JACQUES DERRIDA AND THE POLITICS OF ARCHITECTURE

A B S T R A C T

In his writings on architecture Derrida defines it as “the last fortress of metaphysics” and supports the necessity of a deconstruction of architecture involving its theory as well as its practice. The essay intends to unfold the meaning of these propositions referring them to Derrida’s determination of the Western concept and tradition of the political as “onto-topo-politics” (*Spectres de Marx*, 1993). In the Western culture the political has always been bound to the issue of the gathering within space, of the closing of frontiers as the condition of its living unity. The place and territory are not simple material elements that add to the political, but they are essential to the constitution of the dream of the living unity of the political, the metaphysical illusion of a full and pure auto-sufficiency keeping alterity and alteration out of what we take as our own individual, social, cultural and political identity. According to Derrida, the deconstruction of architecture has to demystify such illusion and to open the space of a different practice of architecture. A space where the possibility of the relationship to the other discloses itself as the irreducible condition of each form of identity.

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KEY WORDS

ARCHITECTURE
DECONSTRUCTION
PLACE
TERRITORY
HOUSING

The concern with architecture covers a well defined period of Jacques Derrida's work, at least at the first glance. From *Labirinth und Architektural*¹ (1984) till *Talking about Writing*² (1993), over a period of no more than ten years, when his activity was very intense: Derrida was among the promoters of the collaboration between the new born *Collège international de Philosophie* and the *Centre de création industrielle* in Paris³. He wrote the presentation of the general project of Bernard Tschumi of La Villette park in Paris⁴, and collaborated with Peter Eisenman on the project of a site within the same park⁵. He talked to the students of architecture of Columbia University and the theorists of avant-garde such as Marc Wigley, Jeffrey Kipnis, K. Foster, Anthony Vidler⁶. In 1991 he joined the *Berlin Stadtforum*, organized to discuss about the future of the city after the Fall of the Wall⁷. He took part in the interdisciplinary symposium devoted to the Prague Urban Reconstruction project⁸ and the presentation of Daniel Libeskind's project for Berlin Jewish Museum⁹. He attended the early two meetings organized by "Any Corporation", a team of architects and architecture theorists gathered by Peter Eisenman and his wife Cynthia C. Davidson for the architecture of the third millennium: in 1991 in Los Angeles and in 1992 at Jufuin in Japan¹⁰. After 1993 there were no more engagements in architecture.

This was just a break, a standstill, in framing the philosophical work which today we could define as monumental. But it was sufficient for him to be even considered, rightly or wrongly, the father of an architectonic movement: the so-called *deconstructivism*¹¹, which is, more or less regularly identified with the work of the above named Tschumi, Eisenman and Libeskind, but also with the work of Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, Coop Himmelb(l)au, Frank Gehry and others.

It is advisable to clarify the subject and begin to place Derrida's work on architecture within a perspective useful to have this field freed up from some traces which may lead to misunderstanding and to point out to the others which appear more pertinent to us.

POLITICS OF ARCHITECTURE

"The last fortress of metaphysics" – this is how Jacques Derrida determines architecture in *Point de folies – Maintenant l'architecture*¹². The work, published in 1986, accompanies the presentation of the project conceived by Bernard Tschumi for Parc de La Villette in Paris. It is the first of Derrida's writings devoted to architecture.

I would like to show how deconstruction of architecture proposed by Derrida is not only concerned with the theory of architecture. It also implies itself the possibility of a different architectural practice, which cannot be identified with a new aesthetic and formal style. I would like to explain that deconstruction of architecture implies rather the deconstruction of the political and that it can be put into effect only through the actual deconstruction of the architectural structure which the Western tradition of the political has embodied itself into.

The tradition that is itself based on the link which strengthens the identity – of the individual and the community – to a supposed original space, to the stability of the frontiers separating it from the otherness in general, from what is therefore conceived of, simultaneously or alternately, as external, foreign, stranger or strange.

