

Deconstruction *and* Architecture. Basic notes about this encounter for a further research

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Abstract. The main objective of this paper is to outline a research account about an event of approach between the philosophical thought of Jacques Derrida, usually gathered together under the signature of “deconstruction”, and the architecture in general, but more particularly in the field of the named “deconstructionist architecture”. To proceed like that, a research was done to study, based primarily on the literature review, the “invitation event” of the architect Bernard Tschumi calling Derrida to work on his project with another well-known architect, Peter Eisenman. The project, in general, was the building and development of a new public space at the city of Paris called *Le Parc de la Villette*, one of the named *Grandes Travaux*, done under the presidency of François Mitterrand. In accepting the inviting, we claim, Derrida narrowed even more the attaches between the philosophical thinking of “deconstruction” and the thought of architecture, even if in his early work this attachments were, of course, all readable. At the same time, the philosophical thinking of deconstruction influenced the architecture and the architecture influenced the named “deconstruction”. Even if the objective it is not to compare the “deconstructionist architecture” as whole with Derrida’s work, the focusing on this event could held some basic notes between these two areas. It is a singular event to start to think together the mutual implications of one to another.

Keywords. Deconstruction, Architecture, “Deconstructionist Architecture”. Jacques Derrida, Parc de la Villette.

1. Introduction

The present paper is a partial draft of some previous notes for a further research indication. Due to his specified limits, it has modest objectives, these are: try to establish a research topic and try to get an overview of the literally availability of research sources about the theme. It is based at ongoing researches on the so-called topic of “deconstruction and architecture”: the first author of this paper were outlining a research on the themes of “deconstruction” and “identity”. It places, too, a link between this research and the researches on architecture held by the second author of this paper. It is a first attempt of the authors to write about the Derrida’s work, a work often placed under the signature of the word “deconstruction”, on an English language. This paper were intended to abroad the research objectives of the authors on this field. It is, encore, an attempt to link this preview questions with his “application” on the

“field of architecture” and some relate foregoing questions or issues.

The research field of this paper are located on the areas of “history of contemporary philosophy” and the “architectural theory studies”. Debating this recent philosophical history, it is target, as the paper main focus, to discuss the legacy of the work of thinking named “deconstruction”, centering it on the *opus* signed by Jacques Derrida. Evolving formally, as an recognizable termination, from a thinking work developed by the years of 1950-60’s, the then called “deconstruction” became one of the major philosophical topics of our contemporary philosophical debate. Still, nowadays, is one of the most recurrent contributions to the legacy of the philosophical thinking.

At the same time, mainly around the 1980’s years, an architectural movement called “deconstructionism” or “deconstructionist architecture” began to take a more widespread form

and to become, too, relevant since then. The “deconstructionist architecture”, by this context, has started to be considered one of the most important architectural movements inside the general frames of the so-called “post-modern architecture”. As a recognizable topic area inside architecture, this specified way of doing the architectural work gathered together many buildings, monuments and architectural designs with the name of a series of architects that became well known for this particular way of doing architecture. Some examples of architects names associated with the “deconstructionist architecture” where the ones of the swiss architect Bernard Tschumi, the north-american architect Peter Eisenman (both closely related to Jacques Derrida, as we gonna see it), and many others as so, like Frank Gehry, etc.

Even if the “philosophical thinking” and the “architectural movement” (if one might wants to call they so) share the same name – the neologist word “deconstruction” – the relations between those two areas or fields are not so obvious as it might seem. On some views, the work developed on each area has some particular nuances that would be positive to claim and see his details. In other words, the called “deconstructionist” movement on architecture it is not just an “application” of Jacques Derrida’s work and thinking into the field of architecture. Even if these philosophical and architectonic actions are held at a more or less “common” name, we want to underline that one not necessarily “command” the other. At the same time, the architecture field, one might claim, was not directly discussed by Jacques Derrida until the middle 1980’s (c.f. WIGLEY, 1993:XII)[1], and his thinking was not classified at a “theoretical thinking towards architecture” specifically. So, the specificities of this “encounter” towards architecture and philosophical thinking are very special and should be examined.

