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## **Deconstruction in Architecture – Continuous Translation through an Open Project**

**Abstract:** Jacques Derrida developed deconstruction as a way of thinking which constantly examines the nature and possibilities of meaning. The paper analyses spatial-economic, cultural and social context in which deconstructive discourse was translated into architectural discourse. Translation between these two discourses happens *vice versa*. Deconstructivism emphasizes the formal properties of architecture, like postmodernism, which is the subject of exploration by architects such as Coop Himmelblau, Frank Gehry, Eric Owen Moss, etc. According to some interpretations, the only solution for deconstruction in architectural work is incompleteness, an open project which represents never-ending deconstruction. There are different solutions for open projects, and the article highlights projects by architects mentioned above, which seems to manage to achieve continuous deconstruction in practice.

**Keywords:** architectural discourse, deconstructive discourse, translation, incompleteness, open project

### **Introduction**

The issue of translation of deconstructive discourse into architectural discourse (and *vice versa*) is essential for understanding of the relationship between the terms *architecture* and *deconstruction* as well as for recognizing which architectural work is deconstructive. The paper analyzes spatial-economic, cultural, political and social contexts in which translation of these two discourses happened and conditions in which deconstruction was developed in architectural practice. The aim of the paper is to highlight few interpretations of open projects that were created in specific contexts mentioned above, by architects such as Coop Himmelblau, Frank Gehry and Eric Owen Moss, which show the possibilities for architectural work to preserve deconstructive character.

The issue of relation between the terms *architecture* and *deconstruction* was first rethought at the exhibition called *Deconstructivist Architecture*, which was

opened by Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley in 1988, at MOMA, New York. It was the year when deconstructivism was promoted as an official style in architecture, which was questioned by many architects and theorists. The issue of deconstruction in architecture and of the position of these two discourses during the translation should be problematized and examined from different aspects and contexts. Due to a need for accessing the problem from different aspects, as an introduction to the analysis, a concept of deconstruction in art is explained – Joseph Kosuth's installations *Zero&Not* exposed in 1985. The concept of the installations is based on the re-articulation of the space interior into the text, by which Kosuth explains the possibilities of translation process and its implementation/presentation.

### **Spatial-Economic, Cultural and Social Context of Deconstruction in Architecture**

In a broader context, period of practice and theory of deconstruction in architecture is the end of postmodernism. As for the physical context, this tendency in architecture has had an international character from the very beginning, with the Architectural Association in London and the former Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York, as institutions that propagate it.

Cultural context of these architects is diverse, not uniformed. They do not share a common cultural heritage nor architectural background, instead they created independently. Deconstruction in architectural practice has emerged as an international phenomenon of interrelated, interlaced but independent architectural concepts.

Deconstruction in architecture emerged with avant-garde revival tendencies. "The New Spirit" article, written by Elizabeth Farrelly, published in 1986 in *The Architectural Review*, is one of the first architectural manifesto proclaiming the death of postmodernism.<sup>1</sup> Farrelly proclaimed a new spirit of architecture as a revival of the avant-garde art and architecture. She characterized this new wave in architecture with aspects inherent in constructivism (fragmentation, asymmetry), as well as excesses and radicalism of Dadaism. The existence of a formal connection of The New Spirit and constructivism suggests a connection of The New Spirit and deconstruction in architecture.

According to Geoffrey Broadbent, the New Spirit is actually a reduced catalog of architects who participated at the exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture* (Gehry, Hadid, Libeskind, Coop Himmelblau),<sup>2</sup> opened in 1988, with which deconstruction in architecture was promoted worldwide. The same year, Andreas Papadakis organized a symposium at the Tate Gallery in London on this subject, using the term

<sup>1</sup> E. M. Farrelly, "The New Spirit," *The Architectural Review* 1074 (1986): 7–12.

<sup>2</sup> Dž. Brodbent, "Arhitektura dekonstruktivizma," in M. Perović, ed., *Istorija moderne arhitekture, knjiga 3. Tradicija modernizma i drugi modernizam* (Beograd: Arhitektonski fakultet, 2005), 610.

