Deconstruction: Philosophy to Architecture

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Abstract: *This paper takes Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist theory as its core and explores the process of transforming deconstructionism from theory to practice. The article first uses the metaphor of "the Tower of Babel" to explain the challenge that deconstructionist philosophy poses to the logic of architecture. By analyzing deconstructionist philosophical theory, and based on Jacques Derrida's core ideas, the logic of deconstruction in linguistics and semiotics is used to translate architecture. The article then explores the possibility of deconstructing architecture by spatially translating deconstructionist philosophy into architecture. Finally, the article uses an analysis of Zaha Hadid's practice as an example to demonstrate the practical embodiment of deconstructionist architectural theory. The article concludes by emphasizing that deconstructionist architecture is not only a subversion of traditional structures, but also a continuous process of philosophical reflection on the essence and meaning of architecture.*

Keywords: *Deconstruction (Philosophy), Deconstruction (Architecture), Architecture, Derrida, Spatial Boundaries*

1. Tower of the Deconstruction: a dialogue between philosophy and architecture

In the realm of philosophy, the concept of architecture has been employed as a metaphor for philosophical discourse. The concept of architecture is understood here as a representation of deconstruction, a material representation of abstract concepts[1]1. However, the question remains: How can this conceptual framework be effectively "translated" into architectural form? This inquiry encompasses a wide spectrum, ranging from the early "rammed earth" constructions, which emerged through the continuous pounding of earth, to the modern "steel jungle" of reinforced concrete. Architecture, in essence, is a process of addition. If deconstruction for architecture is the subversion of addition, and deconstructing architecture is simply deconstructing skyscrapers again, reducing them to their fundamental elements, can deconstructionism survive in architecture? The objective of this study is to explore the viability of deconstructionism in the domain of architecture. The very concept of "architecture" must be examined to determine its continued relevance. The answer is evidently negative. Indeed, philosophy and architecture have long been intertwined in deconstructionist thought. It is imperative to identify the superior logic that is already at work, trace its intricate geometric structure, identify the philosophical field that dominates both deconstructive and architectural discourse, and translate deconstructivist philosophy into architecture.

Jacques Derrida writes in Des Tours de Babel[2] that "The Tower of Babel" does not merely describe the irreducible diversity of language; it shows an incompleteness, the impossibility of completing, of totalizing, of penetrating, of perfecting architectural systems, architectural descriptions, systems, and architectures. The multiplicity of idioms imposes limitations not only on true translation and transparent, adequate mutual expression, but also on structural order and coherent construction. This inherent limit of formalization, or incompleteness of structure, is a fundamental aspect of deconstruction. This observation unveils the translation of a deconstructive system, a phenomenon that, to a certain extent, is justified.

The narrative of the Tower of Babel, as recounted in The Book of Genesis in the Old Testament of the Bible, chronicles humanity's endeavor to construct a tower so lofty that it would reach the heavens following the Great Deluge. This endeavor, however, provoked the apprehension of God, who feared that the unification of humankind would result in the obliteration of their language and the subsequent dispersion of their progeny across the globe. The narrative recounts how, due to the impediments to effective communication that arose from this endeavor, the construction of the Tower of Babel remained unfinished. In the context of Derrida's deconstructionist framework, the symbolism of the Tower of Babel transcends the mere surface phenomenon of linguistic diversity or the challenges to human communication. Instead, it serves as a profound expression of the inherent incompleteness of the system, whether linguistic, architectural, or philosophical in nature. Derrida's conceptualization of the Tower of

Babel transcends the confines of language, architecture, and philosophy, encompassing a comprehensive systemic framework. The eventual "collapse" of the Tower of Babel may be interpreted as a representation of the inherent impossibility of human attempts at completeness, unity, or systematization (he construction of the Tower of Heaven). Derrida's concept of "translation" as a central metaphor signifies a process of transmission and transformation of meaning, a notion that extends beyond the literary realm to the domains of philosophy and architectural systems. By translating and "deconstructing" deconstructivist philosophy in architecture, we may gain a more nuanced understanding of the underlying logic of these systems.

In Derrida's conception of translation as "the untranslatable translation," the translation of the building cannot be regarded as either a success or a failure. The construction of the Tower of Babel remains unfinished, and this "philosophical edifice" will never be fully completed or dismantled. This "philosophical edifice" will never be fully completed or dismantled. The philosophical system bears a striking resemblance to the Tower of Babel, a construction that remains unfinished, with the process of its construction ongoing, albeit with an indefinite timeframe for completion. This does not imply that the construction of the Tower of Babel is a gradual process aimed at an unattainable goal; rather, it suggests that the construction is perpetually suspended in an endless cycle of reconstruction. This reconstruction can be conceptualized as a shift in logic within a philosophical system that is perpetually evolving, reorienting, and reinterpreting itself.