This paper, however, does not intend to do a comparative approach of Jacques Derrida’s work and the projects, buildings or semantics of the “architectural deconstruction”. The main objective, instead, is to give an account of the concrete encounters between the philosopher Jacques Derrida and the architectural field on the middle years of 1980’s. As said before, the “deconstructionist architecture” has it’s own history and developments and so as the “deconstruction” as a formal philosophical thinking. More than comparing those two historical facts, isolating one form another and then comparing his common continuities and discontinuities, the paper objective and research question was try to compile the historical accounts of the invitation – formally held by the architect Bernard Tschumi – of Jacques Derrida to work with architects on some parts of the at the time new project for the *Parc de la Villette*, an open public space at the city of Paris. This “event” were probably significant both to the

influence of architecture on the “deconstruction”, the Derrida’s (among others) philosophical work, as for the influence of this thinking of “deconstruction” on the architectonic thinking.

Before we try to summarize some historiographical notes on the event, two previous steps are necessary, those are: 1- an exposition of the research methods held on this paper and 2- a preliminary more detailed presentation of Jacques Derrida and the thinking of deconstruction. It is what we gonna develop now.

2. Research methods

The main research method used in this paper is the literally review and the bibliographical search. So, using a specified database and indexer, the research where guided on the search of the quality written material at the scholar community, in general, and in the philosophy and architecture fields, specifically. It was established that the search would be based at the online frame, searching for the material that were available online. The main resource and indexer for the online material established and choose by the research was the *Google Scholar* platform.

So, established the field of the research and his main research question, the aforementioned historiographical account of Derrida’s invitation to collaborate at the *Parc de la Villette* project, it was necessary to refine the questions and the methods of indexation and searching in order to try to get the more accurate and useful bibliographical material for the research. With the reminder that the objective was to focus on the historical events concerning to the Derrida’s participation on the project, the main keywords chosen to be main search terms where the names of the personalities involved on the event (I. e. the then french president “Mitterrand”, for reasons we are going to see, the lead architect of the project, Bernard Tschumi, Derrida, etc.) and the exact expression “Parc de la Villette” that encompassed the project event. One additional strategy held were the combined researches avoiding another names well known on the called “deconstructionist architecture” that, nevertheless having a huge importance on the field as whole, does not have a narrow attachment to this particular event as one contextual example.

By doing so, the research managed to get on a extent of 20-40 texts (comprehending papers, articles, books, dissertation studies, etc.) that were more or less connected to the research question and objectives held here. Then, it was the time to select the most relevant of these to make an historical balance of the studied event. The choose was not only targeted on English-written texts, but the main objective was to choose the texts that were more related to the research conducted here. Another objective was to avoid redundancy and try to filter

only the most synthetic and helpful articles for specific information required. Then, some information were based on this article, others on that, focusing on the steps necessary of presenting and debating the event. Due to the limits of this paper, it would be very difficult to conduct an broader investigation opening wide new information about the event. So, we contented to present an authorial way of seen it, summarizing the question and, then, finishing with some notes and remarks pointing out some possibilities for future researches or broader questions.

Following the lines specified above, we are going now to discuss the *deconstruction* as a philosophical thinking, trying to outline the major questions in a very initial and resumed way. Then, we will pass to the specific discussion of Derrida and the *Parc de la Villette* project.

3. Deconstruction and Derrida's Work: an overview

3.1 Jacques Derrida and his philosophical work

Jacques Derrida was a french-speaker philosopher born in 1930 at the city of El-Biar, Algeria – at the time a french possession. The “marks” of this context of french imperial politics over Algeria would be a theme of his late works, namely ones like the book *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* (translated into english as *The monolingualism of the other*), *Circonfessions*, etc. As Derrida says on *Le monolinguisme de l'autre*, he never crossed the sea that split the margins of algerian and french seashores until he was 19 years old (1998: 44; 1996: 75)[2][3]. At the time, he did that travel to go study on France. He conclude his university studies at the field of philosophy and started his works writing about Husserl's phenomenology, already at the time, the middle of the 1950 decade, one of the most important of philosophy areas of study.

