

**THE CASE FOR A RE-EVALUATION OF DECONSTRUCTION AND DESIGN; AGAINST DERRIDA,
EISENMAN AND THEIR CHORAL WORKS::
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Abstract

With the reaction to the death of Jacques Derrida receding, the time seems right to re-evaluate his impact on design and in particular to examine how the concept of deconstruction, propagated in his name and coming from his work building on the ideas of Martin Heidegger were misrepresented when related to design by many people including the explicitly deconstructive architects, including even Derrida.

This paper will argue for deconstruction as a stimulating provocation with utility for designers, but it will argue against many of the actions, practices and ideas historically associated with deconstruction in design and the wider theory. This will be achieved through an exploration of the collaborative project undertaken by the architect Peter Eisenman and Jacques Derrida – Choral Works and the theoretical micro-landscape on which the project sits.

Deconstruction

Deconstruction and design really came into close contact through a number of architectural conferences at the Tate in London and at MOMA in New York in 1988. Many of the brightest contemporary architects of the 1980`s were involved with these events including Peter Eisenman Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelblau, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind, Bernard Tschumi. In 'Deconstruction' the major anthology following these events, Andreas Papidakis writes '*Few ideas in architecture have created such a stir as Deconstruction in the relatively short time since it gained currency and public prominence*'¹.

This influence continues to an extent today, in the review of Salinargos '*Anti-Architecture and Deconstruction*' for the Architectural Review 2005, Meir A writes '*Deconstruction is an architectural style that in recent years has gained ever-increasing influence among architects and educators, as well as decision and policy makers and developers of prestige projects*'². There is a sense that this influence is not as fashionable as it once was and that deconstruction is a negative influence on architecture and design in general, indeed Meir goes on to say in his review

*'Architects cannot go on indulging themselves in the misty atmosphere of 'constructive ambiguity', with the logic of cults, the rhetoric of twisted pseudo-philosophy, and the terminology of disciplines they have no understanding of. It is time for architects to realize that an aggressive, self-propelling group has hijacked architecture, its teaching, discussion and raison d'être.'*³

It is easy to identify with this position when reading some texts about deconstruction, where obfuscation is seen as an aim rather than a problem and where in an effort to avoid determinism its often difficult to say anything at all, for example in the second-guessing in the title of Trigerman`s essay '*Construction (De) Construction (Re) Construction Architectural Antinomies and a (Re)newed Beginning, The (pre)text of American (Forget)fullness*'⁴.

The aim of this paper is to find ways of engaging with deconstruction that have a utility beyond academic design philosophy. I'm attempting to be direct and straightforward while acknowledging that even using the term deconstruction establishes a binary relationship (inside/outside deconstruction) that is potentially problematic and can regarded as creating a deconstructive orthodoxy through categorization.

There is a rich tradition of design and especially architecture taking an overtly theoretical stance. In some cases the user is recognised in this process but often the actual use of the designed artefact is subservient to the physical expression of the theory. The archetypal expression of this dominance of theory over use is Gerrit Rietveld's Red Blue Chair. This construction of planes, primary colours and black lines fits perfectly into the frameworks established by van Doesburg and Mondrian in their exploitation of theosophy in the de Stijl movement. The point here is not that the Red / Blue chair is not usable (it's quite comfortable) but its physicality is controlled by theoretical abstractions.

There are a number of books that attempt to summarise, abstract or explain deconstruction. These range from books such as *What is Deconstruction?*⁵ *Structuralism and Post-structuralism for Beginners*⁶, to Cullers *On Deconstruction*⁷ to books specifically for architectural students *Deconstruction A Student Guide*⁸. While this paper is not capable of covering the ground occupied by these (and many other) books it is appropriate to attempt a description of the essence of deconstruction.

One approach by Jeff Bennington is to keep the question of defining deconstruction open but still placing it in question by disabusing the reader of some assumptions they may have formed in relation to deconstruction. He achieved this in his text *Deconstruction is Not What you Think*⁹. Taking a more positive approach (as Bennington went on to do in the anthology cited above¹⁰) Derrida provides us with a definition of sorts of deconstruction. He says

*'Through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing put into practice a reversal of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system it is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of intervening in the field of oppositions it criticises and which is also a field of non-discursive forces'*¹¹

Although deconstruction is emphatically not a process or method (this interpretation is common to almost all texts addressing deconstruction), this definition/description by Derrida appears suggestive of process. In one description, binary relationships need to have their hierarchical relationships reversed and as an outcome of this reversal, the very fact that factors that were classically assumed to be minor (if perceived at all) are proved in fact to be able to be dominant, resulting in a general loss of certainty and re-assessment of the system as a whole.