In *Specters of Marx* (1993) Derrida names onto-topology the fundamental structure of the political, as it links the ontological and metaphysical value of presence – *on* – with place – *topos* – :

“By ontology we mean an axiomatics linking indissociably the ontological value of present-being (*on*) to its *situation*, to the stable and presentable determination of a locality, the *topos* of territory, native soil, city, body in general”.¹³

The essence of the political therefore has been linked from the beginning to the politics of space and place.

In fact, in *Plato's Pharmacy* (1968), taking on the deconstruction of the Platonic philosophy, Derrida remarks that, from Plato henceforth, the system of oppositions governing our philosophical tradition has its grounds on the undisputed presupposition of a spatial opposition:

“In order for these contrary values (good/evil; true/false; essence/appearance, inside/outside, etc.) to be in opposition, each of the terms must be simply *external* to the other, which means that one of these oppositions (the opposition between inside and outside) must already be accredited as the matrix of all possible opposition. And one of the elements of the system (or of the series) must also stand as the very possibility of systematic or seriality in general”.¹⁴

In particular, with regard to the *polis*, the practice of ostracism and the related rituals of purification of the city, Derrida outlines the strict connection among political identity, urban topology and the exclusion of the other, insisting on the

spatial opposition inside / outside:

“The city’s body *proper* thus reconstitutes its unity, closes around the security of its inner courts, gives back to itself the word that links it with itself within the confines of the agora, by violently excluding from its territory the representative of an external threat or aggression. That representative represents the otherness of the evil that comes to affect or infect the inside by unpredictably breaking into it. Yet the representative of the outside is nonetheless *constituted*, regularly granted its place by the community, chosen, kept, fed, etc., in the very heart of the inside”.¹⁵

In the Western tradition the (individual and collective) identity is thought of as an internal, permanent, stable space, autonomous and independent from the other in general, which is represented as external, stranger and, thus, is experienced as a possible threat.

Referring back to *Specters of Marx*, Derrida maintains that this axiomatics still structures today the political discourse and action: it is always at work there where one appeals to the defense of the territorial identity against the other, which is lived or rather represented as the external threat justifying the closure from inside.

Since this axiomatics goes back to the origin of the Greek civilization and, thus, of the Western tradition as well, here Derrida recognizes the return of a “conceptual specter”, an “archaism”¹⁶.

In fact, today, that axiomatics comes out as a reaction, since it constitutes itself as a fortress against a process of de-territorialization, which is not only concerned with the migratory flows pressing the Western frontiers, but also with the conditions of development of economical and cultural relations and exchanges, of the constitution of a public space unlimited in principle and, therefore, with the life itself one wants to shelter¹⁷.

Nowadays, finally, the relation to the other, lived as a threat for the community, at the same time, turns out to be the irreducible condition of the life of the community itself.

Place turns out to be what it has always been: it is not the mythical origin of the metaphysical identity, but the effect of a process of dislocation and localization where the anthropic presence has come to inscribe itself into space, locating itself in any case in relation to the otherness in general, thus distinguishing

itself from itself since its origin:

“The process of dislocation is no less arch-originary, that is, just as “archaic” as the archaism that it has always dislodged. This process, moreover, is the positive condition of the stabilization that it constantly re-launches. All stability in a place being but stabilization or a sedentarization, it will have to have been necessary that a local difference, the spacing of a displacement gives movement its start. And gives place and gives rise (*donne place et donne lieu*)”.¹⁸

Therefore one should think of space not as the surface where originary places, being self-enclosed and forever established, are distributed, but as the element of the relation to the otherness, where an individual and collective localization is possible that, for this reason, cannot be closed to the other in general, to the relation constituting every identity as the effect of an irreducible opening.¹⁹

To do space for the other, to give a place for that relation is the task of the deconstruction of the political. This does not mean simply to evaluate the other as such, always and anyhow. Anyway the horizon of the relation to the other always imports a threat for the life of the community, in the different forms that such threat, in fact, might take up. History, even in the recent years, does not stop making us face this cruel reality: terrorist, colonial or post-colonial conflicts among states or inside a state. And however, as the relation to other is the irreducible condition of possibility of the community, to avoid, subdue, repress, or remove such relation would mean to expose the community to an even more severe threat.

