

REFLECTIONS ON DECONSTRUCTIVE ARCHITECTURE

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POGLEDI NA DEKONSTRUKTIVNO ARHITEKTURO

izvleček

Arhitektura kot umetniška oblika je doživela različne obravnave, kar zadeva njeno pojmovanje in definicijo. Prevladujoča metodologija arhitekturnega projektiranja in teorije ostajata klasična in modernistična arhitektura. Tako kot vsako novo nastajajoče gibanje sproža dvome in kritiko, je tudi dekonstruktivna arhitektura povzročila mnogo negotovosti in zmede glede definicije. Veliko vzrokov za težavnost njene opredelitve se nahaja v zgradbah, ki jih je ustvarila v preteklosti. Medtem ko klasična arhitektura slavi človekovo ustvarjalno ročnost, modernistična arhitektura pohvalo namenja strojni tehnologiji; vsaka od njiju je imela podoben in ponavljajoč se jezik estetike, ki je bil prisoten v vsej sočasni arhitekturi.

V dekonstruktivni arhitekturi ni te podobnosti, kar zadeva estetiko. In prav zaradi odsotnosti vidnega skupnega arhitekturnega jezika pričujoča študija poskuša ugotoviti kaj dekonstruktivna arhitektura izraža oz. predstavlja.

ključne besede

Sodobno arhitekturno projektiranje, dekonstruktivno mišljenje, Derrida, Tschumi

abstract

Architecture as an art form has traveled through various treatments in terms of conceptualizing and defining it. The most overwhelming and widely applied methodology of architectural design and theory remain the Classical and Modernist Architecture.

Just as every new emerging movement withdraws doubts and criticism, Deconstructive Architecture caused a lot of uncertainties and confusion surrounding its definition. Much of its inability in defining it remains in its diverse nature present in the buildings it has produced in the past. Whilst, Classical Architecture celebrated the human craftsmanship, Modernist Architecture did so in machine technology hence; each one of them had similar and repetitious aesthetics language visible throughout architecture of its time.

This aesthetic resemblance is not present in Deconstructive Architecture; hence due to the absent visible common language in architecture this study presents attempt to establish what Deconstructive Architecture stands for.

key words

Contemporary architectural design, deconstructive thinking, Derrida, Tschumi

“Within architectural circles much confusion surrounds the term ‘deconstruction’ [Leach, 1997: 317].

The year 1998 marked a turning point in the very essence of architecture, when Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley from the curator’s standpoint presented the exhibition titled “Deconstructivist Architecture”. At the aforementioned event held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York the public had a chance to observe the work of seven architects; Zaha M. Hadid, Peter Eisenman, Bernard Tschumi, Coop Himmelblau, Daniel Libeskind, Frank O. Gehry and Rem Koolhaas. The architectural projects featured at the aforesaid exhibition have been summarized with the generic brand of “Deconstructivist Architecture”.

In his attempt to draw a universal perspective that describes Deconstructivist Architecture, Johnson claimed that this new rising architectural tide did not respond to a particular style, nor is obedient to a specific set of rules and it does not constitute a movement [Johnson, Wigley, 1988: 7].

Taking the above suppositions by Johnson into consideration, one remains puzzled upon facing the following question; what is the criteria that the curators embraced when selecting the projects that are the correct representation of Deconstructivist Architecture?

Both the curators have emphasized that the architecture housed in the MOMA’s exhibition seventeen years ago, is linked to the Soviet modern movement drawn from the 1920. Wigley does admit that Deconstructivist Architecture is devoted to the principles of adopted by

the Constructivists. Yet he claims that the featured architecture does not share nor have a common aesthetic.

In a lecture delivered in Columbia University in February 1991, Swiss architect Bernard Tschumi, recognized the fact that many architects who are considered to be deconstructivist refuse to be associated with a style and do not accept the deconstructivist prefix attached to their work.