While many understandings recognise a reversal of binaries and some go on to recognise that the aim of deconstruction is not a reversal of binaries, not the empowerment of the dominated but to use this as a 'tool' to provoke a general re-assessment of the system. It's clear in Derrida's quote that this binary reversal and re-evaluation of the system is a prerequisite to deconstruction not deconstruction itself.

After this re-appraisal of relationships, deconstruction offers the opportunity of intervening in the field it is criticising. Mark Wigley¹² describes this as the tracing of the boundaries between factors, but in allusions to fractal geometries, this boundary is so convoluted that it is the boundary that is the very structure of the system under investigation. Further, exposing and exploring this boundary state reveals the structures that are essential to that system but unknowable by that system.

*'Deconstruction is that which is necessary to structure but evades structural analysis (and analysis is invariably structural). It is the breakdown of structure that is the very possibility of structure'*¹³

This breakdown of structure can be seen as a 'teasing apart' but this is not a destructive action, it is not a case of reducing a structure to its constituent parts but as Kipnis describes it 'a soliciting of the text, a shaking of the wholeness of the text to see what falls out'¹⁴. The deconstructivist assertion is that the things that 'fall out' of a text may be vital to the structure but invisible to it.

In this sense deconstruction can be seen as a sort of reading. Indeed J. Hillis Millar, a deconstructivist literary critic strongly asserts that deconstruction is unambiguously *'good reading'*¹⁵ and that when we read texts we should all be looking beyond the casual, to the structural subtexts that are vital in their support of the text.

The architect Peter Eisenman reinforces this literary view of deconstruction acknowledging that he responds to texts outside his practice rather than creating from new. In this light, he uses devices (concepts) like 'palimpsest'. Palimpsest is a document that has had the original writing on it erased and is then re-inscribed with further text(s). Using this device Eisenman treats the sites of his buildings as texts uncovering previous inscriptions, exploring the boundaries between different versions of the constructed multilayered space-as-text.

A view of the literature could lead one to the conclusion that deconstruction is applicable to almost any situation, the breadth of application of deconstruction and the fact that some architects / designer / critics only engage in deconstructive practices seems to support this, but in a lecture in Australia Derrida clarifies this position and establishes the social/political nature of deconstruction when asked when you should use deconstruction.

*'What you need Deconstruction for is to undo a number of presuppositions prejudices and so on and so forth. But where you don't need to undo such things you don't need Deconstruction.'*¹⁶

Here we see that deconstruction is about exposing prejudice and highlighting assumptions that would not normally have been addressed and where there are no unexamined assumptions, deconstruction has no utility.

Choral Works, Chora I Works, Chora(I) Works¹⁷

Choral works was a collaborative architectural project principally involving Derrida and Peter Eisenman. This project is part of a much bigger project called Parc de la Villette coordinated by the architect Bernard Tschumi in 1982. The attraction of working with Derrida for Peter Eisenman is clearly understood, beyond the fact that at the time Derrida was the hero of critical theory, Eisenman already explicitly applied Derrida's ideas in his projects, seeing them as being 'animated by the spirit of Deconstruction'¹⁸. While we shall be returning to some problems with the application of Derrida's ideas later, Derrida did look at Eisenman's previous work and proceeded with the collaboration. In essence, this gave an implicit approval of Eisenman's interpretations and if taken at face value confirms his support for Eisenman in the essay *Why Peter Eisenman Writes Such Good Books*¹⁹.

Derrida's desire to collaborate with Eisenman stems from an acknowledgement that architecture has (according to Wigley) a special relationship with philosophy beyond simple analogy, that there were fundamental connections between philosophy and architecture concerning the idea of foundation and structure that were not present in (for example) art or photography. Derrida accepted these links and appeared happy to enter into collaboration. As we will see, the degree of actual collaboration is debatable²⁰.

Choral works was selected for a more in-depth investigation because of this collaboration, as there can be no doubt that this was a legitimate and explicit attempt to explore architectural deconstruction while at the same time being an example of a conspicuously 'authored' work. There was another candidate for further investigation. That is Parc de la Villette itself, the larger project in which the choral garden was to be placed.