2. The Language of Deconstruction and the Translation of Architecture

A considerable number of philosophers have explored the use of architectural metaphors in their writings. A notable example is Martin Heidegger's seminal late essay, Building, Dwelling, Thinking[3], in which he articulated a special relationship between architecture and philosophy, linking philosophical systems to architecture. In Kant's Critique of Pure Reason[4], metaphysics is described as a "building" constructed on the most stable "ground" by laying a solid "foundation." Kant's critique of his predecessors in philosophy is twofold: first, they were hasty in completing speculative structures without first investigating the reliability of these foundations, and second, they failed to consider the implications of their theories on the ground of metaphysics. The metaphysical edifice, according to Kant, was in a state of disintegration, eventually leading to its downfall. This decline was attributed to its construction on "unfounded assertions" that had been passed down from the philosophical tradition. According to Kant, traditional metaphysical philosophers demonstrated a marked tendency to construct elaborate theoretical systems, yet they neglected to adequately verify these systems.The necessity to verify the foundations of these systems was a key point of his philosophical critique.

So, how can the philosophy of deconstructionism be interpreted in architectural design? What does deconstructionism leave behind for architecture? Why can the legacy of deconstructionism only be found in architecture? Before understanding how deconstructionism can be used to 'translate' architecture, it is essential to analyse the deconstruction semiotics category briefly. In the pre-Saussurean era of linguistics,the concept of "referent" was widely held to be of greater significance than that of "can refer." This perspective posited that the original meaning of words held greater importance, with language being regarded merely as a medium for expressing thoughts. However, Saussure's seminal work challenged this prevailing paradigm by introducing the concept of the arbitrary nature of the relationship between denotation and reference[5]. The concept of denotation and reference being arbitrary is only valid within the system of signs used for representation. The differential relation of co-temporality is crucial for any canonical reference to be secure in its position and have a definite referent. To illustrate this point, consider the example of the chair. This object can be described in various languages, each using distinct symbols, yet all referring to the same entity. This perspective can be interpreted as indicative of a structuralist viewpoint. If the referent is regarded as the entirety of a system that possesses logical priority,then the so-called referent becomes a constituent element of that system.

In contrast, Derrida's critique of Saussure's linguistics was grounded in deconstructionist principles[1]2. Derrida's argument posits that the concept of difference is intricately intertwined with both referentiality and denotation. He further contends that the notion of a holistic semiotic system is a fallacy, thereby asserting that no linguistic system exists wherein difference serves as the defining factor of referentiality. To illustrate this point, consider the expanding vocabulary of differentiated words related to the expression "to say." It is evident that no clear end point exists in this regard. Attempting to ascertain the precise denotation of "to say" invariably results in a proliferation of connotations, including "claim," "assertion," and "explanation." A subsequent examination of the dictionary yields an additional set of referents, a series of words that exhibits no discernible conclusion and can be extended indefinitely

without limit. The circularity of the meanings of the referents demonstrates that the meanings between the denotative and the referent are not clear and do not correspond to each other.

Therefore, any attempt to translate the concepts of architecture and deconstruction would not be a direct translation between the "text" of architectural discourse and the "text" of philosophical discourse. Consequently, any attempt to translate between these two fields must not merely apply the concept of deconstruction in philosophy directly to the language of architectural design. Instead, it is argued that such a translation occupies and organizes both discourses. Within each of these discourses, an architectural translation of philosophy and a philosophical translation of architecture can be identified. Consequently, the process of translating deconstruction into architectural discourse does not entail a mere application of deconstruction's principles to the language of architectural design. Rather, it entails a comprehensive integration and structuring of both discourses. Within each discourse, an architectural translation of philosophy and a philosophical translation of architecture coexist. Instead, it represents a misapplication of Derrida's deconstructionist principles. The translation of deconstruction into architectural discourse entails the identification and examination of lacunae in deconstructivist writing that require resolution within the context of architectural studies, and the subsequent integration of these insights into deconstructivist discourse. The translation of deconstructive architecture is, in fact, the production of deconstruction. The translation of architecture is not merely passive; it is inherently creative. Through the medium of architecture, deconstructivist philosophy can be reinterpreted and actualized in space and form.

3. Spatial Thinking in Deconstructive Philosophy

The translation of deconstructionism into architecture is not limited to the interplay between philosophy and architecture. This phenomenon occurs in any discourse. Rather than merely implementing philosophical deconstructionist principles in the design or description of architectural objects, this transformation explores the ways in which architecture, as a symbolic system, engages in dialogue with philosophical discourse. The distinguishing characteristic of deconstructivist architecture is not its opposition to traditional philosophical discourse, but rather its embodiment of a critique and analysis of philosophical systems. This inherent critique and analysis, in turn, are rooted in the very fabric of deconstructivist architecture, distinguishing it from traditional philosophical discourse, which is characterized by the establishment of unified and stable universal truths.

