaphysics is projected as a building plan. Kant "draws and sketches" reason's "outline" whose essential moment" is the "architectonic, the blueprint projected as the essential structure of pure reason."⁴

3 Descartes, *Meditations*, Meditation 1, Paragraph 1

4 Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 2.

In these examples, and many others, the language of architecture is being used metaphorically. It is the apparent stability and the presumed logic of architecture that appeals to the foundational aspirations of traditional metaphysics, providing a form of legitimation for the construction of a philosophy. The power of this association is such that Heidegger can effect a critique of Western metaphysics through an exposure of the weaknesses of its architectural metaphors, arguing that the language of grounding in metaphysics - the very thing that gives rise to its apparent authority - is in fact a veiling of a more essential condition, that of Being. The architectural image of stability disguises an inherent weakness in metaphysics, which is in fact is not built on *terra firma* but an abyss.⁵ Heidegger argues that Western metaphysics is not grounded at all as a philosophical structure. As one critic notes of the argument:

Metaphysics becomes the veiling of the ground rather than its investigation, and the apparently simple sense of a building sitting on the ground, supported by it, is the very mechanism of that veiling. Architecture is a cover and philosophy takes cover in architecture.⁶

However, my aim is not to attempt to carry out a Heideggerian critique of the foundation of architecture but rather to point to the way that the metaphor of architecture supports, or haunts, all manners of philosophy. The coincidence in the terms of the two disciplines allows architecture to assume the authority of Western metaphysics in establishing universal, enduring, principles. This reciprocity leads to an understanding of architecture as a kind of formal language there to be apprehended by a whole range of philosophical approaches, be it that of aesthetics, of semiotics or of deconstruction. Of course all these conflicting approaches lead to radically different interpretations of the architectural object, but underlying them all is a focus on the formal structure of architecture and the way that formal structure may or may not convey a fixed meaning or set of values. Typically they set up a distance between the intellectual subject and its object, in this case the building, so that architecture is always framed within the terms of that intellect. Architecture is thus described as a

5 Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 93.

6 Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995), 39.

detached object, the product of the constituting subject. One first approaches architecture as an abstraction, as a formal system of parts, and only then in terms of potential occupation. In this model, the analysis of form assumes such ascendancy that arguments are made that a morally sound, rational aesthetics⁷ of architecture will lead to a morally sound and rationally constituted occupation of architecture by a reformed society - or obversely that a degenerate aesthetics goes hand-in-hand with a degenerate society.

As a critique of such attitudes I could at this stage partially fulfil my brief as a representative of continental philosophy and introduce phenomenology as an agent which has attempted to collapse the Cartesian separation of subject and object - and counter the abstraction of the formal canon (constituted as it is by the mind) with the immediacy of a bodily engagement with architecture. However, I wish instead to turn to another agency which has consistently sought to undermine the authority of traditional metaphysics and its reliance on a subject/object dualism. Based on the inherent relationship between architecture and philosophy, I have suggested if there are enduring principles in architecture, then it is to the foundational claims of Western metaphysics that one may best look to find them. From this it may follow that if the foundational claims of metaphysics can be seen to have been shattered by the constant assaults of post-Nietzschien philosophy, then so too would the enduring principles of architecture have been shattered. Following through the implications of the alliance of philosophy and architecture, it may be argued that the collapse of the edifice of philosophy as the home of universal truth has a coincident effect of the collapse of the house of architecture as container of enduring principles. If there is anyone who might be expected to best actuate this dual collapse, it might be Jacques Derrida.

We might anticipate that for Derrida the only enduring principle in architecture might be the very impossibility of ever establishing such principles. The mutual support system of philosophy and architecture should imply that any collapse of traditional epistemology will result in a destabilizing of architectural meaning.

⁷ One example is Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (London: Methuen, 1979), 36, for instance when he states: "One of my contentions in this book will be that the study of what is right and appropriate in matters of aesthetic judgment is vital to practical wisdom".

However, when we look at what Derrida has to say *specifically* about architecture, something strange emerges. I stress these explicit references in contrast to what Derrida says implicitly about architecture and philosophy, a route that has been substantially covered by Mark Wigley.⁸

In a piece of writing about Bernard Tschumi's Parc de La Villette,⁹ Derrida first outlines what have been seen as invariables in architectural culture. What are these invariables?, he asks:

I will distinguish four. They translate one and the same postulation: architecture *must have a meaning*, it must *present* it and through it *signify*. The signifying or symbolical value of the this meaning must direct the structure and syntax, the form and function of architecture. It must direct it *from outside*.¹⁰