Bernard Tschumi won a major international competition in 1982 to build La Villette. It was a very large site with the opportunity to create a significant building, a contemporary multi-use Pompidou centre. Rather than this, Tschumi conceived of a distributed series of buildings (or follies) whose location was determined by the overlaying of existing grids, archaeology and networks (exploiting the site as a palimpsest). The follies are semi-computer generated and were to have un-fixed, flexible or changeable uses on completion.

This de-hierarchized, flexible, context dependent approach originated in earlier projects and as Tschumi claims, 'the first deconstruction superposition work was my Manhattan transcripts (1976-81)'²¹. While the idea of a first, original deconstructive application is fraught with tension, the compositional grids and the construction of the follies of la Villette are described as 'rejecting the 'symbolic' repertory of architecture as a refuge of humanist thought' and '*La Villette, then, aims to be an architecture that means nothing, an architecture of the signifier rather than the signified*'²² are interesting. The explicit rejection of authorship of meaning generated by the follies 'each observer will project his own meaning', looking to produce stimulation rather than closure, resonates strongly with Barthes' ideas of writerly writing²³.

The problem with Tschumi's (and Eisenman's) exploration of issues around authorship is that Eisenman's claim that the grids Tschumi used for La Villette were 'superpositioned' from an earlier project of Eisenman's in Venice called Caravaggio, sparked a public argument about who exactly was the author of the grid. In an emotional letter to Eisenman (copied to Derrida and five other people) Tschumi claimed that Eisenman's insinuations were on the one hand 'regressive' looking back to the idea of defined authorship when other areas were moving away from this concept²⁴. In the same document, he robustly claims the grid to be his own work and that in fact Eisenman intellectually and practically borrows from him. This double play not in the Derridian terms of reversal and dissolution but the more conventional counterattack and entrenchment,

undermines claims of openness and the transcendence of a literal view of authorship on the part of both architects. On one level this is simply friction between egos but it is evidence that deconstructive architects may not really be interested in re-addressing the role of the designer in the authorship process and that there may be some (many?) assumptions that are not up for re-examination.

One of the first actions of the collaboration between Eisenman and Derrida was to consider how Derrida could contribute to the process while acknowledging that he is not an architect or designer. The solution was to explore his analysis of Plato's *Timaeus* looking specifically at the idea of Chora.

Chora, like hymen, trace, pharmakon or any other of Derrida's 'undecidables' does not have a fixed meaning. Derrida describes it as between the sensible and the insensible; Chora is '*a difference with no opposition*'²⁵. As a spacing or boundary without a form, it is not so dissimilar from deconstruction. Derrida also likens it to sand. Sand on a beach is the shifting record of moving water. When one walks on the sand an imprint is left behind but a trace is also imparted on the foot (grains of sand). This conceptual trace/boundary is not a physical entity in the way that sand is. In fact, '*Chora is not, is above all not, is anything but a support or a subject which would give place by receiving or by conceiving, or indeed letting itself be conceived*'²⁶.

Chora is a receptacle (proposed by Plato in a text called *Timaeus*) that can shape contents and imprint on surfaces without itself having a physical form. It cannot be represented. It is the '*spacing, which is the condition for everything to take place, for everything to be inscribed*'²⁷. In this sense, 'Chora' could be thought of as the existence that was in place before the cosmological moment of inflation - the space into which space emerged. The idea that Chora requires creation, the receptacle has to contain something for it to exist led Derrida and Eisenman to spend time thinking how users could create something at the same time exploring the agenda Eisenman brought to the collaborative process.

This process involved a series of seven meetings and in support of these, a number of letters, drawings and other supplemental texts were exchanged. The roles adopted by the protagonists of this collaboration are interesting. Jeffery Kipnis is introduced to Derrida as someone theoretical with a good knowledge of Derrida and Eisenman's work. At the outset of this project Derrida makes it clear that working in a foreign field (architecture) and a foreign language (English) was going to be very difficult for him and that collaboration was improbable.

This unease is compounded by Eisenman later in the process by asking Derrida if he can draw a Chora. Derrida clearly has problems with this and with Eisenman's statement that '*what I am searching for is a way to turn deconstruction from a mode of analysis into one of synthesis*'²⁸. This desire to turn deconstruction into a creative activity is something Eisenman sees in his previous projects, Caravaggio and *Romeo and Juliet*. There is a sense (supported by Kipnis comments in the documentation of this project)²⁹ that Eisenman is looking for Derrida's approval, his signature as he puts it on these earlier projects by reconstituting them here in a theoretical form with Derrida in attendance.