At least, this is so for a community which aims to be democratic, for which the responsibility of such opening, the always open possibility of its own transformation, is the very life.

HOUSING POLITICS

To do space for the other, to give a place for that relation is the task of deconstruction of the political. The achievement of this task necessarily requires deconstruction of the architecture which provides such axiomatics with a concrete and durable form, with a form imposing itself upon our experience as if it were our natural environment.

It is enough to think of the structure of the town, of the hierarchic layout of the institutional, economic, religious, symbolic, residential sites which constitute the

identity of the community, and, at the same time, mark strictly the times and the manners of our individual and collective daily experience.

Let us go back to the essay on architecture: according to Derrida, it is the last fortress of metaphysics exactly because it sets up a concrete, established and durable form for the identity, which is conceived of as a familiar and self-enclosed interiority or intimacy, engaged with the defense of itself.

This identity has been determined since the origin by the analogy with a specific type of architectural structure: the house/dwelling.

In fact, if nowadays one considers natural the fact that dwelling is the end and essence of architecture, this can be understood because, since the origin of metaphysics, namely, from Plato henceforth, architecture has been subjected to the law of the house, of the *oikos*: the house as protection of the inside with respect to the outside, of the familiar with respect to the stranger.²⁰

That is, the house built in defense of the institution of the patriarchal family, the house built according to a precise spatial distribution of roles driven by the management of the property: of the man, the head of the family, open to the outside, in charge of accumulating and exchanging goods, while the woman, closed inside, is in charge of the administration of the piled goods. The first is active in public life; the second is connected with the worship of forefathers²¹:

“Let us never forget that there is architecture of architecture. Down even to its archaic foundation, the most fundamental concept of architecture has been *constructed*. This naturalized architecture is bequeathed to us: we inhabit it, it inhabits us, we think it is destined for habitation, and it is no longer an object for us at all. But we must recognize in it an *artifact*, a *construction*, a monument. (...). Its heritage inaugurates the intimacy of our economy, the law of our hearth (*oikos*), our familial, religious and political oikonomy, all the places of birth and death, temple, school, stadium, agora, square, sepulcher. It goes right through us to the point that we forget its very historicity: we take it for nature”.²²

Therefore, since the origin, the metaphysics of presence has used a certain model of architectural building – the house – to determine the meaning of the individual and collective identity. For this reason dwelling represents the end and essence given to architecture by our tradition.

The end and essence that we still acknowledge today as obvious and undisputable.

Therefore architecture still represents the concrete accomplishment of that model. It is the most durable and effective accomplishment, for it affects not only our way of thinking but also our most immediate experience.

“On the one hand, this general architectonics *effaces* or *exceeds* the sharp specificity of architecture; it is valid for other arts and regions of experience as well. On the other hand, architecture forms its most powerful metonymy; it gives it its most solid *consistency*, objective substance. By consistency, I do not mean only logical coherence, which implicates all dimensions of human experience in the same network: there is no work of architecture without interpretation, or even economic, religious, political, aesthetic, or philosophical decree. But by consistency I also mean duration, hardness, the monumental, mineral, or ligneous subsistence, the hyletic of tradition. Hence the *resistance*: the resistance of materials as much as of consciousnesses and unconsciousness which instate this architecture as the last fortress of metaphysics”.²³

However, the law of the house, as ancient as it is, is not an immutable law of nature. It corresponds to a historically determined order, that one of the metaphysics of presence which still rules our notion of individual and collective identity by means of the strong and durable form granted by architecture.

The law of the house, therefore, can be transformed, deconstructed, in view of another experience of individual and collective identity. So it is necessary to set the theory and praxis of architecture free, the experience itself of architecture, from the link that subjects it to the law of the house and the dwelling:

“Any consequent deconstruction would be negligible if it did not take account of this resistance and this transference; it would do little if it did not go after architecture as much as architectonics. To go after it: not in order to attack, destroy or de-route it, to criticize or disqualify it. Rather, in order, to *think* it in fact, to detach itself sufficiently to apprehend it in a thought which goes beyond the theorem – and becomes a work in its turn”.²⁴

The deconstruction of architecture must become work in turn, it must become architecture.