The language here is telling. It is the language of a dogmatic formalist, in which the stability of meaning in traditional architecture is related to the stability of its formal structures. Derrida argues that Tschumi's follies "deconstruct first of all, but not only, the semantics of architecture".¹¹ Now of course Derrida is not so crude as to fall into the trap of his dumber architectural followers and suggest that in order to destabilise meaning one should make buildings look unstable. His analysis of Tschumi is much more subtle, but still never escapes the view from outside - which is one of the aspects of traditional architecture that he has implicitly criticised; here, as elsewhere in his architectural readings, he maintains a separation of viewer and viewed - a separation, that is, of subject and object. In the face of architecture, when interpreted as a formal structure, Derrida cannot escape the Cartesian world he would wish to banish. Still stranger in reading this piece on La Villette is the thudding realisation that what one has assumed in the first instance to be a description of the park *as built* turns out in fact to be an analysis of the project as drawn and (crucially)

⁸ Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995), 8..

⁹ J. Derrida, "Point de Folie", in Neil Leach, *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1997), 324-345.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 326.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 330.

written by Tschumi. This project - a weaving of grids, points and surface - is held up as a challenge the authority of previous architecture, seen to destabilise meaning, to question those invariables. But the battle is not quite fair, because the architecture under siege has been described in real terms, as actual presence, whereas the weapons used are those of rhetorical devices. On the one hand Derrida has presented the so-called invariables of architecture in literal terms - as dwelling, as material, as beauty, as function - on the other he has challenged these terms through the metaphoric content of Tschumi's project, rather than the actual experience of it. The argument may be strong, but the victory Pyrrhic.

There is thus a conflation of literal and metaphoric - a conflation exacerbated when, in a tidy completion of the intellectual circle, Tschumi invites Derrida, in association with the architect Peter Eisenman, to design a garden within La Villette.¹² This might have been fine if the project had remained a project - as I assumed it was always meant to be - a kind of jolly folly of lines, philosophers, words, architects engaged in intellectual play. But things go wrong. They appear to believe it is for *real*. In a delicious moment of mutual admiration, the two have swapped roles. Eisenman writes words; Derrida makes forms. He even does a sketch, which is then invigorated by a written text. After a long explanation of Plato's *Timaeus* and of the *chora*, the object he has designed is described thus:

A *gilded* metal object (there is gold in the passage from the *Timaeus*, on the *chora*, and in your [i.e. Eisenman's] Cannaregio project) to be planted obliquely in the earth. Neither vertical, nor horizontal, an extremely solid frame that would resemble at once a web, a sieve, or a grill (grid) etc., it would have a certain relationship with the filter (a telescope or a photographic acid bath or a machine which has fallen from the sky having photographed or X-rayed - filtered - an aerial view). This would be both an interpretative and *selective* filter which would allow the reading and sieving of the three sites and three layers (Eisenman-Derrida, Tschumi, La Villette). As a stringed instrument, it would announce the concert and the multiple chorale, the *chora* of the *Choral Work*.

12 The process is described in: J. Derrida, "Why Peter Eisenman Writes Such Good Books", in *Ibid.*, 336–346.

I do not think that anything should be inscribed on this sculpture (for this is a sculpture), save perhaps the title and a signature might figure somewhere (i.e. *Choral Work*, by ... 1986) as well as one or two Greek words (*plokanon, seiomena etc.*).¹³

One could argue that the project resides in the text and not in the sketch (fig. 1), but I am not convinced; both are surprising in their obviousness. Despite his claim that the project is "a non-totalizable palimpsest",¹⁴ Derrida is here ascribing meaning, very fixed meaning, to an object. There is no room for multiple readings, or even misreadings, of the project. We are told emphatically how to interpret. All this flies in the face of the position that Derrida has so established for himself over the years. And so Derrida, who we might have expected to challenge the enduring principles of architecture, not only leaves them essentially unscathed, but actually indulges in them.

So what might have happened? It appears that Derrida has, in the face of architecture, been seduced by the vanity of form. He has made the transgression of believing that his rhetorical devices could lead to action. He has confused the metaphoric content of architecture with literal architectural production. It is as if, when tempted with the merest possibility of making architectural form, surely one of the most vainglorious pursuits there is, any principles are overturned. This is the vanity of form.

Derrida's lapse here is indicative of a wider problem where the figure of the philosopher/architect is beguiled into believing that an analysis of form - an analysis which I have suggested is catalysed by a metaphoric relationship of architecture to philosophy - can lead to an instrumental theory of form. In this Derrida's deconstruction is no different from semiotics, typology or traditional aesthetics. These might appear strange bedfellows, but all share an approach which in the end distances the production and perception of architecture by turning it into a detached object of analysis. In their detachment, the architect/philosopher of form squeezes the life out of architecture, creating remote objects of display, emptied of any real occupation, ignoring the experience of the body. These are unreal figments which deny the

13 *Ibid.*, 342.