In order to underpin the reason that causes this refusal of belonging to a certain style, Tschumi refers to the aims of the deconstructive thinking. Tschumi claims:

“...deconstructivism was born – immediately called a ‘style’ – precisely what these architects had been trying to avoid. Any interest in poststructuralist thought and deconstruction stemmed from the fact that they challenged the idea of a single unified set of images, the idea of certainty, and of course, the idea of an identifiable language” [Tschumi, 1996: 251].

Tschumi endorses his reasoning with the argument that whilst the deconstructive architecture true to deconstructive philosophy is supposed to question the established and unified methodology of thinking, how it can still serve its purpose if in turn it becomes a style.

However, upon deciding what work is eligible to represent the Deconstructivist Architecture, Johnson and Wigley in determining the decisive factor have not implicated the above statement. At what point does an architect begin or end to generate Deconstructive Architecture?

Deconstructive Thinking

“But the nature of deconstructive thinking is not to set out to destroy what has been taught in the past but instead to develop and revisit those values by analysing them in detail, hence the description deconstruction. The general assumption of a house is that it is constructed of walls, floors, ceilings, living room, bathroom, and bedrooms. Deconstruction is concerned with the in-between of those already established attachments of the house more than dealing with issues that have already been established. In philosophy the matter under the spotlight has evolved around providing generalised answers to questions troubling humanity. In the past we were accustomed to establishing something as true or definite. Deconstructive thinking scans through those predetermined thoughts and values by challenging them to be interpreted in a new form” [Ryan, 1982: 1].

Michael Ryan’s diagnosis of the Deconstructive movement offers more insight into the subject by describing it as investigative of the dominant principles applied in the widely accepted movements. It analyses previously established macroscopic issues through microscopic lenses focusing in detail to a particular treatment of an architectural element or theory and furthermore explores modernist views that have been undermined as trivial and underated.

Derrida’s strategy has been considered by many to be one of destruction of the past ideologies. Deconstruction’s existence lies in the very existence of perceived absolute structures.

The very existence of deconstruction is liaised with the actual presence of normative thinking and if the claims of its destructive nature are true then this could pose a threat to Derrida’s concept. How can it pursue its interrogative discourse when, by destroying them in the process, it no longer has any scene left to investigate? Furthermore to ascertain the non-destructive nature of deconstruction, Derrida in “Of Grammatology”, has affirmed that the deconstructive movement acknowledges certain established views. It does not carry the tendency of destructing but in looking for different ways of non-customary forms of recuperating it:

“The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structure from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in a certain way, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain ways falls prey to its own work” [Derrida, 1976: 24]

Derrida argues that the featured discourse inhabits the established structures in order to look for ways for it to be complemented with an improving aim.

Deconstructive Architecture – An External Perspective

Deconstruction endeavours to construct the deconstructed (not fully constructed) structure. A viable example of the aforementioned supposition could be considered the interpretation of the “street” and “place” by Michel de Certeau.

In the past it has been a general assumption that the role of an

architect has been to create spaces. But according to de Certeau a place is something fixed and determined and therefore is planned. When movements are introduced to a place, the later becomes a space alongside its variations in their behaviour.

“A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense articulated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflicting programs or contractual proximities.... In contradistinction to the place, it has thus none of the univocity or stability of a proper. In short, space is a practiced place” [De Certeau, 1984: 117].

Architectural creativity has in the past relied upon the technological aspects of a building, whereby the human factor has been paid little attention by the architects. Marc Auge has also outlined by remains in the dynamics of the location since a place with activity concludes into space. Auge draws the attention to the dynamics of a space as its primary element and not the architectural elements.

“Benjamin implies that in its repetition or rather in its revisit, the deconstructive mind enters with exploratory vision searching for meanings in things that were previously considered as trivial. He also claims that philosophy has been confined within its borders in defining the subject of its interest. Under deconstructive vision adding related issues that have been not so visible is expanding these borders” [Auge, 1995: 81].

Auge concludes that a place without activity is not a space.