ARCHITECTURE TO COME

But how to build the architecture of deconstruction? Derrida, in the essay that we read here, does not give us clear instructions: he poses a question and leaves it open since only architecture can take it up.

Is architecture of the event possible?

It seems to be a paradoxical question: on the one side, the architecture of the firm and durable presence, on the other side, an architecture of the aleatory and contingent event. How is it possible to build it up?

In *Point de folies*, Derrida goes back to the Greek civilization where he finds the historical matrix of metaphysics imposing its well known law upon the essence and the history of architecture: the law of the house and the dwelling. He retrieves the moment where the possibility of dislocation, as the condition of every process of anthropic localization, is removed into the order of onto-topology, and buried under the weight of an architecture devised and set up in order to consolidate this removal.

A removal, evidently, not accomplished since from the inside of the house-fortress the external space is still lived as the element of the unknown, the other is still lived as a threat, the frontiers are still lived as unstable.

Nowadays there are many instances that are known to everybody but not less worrying for this reason.

The architecture of deconstruction must be therefore the re-writing of space which brings back to light the experience of the original dislocation recalled by Derrida in *Specters of Marx*: an experience of the space as an irreducible opening to the other in general, an experience of dislocation as the condition of every localization in time and for the time to come.

Here one can find an experience which is finally human and no longer metaphysical.

Architecture, in fact, with its material and, at the same time, symbolic presence, fills up not only space but also time, it fills up the space for the time to come. It imposes its presence to the future, a rigidly structured space, a coercive space

where the possibility of the relation to the other has already been anticipated and calculated at the level of the project, a space where, therefore, the other has already been rejected, ostracized, avoided because of its feared irreducible otherness.

This is what Derrida understands as event: the possibility of the future (to-come) in its non-foreseeable otherness, as the irreducible condition where the relation to the other can take place.

The architecture of deconstruction must be responsible for this space, its opening to the other yet to come; it must take care of it.

Although it appears absurd from the inside of the fortress, architecture must build avoiding the coercive saturation of the space. The project, as the realized artifact, must remain open to the chance of a transformation yet to come. It brings about a different thinking of the place where dwelling is built, on the consistency and the durability of the materials to be used, on the flexibility and rigidity of the architectural solutions; and this thinking is not absurd at all. Derrida mentions the instance of the temple of Ise in Japan, which is disassembled, deconstructed and re-constructed every twenty years.

In particular, in his speech at the Berlin Stadtforum and, in particular, with regard to the future of Prague, Derrida maintains the necessity to include within the scientific and professional training course of architects the responsibility of this opening, using the paradoxical definition of an “axiom of incompleteness”:

“In other words, what makes the living community of generations who live or build the city possible, who set themselves permanently in the very projection of a city to de-re-build, is to give up the absolute tower, the total city touching the sky, is to accept what a logician would probably call an *axiom of incompleteness*. A city is a whole which must remain indefinitely, structurally not saturable, open to its transformation, to the minimal additions which come to alter or displace the memory of its heritage. A city must remain open to the fact that it does not know yet what it will be: it is necessary to inscribe the respect of this not-knowing into the architectonic and city-planning science and skill, as it were a symbol. Otherwise what else would one do but carry out some plans, totalize, saturate, suture, suffocate? And this, without taking a responsible decision, since to carry out a plan or to make a “project” into a work is never a responsible decision.”²⁵

It is only according to this perspective that architecture can keep the chance of the relation to the other open, that is a necessary condition in order that the other may live and take place. The other whom the community needs, to be itself. When the community is not captive within the walls it has erected to reject the other and to defend a pure and, at the same time, empty interiority, which has no future.

I would like to conclude with a quotation, drawn from Derrida's last writing on architecture, *Faxtexture* (1993, the same year when *Specters of Marx* was published). It is meaningful that the writing ends by announcing the necessity to deconstruct, through architecture, the onto-topological axiomatics in view of the very future of the political, in the name of the democracy to come.