According to Derrida, "destruction" signifies "not destruction, but precisely a reorganisation of the structural layers of a dismantled system." Conversely, 'deconstruction' signifies the process of dismantling an edifice with the objective of discerning its underlying composition or deconstruction[6]. It is important to note that both of these concepts imply an 'operation' on the philosophical or traditional structure of ontology or Western metaphysics. Derrida's approach aligns with Heidegger's argument, emphasizing the concept of deconstruction as a process of inhabiting the structure of tradition and utilizing its metaphors to disrupt it. This disruption, according to Derrida, does not constitute an abandonment of the structure, but rather a subversion of tradition by unveiling what is concealed within.

In Derrida's perspective, this process of deconstruction should be facilitated by the act of building, akin to the construction of the Tower of Babel. The process of deconstruction, therefore, is a dualistic one:it builds by destroying and destroys by building. Rather than focusing on the destruction of particular deconstructions, it is a reorientation of the notion of deconstruction, identifying those aspects of deconstruction that neither support nor collapse. Derrida elucidates this concept in Forces et Signification, asserting that the structure can be methodically threatened to facilitate a more nuanced comprehension, unveiling not only its supports but also the locations of its secrets, where it transcends both construction and ruin, manifesting as mutability. It is essential to emphasize that architecture should not be subsumed under the umbrella of structure. Derrida's approach to architecture challenges the conventional understanding of the term, challenging the conventional understanding of the term.

Traditional philosophy and architecture have endeavored to regulate space through the process of normalization and confining it, thereby transforming it into an object that can be comprehensively understood and utilized. These systems have sought to obscure the intricacies inherent within their structural frameworks. However, from a traditional philosophical perspective, space is not constructed to be subordinated. The interpretation of space does not entail a mere reversal of opposites to establish space as the dominant element. Instead, it involves a subversion of the conventional separation of space from architecture. In this perspective, space is not considered a subordinate component of the architectural system. Consequently, any discourse on deconstruction and architecture must, by necessity,

be a discourse on "space" from the very beginning.

The issue of the spacing of buildings is invariably raised. On the one hand, the division and demarcation of space is indispensable for the conception of architecture. Conversely, architecture engenders a sense of distance from other discourses, thereby establishing its own spatial domain. Traditional architectural discourse is replete with a sense of boundary, with structures themselves serving as boundaries to other discourses. However, these boundaries are not inherent, but rather, they are constructed, whether intentionally or not. Boundaries manifest in various forms, such as those between nations, communities, and neighborhoods.

Indeed, in the pre-human era, the world was one entity, devoid of the delineations that characterize contemporary boundaries. Consequently, deconstructionism endeavors to identify an alternative spatial trajectory that can subvert convention. This is not merely achieved by traversing the boundaries of a specific space generated by a metaphysical discourse, but rather by disrupting the very concept of boundaries that this discourse fosters, that is, the perception of space as a conventional construct. Derrida's conception of deconstruction as "the opening of a space through the principle of dislocation" signifies the disruption of conventional spatial structures, thereby replacing the conventional logic of institutionalized spaces.

4. Deconstructivist Architecture: From Theory to Practice

So, how can the philosophy of deconstructionism be interpreted in architectural design? What does deconstructionism leave behind for architecture? Why can the legacy of deconstructionism only be found in architecture? Before understanding how deconstructionism can be used to 'translate' architecture, it is essential to analyse the deconstruction semiotics category briefly. Pritzker Prize laureate Zaha Hadid's design offers a potential solution to this challenge. According to her, the creation of architecture that fosters connections can give rise to a novel landscape, thereby facilitating the perpetual flow of the contemporary city and its denizens[7]. In her masterplan for the Azerbaijan Yev Cultural Centre, she integrates the building and the square into a continuous, streamlined masterplan[8] that breaks the spatial construction of traditional architecture and disrupts the sense of spatial boundaries. The seamless integration of the building within the urban fabric aligns with Derrida's philosophical pursuit of indistinguishability, emphasizing the convergence of form and function in urban space.

Derrida's conceptualization of the "principle of dislocation" is a seminal contribution to the field. Internally, she redefines the sequence between spaces, and externally, she designs buildings that blur the distinction between traditional architecture and the city, the square, and the ground. Her designs subvert the conventional architectural conception of form and space, exerting a profound influence on the metaphysical realm of "architecture."