His philosophical work became more recognized on the following decade, the 1960's. The debates held by Derrida with the main theoretical movements of the time played a great role on that. Derrida started to write and participate on congresses and lectures held on the theme of the linguistics and the structuralism, one of the major academic fields of debate at the time. But Derrida's work, among other french philosophers works at the time, would not “fit” into the claim of being an “structuralist” view. As many others like Foucault and, perhaps, Deleuze, Derrida's work would be called, for the better or worse, *post-structuralist*. Even if the author itself many times on his life tried to detach this labels from himself, this going labeling also plays a role on the history of the XX century ideas and concepts

attribution, even nowadays that arouse a profound debate. Putting aside this major questions for a moment, it would also important to be said that Derrida have participated, at the 1960-70's years, on the group called “Tel Quel”, linked to the published review held by the same name (with Michel Foucault and many others).

3.2 The word “deconstruction”

By that time – and mainly because the publication of books like *Of Grammatology* – Derrida's work began to be gathered together around the sign of *Deconstruction* – a word and expression registered on his aforementioned book *Of Grammatology* (published originally on french under the title of *De la grammatologie* and then translated to many languages). The word *Deconstruction*, so, started to play a key and a major role on Derrida's work and thinking, and it started to play a major role at the “reception” of his philosophical thought too. To know about the word “deconstruction”, then, started to be seen as a way of presenting the work and philosophical thought that Derrida was developing at the time, a thought that maintained an “open debate” – if one might call so – with many others major philosophical traditions and issues.

But, if this is so important, how can we be presented to questions of “deconstruction”? The answer is both clear, direct, and, at the same time, cloudy, thought-provoking. Derrida was asked many times in his career to answer this questions, but, one might say, every time he proclaimed a presentation of the theme, this account, when given by him, was never “traditional”, in the way many interviewers, reporters and others intended to see. These presentations, or, even better, these “placements” – avoiding the word “definitions” that make almost no sense on the derridean work – where, one might say, “uncanny”. Still, many times the subject was discussed.

So, it would be fruitless to intend to give an “definition” of deconstruction. Instead of that, it would be better, perhaps, to outline some of the gestures held at the “practice” (another complicated word) of the deconstruction. If we want to present the *gesture* of deconstruction, as pointed out on a way somehow closest to the derridean thinking, it maybe would be good to point that this gesture is often said as a gesture of “deconstruction” of the then called “metaphysics of presence”. A “deconstruction”, one might notice, and not only a “radical critic” towards the subject of these “metaphysics of presence”. A radical critic of these “metaphysics” would, maybe, place the “critique” in a position of being radically “out” of these “metaphysics”; then, this gesture would perhaps be closer to the gesture of a “destruction” of this “metaphysics” and his “legacy”. The derridean gesture seems to consider, on the contrary, that it would make no sense try to be on that position,

because It may believe that there is no such thing at this place of an absolute “externe critique”, a position of being completely out of the questions and heritage gathered together on the expression “metaphysics of presence”. Thus, Derrida also claims that this metaphysics way of placement are also insufficient. This also means that there is no such thing as a absolutely “intern” position regarding to this metaphysics. Between the “inside” and the “outside”, but not only being on a “middle” that makes no sense too, between the “construction” and the “destruction” ways of seeing these questions, this thinking of the “deconstruction” is a way of see things not being completely absent but also not completely “presents” as themselves.

Maybe because of this the “deconstruction” thinking is claimed to be a thinking of the *trace*, and not of the *presence* of things as entities, significations, phenomenons, etc.

This very concise and, it must be said, limited exposition would not be adequate to present the whole complexity of the deconstruction thinking. Thus, it would be more appropriated to see it as an outline for further reading and explanation, indicating only some major topics towards an explanation concerning this theme of deconstruction.

Pointed this out, as it was pointed some things about Derrida’s trajectory, now we can develop the next part of the text, reporting the event of the formal meeting between the “deconstruction” thinking as it was being written by Derrida and the architectural landscape on the *Parc de la Villette* context.