Displacement of Established Architectural Theories

Deconstruction and Constructivism share a common approach that art should not be held hostage to the certain ideologies adopted collectively. Both movements consider any predetermined means of conduct in arts to be a handicap.

The appeal by Gabo and Pevsner [Bann, 1999: 8] to free art from guidance under certain set of rules true to a particular ideology has been confirmed by another publication in the magazine *Block* that was published in 1924. The article “What Constructivism Is?” reflects the characteristics true to this movement. Yet again it displays the fact that constructivism relies upon accepting the problems of construction but it also admits that the problems occurring rarely appear to be the same. It also confirms that it is dedicated to life, which is, of course constantly changing therefore, the means of tackling it need to be adopted accordingly and not through a certain system that has been established in the past.

Although since the year 1920 the constructivists were very specific in their demands to release art from the right or the wrong judgments of accomplishing it and appealed for it to evolve freely, it was not until the 70’s that their objections gathered momentum.

For five decades in its existence the constructivist conveyance to be true to the subject and not to a certain universal methodology remained embraced only by the Eastern European academics and artists.

It was in the 70’s that the constructivist voice echoed in the West amongst the intellectual circles, mostly in France, where concerns

towards their creative identity were being raised.

Inside the article “Answering The Question: What Is Postmodernism”, the need to break away from repetitiveness in justifying the essence of the post-modern society emphasized by Jean-François Lyotard,

“Finally, it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented... The answer is let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name” [Jencks, 1992: 149].

In decoding postmodernism calls for a war on totality, Lyotard states that the mission of the current generation is not in providing that which the society expects to be accomplished but instead to provide allusive inventive solutions.

Lyotard’s appeal to the post-modern generation to displace this repetitive, visionless creative culture has also been emphasized in year 1988 by Elias Zenghelis in his attempt to portray the current aesthetics in architecture, assembled together in the text that holds the title “The Aesthetics of the Present”:

“It is the settings where a sequence of displacements activate the imagination (like those in complete sentences that offer a large number of conclusions) and animate the inanimate. With the economy and simplicity of its means, it takes very little to pass from the implicit to the explicit. When architecture achieves this, it becomes an intense and pleasure giving experience. This experience, involving our minds and our senses is the measure of its beauty” [Benjamin, 1988: 67].

Zenghelis adopts the act of displacement as an improving factor when applied to architecture. He also outlines that those displacements achieve beauty only when they avoid being subjected to the generic way of pursuit. Instead, Zenghelis argues that those displacements become lucrative only when they focus on immediate parameters of a subject processed.

Is an architect supposed to reflect his favourite buildings throughout his work or is he supposed to actually produce his own great buildings?

Out of all of the deconstructivist architects Tschumi could be considered as one who has constantly warned that if we do not displace the architectural precedent values or methodologies the profession is exposed to a threat of it evaporating.

In the year 1975 Bernard Tschumi in the “Architectural Paradox”, classifies displacement as a central theme to the survival of the architectural profession. Considering the fact that the reduced control by the architect over the construction process is on the increase, Tschumi draws his attention to the grounds of the cause. According to Tschumi architecture is saved from extinction only when it architects stop corresponding to society’s image of a building.

“So architecture seems to survive only when it saves its nature by negating the form that the society expects of it. I would therefore suggest that there has never any reason to doubt the necessity of architecture, for the necessity of architecture is its non-necessity” [Tschumi, 1996: 47].

The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, designed by Frank Gehry, is perhaps the most valid testimony to the above claim. Frank Gehry has conceived an unorthodox approach by defying the rules of

the metric handbook and rejecting the convention of symmetry synonymous with traditional design. This resulted in architecture being widely published in architectural and non-architectural prints available at the local newsagent.

In the text “On the Razor’s Edge” written in 1989, Coop Himmelblau clearly portrays the displacement of common associations as an important factor to their identity. The text reflects the challenges in perceiving various elements differently to the random logic.

Prix argues that their architecture does not rely on traditional perceptions in confining how a building would look, but in searching less obvious new ways to enrich it:

“When we speak of ships, others think of shipwreckage.