"How is it possible to re-politicize the architectural theory or practice just deconstructing a certain concept of the political, even of democracy? The question may disclose enormous and unending tasks, but it must remain open: that is a necessity and an obligation. This "must" is more original and important than the question it bears and makes possible. *It gives the question its opening*. It cannot be but the opening to the other, to the other to which it addresses itself or *from where it comes*; opening from the other and to the other and, thus, to the future, to the otherness that cannot be anticipated, to the possibility of surprise without which there would be no opening. Deconstruction, or if you like, re-building does not only get through discourses. It proceeds also from what is coming and has not come yet, through events and inventions. Future, invention, event, that require a re-politicizing deconstruction of the political, must open calculus, project, program, rule and law on what must remain non-calculable. To open them does not mean to put them out of play or destroy them. It has to do with another gesture, another movement, another relation to space".²⁶

NOTES

- 1 Interview given to Eva Mayer in 1984. Published in V.M.Lampugnani (ed), *Der Abenteuer den Ideen. Architektur und Philosophie seit industriellen Revolution*, Berlin, Staatliche Museen, National Galerie, 1984.
- 2 Conversation with Peter Eisenman, published in the magazine *Any*, n.0 March-May 1993.
- 3 Derrida presents the special issue of "Cahier du CCI" devoted to this collaboration: *Mesure par mesure. Architecture et Philosophie*, Centre George Pompidou, Paris 1987. Cfr. J. Derrida, *Cinquante-deux aphorismes pour un avant-propos*, in Id., *Psyché, Inventiones de l'autre, tomes I e II*, Paris Galilée, 1987/2003. Trans. P. Kamuf, *Psiche : Inventiones of the Other*, Stanford, Stanford University press, 2007.
- 4 J. Derrida, *Point de folies – Maintenant l'architecture*, in B. Tschumi, *La case vide. La Villette*, Architectural Association, London 1986 (parallel English version); also published in J. Derrida, *Psyché. Inventiones de l'autre*, cit..
- 5 Cfr. J. Kipnis and Th. Leeser (eds.), *Derrida Eisenman. Chora L Works*, ed. Monacelli Press, New York 1997 (1st ed. London, Architectural Association, 1991).
- 6 Cfr., J. Derrida, B. Tschumi, M. Wigley, *Invitation to discussion*, in «Columbia Documents of Architecture and Theory», vol. I (1992).