This play leads to an interesting dynamic where Eisenman is primarily concerned with the conceptual/philosophical implications of the Choral Work, often more so than Derrida. Eisenman encourages Derrida to be more conceptual, more abstract and to worry less about practical constraints (not one suspects an everyday occurrence for Derrida).

During this, interplay is also stimulated by the other participants of the meetings design emerged that, while very rich texturally, demonstrated an unexpected conservatism in the relationship between creators and prospective users. After a number of discussions exploring the possibilities of facilitating the creation of Chora through public writing or mark making or even moving small components around the site (from a 'quarry' to other areas). Derrida and Eisenman decided that such openness was too problematic both in terms of practical constraints but also surprisingly, conceptually.

On a practical level, Derrida and Eisenman decided that it would be chaos if the public could write on their own 'texts' in their garden. This rejection is problematic from two perspectives, firstly the practical problems of user manipulation do not seem to be insurmountable but further if you are interested in a physical manifestation of the unexpected things 'falling out of the structure', of questioning authorship and hierarchies you have to accept unpredictability even if this involves a degree of chaos. It seems reasonable to argue that the practical concerns were a screen for a conceptual unwillingness to put theory into practice and address 'presuppositions and prejudices' as Eisenman says in the discussions for the project '*We must be sensible or it will not be architecture*'³⁰.

The fact that the first submission of the project was double the allotted budget and when asked to re-design and trim costs, the second submission was six times the original budget is an indication that at least Eisenman did not place a high priority on physically realising the Choral Works. This raises the question of the nature of the outcome of the project and the text Derrida and Eisenman (with others) produced. The real outcome of this project could be said to be the documentation of the project (this accusation is levelled at the contributors of the collaboration in the project documentation). The book documenting this process operates as graphic and literary text; it is obviously a series of two-dimensional representations but also operates in part as an architectural model combined in a Barthes-like *writerly* description that is ambiguous and provocative.

The interplay between architecture and text was always going to be significant in the collaboration and output. Eisenman's explicit drawing out, not only of theoretical ideas but textual analogies such as the palimpsest coupled with Derrida's expression through writing created a predictable weighting towards written or graphic expression.

The book itself (like Choral Works) bears the hallmarks of an obfuscatory approach supporting the interpretation by Plato that Chora requires a form that is '*neither sensible nor intelligible [but] a form 'difficult and obscure*'³¹. This difficulty is evident in the documentation of the creation of the Choral Works.

The ambiguities woven into the fabric of the documentation of Choral Works are evident from its cover and in particular its title (fig. 1). Here the Chora and the L are separated from each other enough to make this separation distinct but not enough to signify a letter space. The L is in tension - is the title Choral or Chora L? The play between these two meanings sets the tone for the rest of the book. Inside the book, two things are immediately apparent. There are a series of nine square holes cut into the book to almost half way through the book. These holes correspond to pits in the design for the choral works shown on the front cover, cutting through the text and images of the book. Secondly the book false starts, beginning with some illustrations and then on page 7 Transcript One, but the Title page and introduction and copyright information are deep inside the book on page 115.

The holes cut in the text introduce a physical ambiguity in the texts; a reader is placed in the position of literally having to fill in the blanks, of putting their words in the mouth of the authors. For example on page 167 the sentence shown in fig. 2 illustrate how the removal of squares from the back of the book renders the text open to multiple interpretations (or total incomprehension). It also has another function, it turns the 'text' into a 3- dimensional model of the proposed 'garden', where the holes in the book correspond in the plan shown to pits proposed in the final realization of the design.

Cutting holes in the text emphasises not only that this is a representation in a book, the absences introduced by the holes evoke or emphasise the nuances (or perhaps even quite significant) differences between the actual meetings and their documentation. While these holes work in many ways they can, in the light of this analysis reinforce, the dominance of the metaphysics of presence, the primacy of the spoken word-thought over the written word-thought.

The result of these design decisions and the inclusion of a large number of drawings mostly in plan and really disrupted by the overlapping of the series of 'pit-holes' on them, result in a document that does leave space for the user to fabricate their own imaginative Choral garden whilst retaining the academic signature of the philosophical Derrida.