4. The *Parc de la Villette* architecture and the deconstruction thinking – an meeting event

To try to outline an account of the following issues, we have to go back to the french context of the beginning of the 1980’s years, a period that seems fruitful both to Derrida’s work and for the architecture in France. Derrida started to publish his books at the years of 1960’s and, about the same time, started to teach at some well-known french academic and university institutions, like the Sorbonne Univesity, for a shot period of time, then the *École Normale Supérieure* and, latter on the 1980’s to the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*. At the same time, Derrida also were, by a great part of his life, a visiting professor and lecturer at other academic institutions and universities around the world, some of them mainly on the North America. The John Hopkins University, the University of Yale and, later, the University of

California at Irvine were some of the institutions where he lecture and/or where he was visiting professor/scholar. So, at the time, his work were being recognized in many parts of the world and became widespread, although with many impact differences on each place (for instance, the United States and France, etc.). This account would be necessary to explain how the repercussion of his work were taking place at the time.

The french political panorama of the time would be very significant. The president François Mitterrand were elected in the year of 1981. According to Mariana Bez, Miterrand, once as a president, did paid a very special attention concerning the “cultural initiatives” and quickly began his famous projects of architectural interventions named as *Grandes Operations d’Arhitecture et d’Urbanisme* and also known as *Grands Travaux* (2014)[4]. Then, followed this scenario a politics of promotions of public architecture competitions to funfill the main goals of the interventions. On this context, a project was asked to replace the old area of the deactivated slaughterhouse of the city, from this preliminarily use, to a city park. Still according to Mariana Bez, at the year of 1867 Napoleon III ordered to build an slaughterhouse at a huge area (about 55 hectares of land) on the Parisian 19° *arrondissement*, the location (also called *La Villette*) has served to the project due to its closeness of train stations, roads and the river boat transport, what would be easier to make the commodities to flow (Idem)[4]. The slaughterhouse was, then, deactivated at the year of 1974. Plans of projecting on the area where taken. In the next decade, under the time of the *Grands Travaux*, the public notice for the contest presented , as a main objective, the ideia of the creation of the park as opposed to the whole tradition of the existent parks in the city. The then called *Parc de la Villette* would have to be different, or even opposed, to the other conceptions of parks already present in the city (Idem)[4].

The winning architect of the contest was Bernard Tschumi and his project was selected to be the one to build the park. The *Parc de la Villette*, besides the redevelopment of one of the *arrondissements* in Paris, was created to shelter urban leisure and culture equipments. The idea was conceived based on three guiding principles: the points, also called as *Folies*, the lines and the surfaces, as is well-known.

The three main lines in the park link the places and create the paths. The points, in which the *Folies* were situated, were designed to attend the need program required according to the park’s occupation. Those *Folies* are an ephemeral architecture, and they didn’t have a specific use defined. In other words, the use is defined through the park’s users. The *Folies* were arranged on a grid form and they organized the places in the park. Finally, the surfaces were, in general, the fresh-air areas that occupied about 35 of the 55 total hectares

of the park. On those surfaces, were created a few thematic gardens.

Bernard Tschumi worked with a team of invited professionals, among them were the architect Peter Eisenman, another one of the architects that would become well-known in the 'field' of "deconstructionist architecture". One of the main objectives of Tschumi and the team gathered together around the project would be to make a more "philosophical" approach to the architecture, thinking differently the process of the architecture making. But it was more than that. The project were taking place at the middle of the 1980's years. At the year of 1985, Bernard Tschumi had the initiative to formally invite Jacques Derrida, as a philosopher, into the project.

Mark Wigley, author of the book *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's haunt* tells that about the same time he, Wigley, were working on a doctoral thesis about Derrida's thinking and the architecture. Until that time, he claim, Derrida never had essayed about architecture. So, at this point, the relations between his philosophical thinking and the architecture were not so clear.