- 7 Cfr. J. Derrida, K. Foster, W. Wenders, *The Berlin City Forum*, in *Architectural Design*, 11-12, 1992.
- 8 Cfr., J. Derrida, *Générations d'une ville : mémoire, prophétie, responsabilité*, in Alena Novotná Galard et Petr Kratochvíl (éds.), *Prague. Avenir d'une ville historique capitale*, l'Aube, Paris 1992.
- 9 Cfr. J. Derrida, *On between the Lines*, in D. Libeskind, *Radix-Matrix*, Munich-New York, Prestel, 1997.
- 10 Cfr. J. Derrida, *Summary of impromptu Remarks*, in C. C. Davidson and J. Kipnis (eds.), *Anyone*, New York, Rizzoli, 1991 and J. Derrida, *Faxtexture*, in C. C. Davidson (ed.), *Anywhere*, New York, Rizzoli, 1992.
- 11 The term "Deconstructivism" was invented by P. Johnson and M. Wigley, the editors of the exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1988); it named the movement gathering the autonomous and original work of various architects. See P. Johnson, M. Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1988, and A. C. Papadakis (ed.), *Deconstruction in Architecture*, Architectural Design Profile, 72, London, 1988.
- 12 In B. Tschumi, *La case vide. La Villette 1985*, Architectural Association, London 1986, p. 9.
- 13 J. Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, Paris, Galilée, 1993, trans. by P. Kamuf, *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*, New York-London, Routledge 1994, p. 82.
- 14 J. Derrida, *Plato's Pharmacy*, in Id., *Dissemination*, trans. by B. Johnson, London-Chicago, Athlone-University of Chicago Press 1981, p. 133.
- 15 Ivi, p. 133.
- 16 J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, cit., p. 83. It is worth recall that in the Greek monologue ontological axiomatics is thoroughly formulated in Aristotle's *Politics*. See *Pol.* II 1, 1260b- 1261a: "We will begin with the natural beginning of the subject. Three alternatives are conceivable: The members of a state must either have (1) all things or (2) nothing in common, or (3) some things in common and some not. That they should have nothing in common is clearly impossible, for the constitution is a community, and must at any rate have a common place- one city will be in one place, and the citizens are those who share in that one city". And Ivi., III 9, 1280b: "It is clear then that a state is not a mere society, having a common place, established for the prevention of mutual crime and for the sake of exchange. These are conditions without which a state cannot exist; but all of them together do not constitute a state, which is a community of families and aggregations of families in well-being, for the sake of a perfect and self-sufficing life. Such a community can only be established among those who live in the same place and intermarry".
- 17 In particular, on several occasions Derrida dwells upon the development of the tele-technologies (from television to individual video camera, from mobile video telephone to internet), which plays a decisive role today in the de-territorialization of political, economical, commercial and cultural relations, contributing to the constitution of a public space which is no longer linked to traditional territory availability.
- 18 J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, cit., p. 83.
- 19 In that perspective (sense) it would be useful to compare it to the anthropological researches: see, for example A. Appadurai, *Putting Hierarchy in Its Place*, "Cultural Anthropology", 1988, 3, pp. 36-49. For Appadurai the natives, the indigenes, would never have even existed, if the natives are understood to be human beings confined to (and by) the place in which they find themselves, and not contaminated with material and ideological exchanges with the rest of humanity. Such conception could be the result of that which is termed "metonymic freezing", for which a part of the aspect of the subject (in this case the static condition) is exchanged for the totality, and is finished so that it be marked (labeled) at the ultimate point of view of conceptualization.
- 20 Archeological researches, following the indications contained in Homer's poems, were identified in the nuptial room (*Thàlamos*), in the nucleus and matrix of the Greek house. In particular, the role of closing the hostility towards the exterior and protection towards the interior: see: F. Pesando, *La casa dei Greci*, Milano, Longanesi, 2006; p- 39: "Here, therefore, is the ambience surrounded by parks, *thàlamos*, in which, in all sense, the veritable heart of the house beats; this is the privileged

habitat of the woman, the place of procreation, of renovation of *oikos*; this is where the clothes, arms and all that which defines the simplicity of human life, is. At the exit from *thàlamos*, a man always finds himself confronted as if he were for the first time in the exterior world, who is requested by each room of his dwelling to be protected. This motif of confrontation between the “interior” and the “exterior” seems as if emerging from a curious form, always repeating itself within these contexts, which identify three moments following waking up: getting dressed, having recourse to the instruments of the offence or defense, tying shoes laces.”

- 21 On this subject see the fundamental essay by J.-P.Vernant *Hestia-Ermès. Sur l'expression religieuse de l'espace et du mouvement chez les Grecs*, in Id., *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*, Paris, Maspero 1965, trans., *Myth and Thought among the Greeks*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London-Boston-Melbourne 1983, pp. 127-176. In particular, Vernant reminds that in the historical stage we are interested in the word *oikos* “has both a family and a territorial meaning”. See also how the house has to be for Socrates: Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, III, 8, 4-10: “In one word, there where in all seasons one can find shelter in the most pleasant way and one’s goods can be kept in the utmost safety, this place would rightly be the sweetest and coziest house.”
- 22 J. Derrida, *point de folies – Maintenant l'architecture*, cit., p. 9.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 J. Derrida, *Maintenant l'architecture*, cit., p. 9.
- 25 J. Derrida, *Générations d'une ville : mémoire, prophétie, responsabilité*, cit., p. 245.
- 26 J. Derrida, *Faxtexture*, cit., p. 23.