¹ Papadakis, Catherine Cooke and Andrew Benjamin (eds.), *'Deconstruction'* London, Academy Editions, 1989: p17

² Meir I, *Anti-Architecture and Deconstruction*, London, Architectural Review, Feb 2005 p104-5

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Tigerman S, *'Construction (De)Construction (Re) Construction Architectural Antinomies and a (Re)newed Beginning'* in *Deconstruction*, Papadakis, Cooke and Benjamin (eds.), London Academy Editions, 1989, p256-259.

⁵ Farrel T, Norris C, Nenjamin A, *'What Is Deconstruction?'*, London, Academy Editions, 1989

⁶ Palmer, *Structuralism and Post-Structuralism for Beginners*, London, A Writers & Readers Beginners Documentary Comic Book, 1997

⁷ Culler J, *'On Deconstruction, Theory and Criticism after Structuralism'*, London, Routledge, 1994

⁸ Broadbent G, *'Deconstruction a Student Guide'*, London, Academy Editions, 1991.

⁹ Bennington J, *'Deconstruction is not What you Think'*, in *Deconstruction*, Papadakis, Cooke and Benjamin (Eds.), London, Academy Editions, 1989, p 84.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Derrida cited in Culler J, *'On Deconstruction, Theory and Criticism after Structuralism'*, London, Routledge, 1994, p86.

¹² Wigley, M, *'The Architecture of Deconstruction, Derrida's Haunt'*, Cambridge, Massachusetts MIT Press, 1997.

¹³ *ibid*: 29

¹⁴ Kipnis & Leeser (ed) *'Chora I Works Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman'*, New York, The Monacelli Press, 1997, p160

¹⁵ Wolferys J, , *'Deconstruction • Derrida'* London, Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998, p9

¹⁶ Derrida in Patton and Smith (ed), *'Jacques Derrida Deconstruction Engaged'*, Sydney, Power Publications, 2001, p110

¹⁷ Such are the layers of ambiguity woven around this project its exact, correct name is not immediately clear. The book publicising this project places a small gap (smaller than a normal letter space) between Chora and I so playing between the interpretations of Choral explored in the text and Derrida's essay Chora. This can also be presented as Chora(I) introducing a flickering between these two meanings. This chapter takes to heart the comments of Peter Eisenman in an interview with Charles Jenks when he says 'They are called Choral Works' Eisenman P, *Peter Eisenman – An Architectural Interview by Charles Jenks* in *Deconstruction*, Papadakis, Cooke and Benjamin (Eds.), London, Academy Editions, 1989, p145.

¹⁸ Eisenman P, *'Peter Eisenman – An Architectural Interview by Charles Jenks'* in *Deconstruction*, Papadakis, Cooke and Benjamin (Eds.), London, Academy Editions, , 1989, p147.

¹⁹ Derrida J, *'Why Peter Eisenman Writes Such Good Books'* in *Chora I Works Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman'* (sic), Kipnis & Leeser (ed), New York, The Monacelli Press, 1997, p. 95-102.

²⁰ As an interesting aside to this Lupton starts to build an argument for a similar special relationship between Deconstruction and typography. In this, she argues that as letterform and layout are at the edges of language they share a relationship with deconstruction beyond simple analogy. Wigley's assertion that Derrida's work consistently addressing the ornamental (the outside, the apparently peripheral) could be seen to support this and may (at some future date) enable a challenge of Wigley's assertion that structure has to be architectural in nature.

Lupton E, Miller A, *Writing on Graphic Design*, London, Phaidon, 1996, p 33-39.

²¹ Tschumi B, *Parc de la Villette, Paris*, in *Deconstruction*, Papadakis, Cooke and Benjamin (Eds.), London, Academy Editions, 1989, p174.

²² (Ibid. p181)

²³ Barthes R, *The Death of the Author*, in *Image Music Text*, London, Fontana Press, 1997.

²⁴ Kipnis & Leeser (ed) *Chora I Works Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman*, New York, The Monacelli Press, 1997, p82.

²⁵ Derrida in Kipnis & Leeser (ed) *Chora I Works Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman*, New York, The Monacelli Press, 1997, p109.

²⁶ Ibid: 17/18

²⁷ Ibid: 10.

²⁸ Kipnis & Leeser (ed) *Chora I Works Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman*, New York , The Monacelli Press, 1997, p8.

²⁹ Ibid: 141

³⁰ Ibid: 72

³¹ Ibid: 150)