We, however, think of wind inflated white sails.

When we speak of eagles, the others think of a bird.

We, however, are talking about the wing span.

When we speak of black panthers, the others think of predatory animals.

We, however, think of the untamed dangerousness of architecture.

When we speak of leaping whales, the others think of saurians.

We, however, think of 30 tons of flying weight.

We won’t find architecture in an encyclopaedia

Our architecture can be found where

thoughts move faster than hands to grasp it” [Noever, 1999; 20].

The replacement of the normative generic association to a specific subject with a related fragment is crucial to the work of Coop Himmelblau. Dealing with a ship instead of its association to shipwreckage, Himmelblau are interested in wind inflated white sails or an eagle instead of portraying it as a bird, Himmelblau draws attention to wing span.

But apart from the attempt to revive the status of an architect in a society the act of displacement is also considered as a form of criticism towards the inconsistencies that the manifestos of the past ideologies have created.

The evaluation of functionalist theory and its application in modern architecture has been conducted by Lebbeus Woods in the year 1997.

“All designed space in fact pure abstraction, truer to the mathematical than to any human function” [Woods, 1997: 23].

Woods refers to the untruthful pledge that architects claim that each design has been shaped to follow a human “program” by using the repetitive Cartesian rules of geometry. Woods questions how could the claim (function follows form) when in the past rectangular space have been ideal for office work, bedroom or butcher’s.

How can it be that the same rectangular shape is ideal to house work, sex/ sleep, or chopping of the meat? Surely the above human activities differ in the choreographic movement of the body in performing the functions, yet identical forms of spaces envelop them.

One could argue that the rectangular form seems to correspond more with the equipment/ furniture shape than the actual human factor. This displacement raises another fundamental question regarding the responsibility of an architect; Is the nature of an architect to surrender to the appliance’s deterrents or is it the

contrary, to challenge their shape, mode or a way of using it?

Technology is rapidly changing in order to accommodate the challenging needs of the user yet architecture still remains servant to the geometrical parameters of the equipment/ furniture inhabiting the space without transforming them to suit the needs of the user.

According to Eisenman the human factor was considered to be the origin around which the buildings have been conceived for the past five centuries. The parameters of the body have been the primary factor in determining a space, however, this space has failed to respond to the spiritual side of one's body.

"... [for] five centuries the human body's proportions have been a datum for architecture. But due to developments and changes in modern technology, philosophy, and psychoanalysis, the grand abstraction of man as the measure of all things, as an originary presence, can no longer be sustained, even as it persists in the architecture of today. In order to effect a response in architecture to these cultural changes, this project employs an other discourse, founded in a process called scaling" [Eisenman, 1998: 70].

Peter Eisenman has also raised his doubts regarding the corresponding aspect of architecture to the actual event that it houses.

In a lecture titled "Strong Form, Weak Form", whilst arguing his reason for the need of displacing architecture, Eisenman compares other art disciplines to architecture. Eisenman exemplifies the freedom of poetry and music in becoming what it transpires to be. In return architecture fails to evolve and with the cause identified by Eisenman is the overwhelming presence of reality impacted by the past.

"The question is, why do we want to displace architecture today? Why is it necessary to separate function and structure from symbolism, meaning, and form? Because in the past architecture always symbolized reality. In other words, while language was one kind of reality, poetry another, music another, architecture was perhaps the ultimate condition of reality, because it dealt with physical facts, with bricks and mortar, house and home. It was the physical place, the fundamental condition of reality" [Noever, 1999: 34].

Eisenman indicates that by architects focusing on the actual technological consideration in a building they have ignored the feelings of the occupier and were not even tempted to challenge them as it can be achieved in the other art forms.

In 1991 at Columbia University Bernard Tschumi delivered a lecture titled "Six Concepts" [Tschumi, 1996: 230], whereby he elaborates the truthfulness of the modernist architects in relation to use. Tschumi argues that modernists were preoccupied more with the appearance, driven by the rejection of ornaments whilst ignoring the function factor in a building. The traces of the overwhelming presence of pure aesthetics in cubic volumes found in modern architecture compile the argument in doubting their affiliation to the activity it houses.