14 *Ibid.*, 344.

essentially political condition of architectural production - though of course some overtly political stances slip in behind the supposedly neutral mask of the aesthetic or formal approach. A visually dominated field is conceived, and though it may appear different depending on the frame of the intellect constituting it, these differences are really just arrangements of the parts.

The architect is just as seduced by form, in the vain belief that architecture may be raised to a nobler plane through recourse to the intellectual and moral values that abstract form may hold. The mistake is to believe that there is an reciprocal and instrumental link between a philosophy of form and the production of form, to believe that an analysis of form should or could lead to a theory of the design of architectural form. The very contingency of architecture resists the imposition of any method. I am talking here of both the contingency of design (when forces beyond the control of the architect constantly modify any attempted ordering) and the contingency of occupation (when the actions and events of everyday life and the indeterminacy of time unravel the best laid plans). Contingency and chance have always presented a problem, even a threat, to the figure of a philosopher/architect, a figure who in a desire to establish universality and truth have a deep need to master, control and repress contingency.¹⁵ - remember the earlier quote from Descartes where chance is banished, and recall Le Corbusiers': "A boundless depth opens up, effaces the walls, drives away contingent presences, accomplishes the miracle of ineffable space". Against such repression, I am not arguing for an approach which celebrates contingency - because that would lead to an anarchic relativism devoid of judgment and emancipatory intent - but rather an approach which develops what Dewey calls "reflective intelligence"¹⁶ in response to contingent conditions. This is similar to the second mode of Aristotelian knowledge, that of *phronesis*. Architecture can never be a form of the first mode of knowledge, that of *episteme* - a detached, supposedly neutral knowledge of the eternal and unchanging. Equally, the architect can never afford to be a theoretician, in the original sense of the word as someone who stands

15 See Richard J. Bernstein, "Rorty's Liberal Utopia", in *The New Constellation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 267.

16 Ibid., 269.

outside, an observer, clinging to the purity of *episteme*. Instead they must engage with the contingency of the world and through this develop *phronesis*, the political and practical knowledge of human action, a knowledge which is continually evolving, the only knowledge that can structure praxis or action.

I am suggesting therefore that the architect should not be removed as a detached observer and then manipulator of form, deluded into the belief of universal truth and fixed meanings. Instead the architect should always work from within, aware and responsive to the multiple and contingent conditions which shape the production of space. It is following this line of thought that I have been preoccupied for the past few years with the everyday¹⁷, because that appears to me to be the most appropriate and relevant place to start the thinking of architecture. Architecture never exists in isolation, it is never experienced as remote object, but is inherently bound up with the action and events of the quotidian world. As soon as architecture removes itself from this world, it will be unravelled by it. However, a complete immersion in the everyday leads to a kind of myopia, in which the ability to speculate beyond the vicissitudes of the daily cycle is lost. The great philosopher of the everyday, Henri Lefebvre, suggests that a reciprocal transaction needs to be enacted:

For we must be careful neither to abandon the acquired or *potential* wealth of the content, of the 'human raw material'; nor to lose whatever is achieved in the highest most intense moments. The problem therefore is to define the reciprocal relation of these activities and realities; the simplest moments and highest moments of life.¹⁸

It is therefore sometimes necessary to withdraw, in order to come back with productive intent, because as Merleau-Ponty notes, "one must be able to withdraw and gain distance in order to become fully engaged."¹⁹ It is this in this spirit that I engage with philosophy, not (clearly) to be a philosopher, nor in a vain attempt to find a

17 See in particular, Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till, *The Everyday and Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1998).

18 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 1991), 86.

19 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1963), 60.

prescriptive method or rigour to determine my working as an architect, but rather as a necessary intellectual space in which to speculate on the next set of actions.²⁰

I wish to end with a crude, incredibly crude, analogy which dirtily summarises some of the issues at stake. The analogy is of various approaches to the of the house of architecture. The formalists, strange bedfellows altogether, view the house of architecture from the outside, holding it at arm's length, suppressing the uncontrollable, disturbing aspect of its occupation. The phenomenologists remain inside, caught in endless reveries of movement from cellar to attic, seeking that moment of ontological purity, curtains drawn to the fallen world outside. Me? I come into the house of architecture through the back door, trailing muddy boots across the floor, past the smell the kitchen, brush a hairy wall, throw open the windows to the tumult of the street, the rumble of the railway, and then, dragging the cloak of the everyday behind me, climb a stair through stacks of books, up to a room in the sky, and there start to think.

... but I have just described our own house to be.

The vanity of form, it ensnares us all in the end.

²⁰ It is in this spirit of reciprocal transaction that I have previously proposed an image of architects as Angels with Dirty Faces. See J. Till, "Angels with Dirty Faces," *Scroope: Cambridge Architecture Journal* 7 (1995): 13–17.

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