As Wigley say, nevertheless: "When I began to write it in the splendid, if not monastic, isolation of New Zealand, architects were not yet interested in deconstruction and deconstructive writers were not yet interested in architecture, and such an interdisciplinary exchange seemed an improbable and overdetermined fantasy, which in some important sense it still is and will necessarily remain so. The thesis was finally submitted in the 1986 to the University of Auckland precisely at the time that Derrida had just started to engage with architecture" (1993: XIV)[1].

So what have changed? Precisely, the event of Derrida's collaboration with Tschumi and Eisenmann could be one of the main responsible vectors to that. Wigley itself gives a vivid description of the beginning of this event: "In 1985 the architect Bernard Tschumi called Jacques Derrida with an invitation. Architecture called on philosophy. For What? Philosophy? Not simply. The philosopher was asked if he would be interested in collaborating with an architect on the design of a section of the *Parc de la Villette* in Paris, a project that already had its own "design-philosophy" and even presented itself as being no more than this philosophy, a conceptual structure rather than a single material form. But clearly the architect thought that something was missing, that there was some kind of gap in the argument that could be filled by a philosopher, an opening that could be exploited, some kind of pocket within which another discourse could be elaborated. So Derrida was invited into the space of the project, and hence the space of the architecture, which is not yet to say the architectural space"(Ibidem: XI)[1].

The "behind the scenes" and some latter movements of this invitation and collaboration are given by the historical narrative exposed at Brigitte Weltman-Aron's paper *Rhizome and Khôra: Designing Gardens with Deleuze and Derrida*. Quoting her, she points out that "The design of the master plan of the park at La Villette was awarded to the architect Bernard Tschumi in 1983 and completed in 1995. At Tschumi's invitation, Eisenman and Jacques Derrida were asked to work together on one of la Villette's gardens (Chora L Works 125). Independently of that project, Derrida wrote an essay on Tschumi's design, *Point de Folie – Maintenant l'architecture*, and in addition, his original collaboration with these architects was documented in *Chora L Works*. Unlike Tschumi's plan, which preceded theirs, Eisenman/Derrida's design was ultimately not laid out, but as we shall see, congruence between the two projects is nevertheless discernible, partly because Derrida's work has been a significant referenee for Tschumi as well as for Eisenman. In addition, both architects have demonstrated an affinity for certain forms, such as the point grid structure, devised beforehand by Tschumi in London ("Joyce's Garden") and by Eisenman ("Cannaregio project") in Venice, which motivated Tschumi's invitation in the first place (*Chora L Works* 82-83)". (2005: 49)[5]

As we can see, Derrida have collaborated directed with Peter Eisenman on the project of one of the garden sections in the *Parc de la Villette*. The project, however, was not then executed due to budget limits. Besides that, the collaboration delivered some new publications by Jacques Derrida, as we can see mainly on the text *Point De Folie — Maintenant L'architecture*, published both on a collaborative publication with the aforementioned architects and on *Psyché: inventions de l'autre*, one of his collection of essays. At the next decade, more precisely at the year of 1997, it was published also some of the collaborative material composed by Derrida and Eisenman, called *Chora L Works*.

But besides all that, this collaboration can be rather seen as an important *regarding point and structural mark* both to the books and works on and of deconstruction that followed the event and, as well, the architectural field in general – and significantly to the field called of "deconstructionist architecture". As Wigley said, "Spurred by this event, a vigorous discourse has developed around the question of "deconstruction and architecture" involving many names from both inside and outside the traditional institutional limits of architecture and philosophy. Just as a number of architectural theorists have turned to "deconstructive" theory, theorists of deconstruction have increasingly turned to "architecture". A multiplicity of exchanges have taken place" (1993: XVI)[1].

About this impact, we can conclude this paper.

5. Conclusion

Even if the approaches of “deconstruction” and “architecture” could not be reduced to this particular event, it is fruitful to place a research here to make some appointments for broader researches. The text written by Derrida – the title also established a bridge with the Bernard Tschumi *Folies* – is one, but not the only one, of the possible indications for seeing these mutual contacts between “deconstruction” and “architecture”.

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7. References

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