The danger of such practice is that the architect either becomes a client by ignoring the design process and knowing exactly what it would look like once the brief is read or follows the client's vision.

This criticism by Mark Wigley in 1998 has also noted that modern

movement in architecture has become overtaken by ideology of providing pure and décor stripped building but that they have lost consideration of function.

"The modern movement attempted to purify architecture by stripping off the ornament of the classical tradition to reveal the naked purity of the functional structure beneath. Formal purity was associated with functional efficiency. But the modern movement was obsessed by an elegant aesthetic of functionalism, not by the complex dynamics of function itself" [Johnson, Wigley, 1988: 16].

Wigley argued that modernist architects were at the same time attempting to conduct themselves faithfully to the pure aesthetics of the building by claiming to serve the dynamics of the function.

If the duty of an architect is to provide the client/ user with a perfect solution where the function is the most important factor in determining the shape then surely we are only competent to claim the right to design architect's offices. Therefore the spaces ought to be best shaped by its users, since undeniably with regards to the way the building functions the users are more experienced than the architects like doctors in respect to the hospitals, curators in the museums, etc.

The modernist architects in their attempt to dismiss decorative buildings have produced buildings which were aesthetical and that was all and they did not further develop architecture.

This has also been emphasized by Zenghelis who claimed that "... instead of concentrating on ideas we focus on styles" [Benjamin, 1988: 66], in his effort to raise awareness that architecture is not only about aesthetics but it is also about providing an idea.

Conclusions

Architecture has to constantly evolve and question its established perceptions and principles of working order to deliver inventive and exiting architectural creativity.

If an architect is preconceived to be a designer then we should interrogate the nature of the word design. The word design derives from two French words *de* and *Signum*, which in "The Chambers Dictionary" prefix *de* stands for off, and the word *Signum* is translated as a mark. Thereby, the word design reflects the process in which one steps off a mark which literally means taking something away from a sign. The word designer does not stand for reproducing the sign and its essence is not for it to follow a consistent path. This in effect constitutes that the incentive of the designer, which is not in being faithful in reproducing icons from the past but instead to create new icons. In relation to the above statement a deconstructive architect corresponds more to the essence of the conception of design. How can a Classical or a Modernist architect be true to taking away the signage by actually producing a signature building true to their values constantly throughout their career?

The heterogeneous and un-repetitive buildings are without a doubt one of the principal characteristics of Deconstructive Architecture. This associated quality in Deconstructive Architecture is what causes the confusion when one tries to define it. The concept of conceiving genuine and not so familiar spaces distinguishes deconstructive architecture from other movements. Whereas Paladio found his professional enlightenment in symmetry

with rigidity in decorative features, Mies did so in detailing of constructive materials in a non-decorative manner. Therefore, both the Classicist and Modernist architects have pledged their work to certain etiquette.

However, a deconstructive architect does not adapt his project to a common architectural formula but instead he/she responds to the non-architectural elements, such as history, events, site context, and etc. Because every deconstructivist project depicts different tangents related to its humanistic and sentimental values Deconstructive Architecture cannot be marginalized into a simple definition.

Classical architecture strived upon the production period of a building ditto of the decorative ornaments. Modernist architecture is similar; however, in opposition to the Classicist achieving purity in a building enchanted them. Both of the aforementioned movements focused primarily in the building process. Deconstructive Architecture in comparison to the movements it bypasses, dedicates its attention to the experience of a building after it becomes inhabitable.

One of the colours authentic to Deconstructive Architecture is the focus of the human experience of a space. The same consideration for sentimental element can be traced in the writings of the Soviet Constructivists. Constructivists maintained the perception of that the building should shelter but also invoke feelings to the user. Hence a building should shelter but an architectural building should create an experience.