It can be posited that Zaha's architectural design exemplifies a commendable transposition of deconstructionist philosophy to the realm of architecture. However, it is noteworthy that Zaha's early designs did not inherently exhibit a deconstructionist architectural style. In fact, her early works drew considerable influence from the suprematist principles espoused by Malevich. In her view, the mastery of painting serves as a pedagogical tool for cultivating her abstract abilities. Malevich's predilection lies in drawing the square, and her architectural school assignments did not commence with the subsequent 'curved' design style. Despite the absence of the 'curved' style, it is not yet employed. She had not yet begun to employ the subsequent "curvilinear" style of design, and even graduated with a work simply entitled "Malevich's Constructions," which pays homage to Malevich's compositions by designing the Thames Hotel so that from the top view it appears to be a simple square block of color. However, the rapidly expanding Zaha's creative trajectory did not halt at spatializing Suprematist paintings.

Her design style evolved from straightforward geometries to unconventional ones, as evidenced by her early Suprematist work, the MAXXI museum, and the Heydar Aliyev Center in Azerbaijan, which exemplifies the transition to more liquid spaces.

In the evolution of Zaha's architectural design style (Figure 1), from the geometric order of early Suprematism to the free curves of late deconstructionism, there is a discernible process of exploring architectural forms and dissecting her deconstructionist architecture. It is my position that her interpretation of deconstructionism does not entail the complete repudiation of traditional architectural elements; rather, it involves a rethinking and combination of these elements. A notable example of this approach is Zaha's liquid curved space, which, while seemingly liberated from the constraints of traditional geometry, in fact, suggests an underlying logical order, akin to a dynamic equilibrium
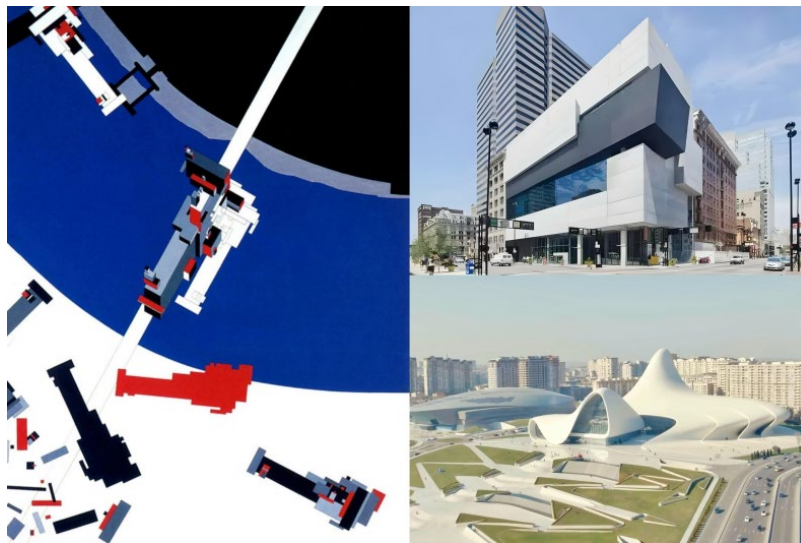
relationship.

Figure 1 Evolution of Zaha's design style

However, if 'deconstructionist architecture' is the result of their disagreement with the so-called 'metaphysical architecture' that constrains space, after they have defeated the orthodoxy, subverted the centre, and dismantled the authority, and as a result, they are forced to 'break' the empty space. As long as it is a house, its image itself must contain a kind of 'ineffable architecture', a kind of 'forbidden but existing space', and the deconstructed architecture does not have the so-called 'space' of traditional architecture. Does the deconstructed building not have the so-called spatial intervals of traditional architecture? Architecture is deconstructed, not deconstructed. In any case, the complexity of deconstructionist 'philosophy' must affect the space of deconstructionist discourse, and even different masters of deconstruction of architecture are different ideas, theoretical systems, such as the Tschumi and Libeskind emphasised on the deconstruction of the existing system and the reorganisation of the different systems[9], and Gehry's architectural ideas are closer to the abstract sculptural form. close to abstract sculptural modelling. Behind them there is also the classical aesthetics of proportionality and form, and then there are even more design ideas that are used in different works. Deconstructivist architecture remains a weak link in the deconstructivist discourse, and even Derrida's work is invariably influenced by stable traditional spatial constructions in discourses that seem to discuss space rigorously.

However, in my opinion, any emerging design language evolves through a cycle of repetition and improvement.

The enduring appeal of deconstructivist architecture lies precisely in its subtle tension between the 'forbidden' and the 'permitted'[10]. Deconstructed architecture does not mean the collapse of the essence of architecture, but its existence reveals the multiple dimensions of meaning of architecture - it is a space for function, and also a medium to stimulate thinking and emotion. Therefore, whether it is Zaha's exploration of liquid space or Tschumi and Libeskind's emphasis on the deconstruction and reorganisation of systems, deconstructionist architecture is striving to find a new balance between architectural function and expression. This practice shows that even in the seemingly anti-conventional language of deconstruction, traces of traditional architecture still exist in a metaphorical way, becoming an unignorable origin and reference for deconstructionist architecture.

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