Another characteristic of the featured architecture is about displacement that is also identical to Constructivists' beliefs. Displacement in itself is a condition that every progressive society absorbs. Architecture is no exception and it cannot progress without its preconceived theories being challenged continuously. In this respect Deconstructivist architects have been successful in providing new insights into the theoretical aspect. Whereas, Modernists architects objected to the present decorative elements in the Classical architecture, Deconstructivists homologues routed their attention to the missing elements of architecture. Whilst Modernist architects justified their purpose in successfully replacing the ornaments favoured by the Classicists, the deconstructive trajectory relies on displacement, one which, supplements architecture with additional values. Therefore, Deconstructive Architecture cannot be mistaken of having destructive motives; a view already affirmed by Jacques Derrida should be understood as an elevating discourse. This is done by reinscribing the established norms of architecture, another element implied by Derrida to be consistent in Deconstruction. The process of reinscription constitutes in reinterpreting architectural elements. In the past architectural ideas were conveyed through drawings as primary means of communication. Deconstructivists consider the verbal communication as equally as important as the graphical one in expressing their intentions. Architecture filtered through Deconstructivism no longer depends on the power of the lines but its strength is found in the interpretation of the ideas conceiving the spaces. Due to this aspect the image of an architect is no longer envisioned to be the one of an individual with technical competence only producing working drawings. Through Deconstructive discourse Instead the architect's position

has changed into literary profession.

Another characteristic of Deconstructivism is the perception of a building raised. Deconstructivists similar with Constructivists do not build buildings but rather they assemble the building's elements together. Deconstructive buildings have no symmetry and do not facet ornamental values nor do they aim to provide purity. Deconstructive architecture does not liase with a certain artistic ideology but it responds to its immediate spaces individually. Deconstructive architecture is a tailored architecture. The process of obtaining a deconstructive building is parallel to producing a jacket. Deconstructive construction is similar to the suit's manufacture, which consist of elements that prior are sown individually and after assembled together.

The above are the characteristics of Deconstructivist Architecture but they are never applied in the same way. Not even in the many works associated with an individual architect and therefore as it is constantly evolving the process true to an art form, architecture is again reconstituted to the status of an art discipline.

The poignant story associated with architecture is the forty years of wait for it to become free to create, instead of copying and spreading a particular ideology obedient to a particular belief instead of architecture users. Soviet constructivists and deconstructive philosophers have both played a major role in order for deconstructive architecture to surface. The Constructivists are credited for the roots of the tree of deconstructive architecture and Derrida for securing the means under which it would flourish.

Deconstruction presents a movement closer to human being, by not defining the rules of life and conduct.

Deconstructive Architecture is not a style. It is a tool that analyses a style and searches for ways to enrich it. Deconstructive Architecture does not serve the colonial appetite of massively spreading an ideology of a particular time or civilization. It looks for ways help a building achieve its aims.

Deconstructive Architecture does not turn a building into a slave serving a particular style.

Deconstructive Architecture does not aim to create iconic buildings. It attempts to create memorable experiences in them.

Deconstructive Architecture does not claim which the correct way to do architecture. It only alludes to the ways it could be.

Deconstructive Architecture does not celebrate stones, brick, mortar or steel. It celebrates life in spaces confined by materials.

Deconstructive Architecture is not a closed chapter. That is why its architecture will continue to excite shock, horrify and inflict a reaction.

Notes

- Neil Leach exploited the various ground breaking philosophical movements that influenced architecture. Whilst his descriptions of other postmodern movements featured in his book, in his introduction he openly admitted the fact that there is a lot of confusion that surrounds Deconstruction. [Leach, 1997: 317].
- Although, Johnson and Wigley, both curators of the “Deconstructivist Architecture” in the 1988 at MOMA exhibition, compiled a list of projects that portray Deconstructive Architecture. However, although they have attributed the movement to be linked to Constructivist, neither of them was able to explain what actually constitutes Deconstructivist Architecture. [Johnson, Wigley, 1988: 7].

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