*deconstruction*, while Philip Johnson as director and chief curator and Mark Wigley as an assistant curator at MOMA, New York, opened the exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture*. Architects who participated in the exhibition, beside Gehry, Hadid, Libeskind, Coop Himmelblau, were also Bernard Tschumi, Peter Eisenman and Rem Koolhaas.

Architectural historian from Netherlands, Liane Lefaivre, has translated the term *Dirty realism* from the literary criticism discourse of Bill Buford and implemented it in the architectural discourse. Dirty realism represents theory and practice of architecture originated from Europe in the mid-80s. As Vladimir Stevanović noted, several architects (Koolhaas, Tschumi, Hadid, Gehry) who will participate at the exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture*, Lefaivre has also already ranked among the Dirty realism.<sup>3</sup> Spatial context of Dirty realism are spaces like suburbs, industrial zones and abandoned parts of the city, while architecture is characterized by Dadaist attitude towards the location, with materials that are part of the environment and the fragmentation of space.<sup>4</sup>

Stevanović proposes a chronological genealogy of the New Spirit, Deconstructivism and Dirty realism, by dividing the New Spirit to Dirty realism and Deconstructivism.<sup>5</sup> This division of the New Spirit illustrates the different interpretations of projects such as Bernard Tschumi's Parc la Vilette. Urban environment of Parc la Vilette is actually a prototype of a spatial context of Dirty realism (suburb of Paris), while this project as a deconstruction is associated with design principles of Russian Constructivism. Parc la Vilette aim was to prove that it is possible, without traditional principles in architecture, to construct complex architectural organization.

The paradox of spatial-economic context of deconstruction in architecture could be read in Parc la Vilette through several aspects (location, design characteristics etc.). In "The Blue Line Text" Peter Eisenman interprets the term *between* in architecture, and what it means to break down the dialectical contradiction in architecture in order to achieve the project of deconstruction.<sup>6</sup> Architecture is about locating, but, according to Eisenman, *between* means to be between a place and a non-place. It could be said that location of Dirty realism is atopy of the present (a non-place), and topos could be found by researching and intervening in them. Thus, architectural practice of a Dirty realism has similarities with the principles of deconstruction.

When it is about economic context of deconstructive architecture, as Mary McLeod observes, the costs are very high, because the main focus is exclusively on

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Stevanović, "Dirty realism and Europe on the edge of postmodernity," *Arhitektura i urbanizam. Časopis za arhitekturu, urbanizam i prostorno planiranje* 42 (2016): 12.

<sup>4</sup> A. Tzonis and L. Lefaivre, "Between Utopia and Reality: Eight Tendencies," in *Architecture in Europe Since 1968: Memory and Invention* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Stevanović, "Dirty realism and Europe," 12.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Eisenman, "The Blue Line Text," *Architectural Design* 58, 7/8 (1988): 6-9.

formal properties of architecture.<sup>7</sup> As for social and political context, similar as in postmodernism, focus on form suggests that any change in political structures must reflect in architecture's nature as an object. The architect's power as an author is underestimated ('death of the author') and it precludes a political actor. Andreas Huyssen has written: "American poststructuralist writers and critics. [...] they purge life, reality, history, society from the work of art and its reception, and construct a new autonomy"<sup>8</sup>, and to Mary McLeod this "formal hermeticism" leads to issues in deconstructive architecture. Besides paradox with high costs forms on neglected places, these hermetic forms and deconstructive discourse creates elitist atmosphere and remains unclear and vague to wider social masses. As Mary McLeod claimed, these forms „embody another kind of forgetting – a forgetting of the social itself"<sup>9</sup>, although every artistic abstraction has social implications. Speaking of deconstruction as a movement enlarges issues of "formal hermeticism".

### **Deconstructive Reading of the Space**

As a prelude to the analysis of the issues of translating deconstruction into architecture, as well as the relation between terms of *architecture*, *philosophy* and *translation*, the concept of the art installation which Joseph Kosuth called *Zero&Not*, could be analyzed. Miško Šuvaković referred in the text "Hybrid questions about deconstruction and art", among other artists, Joseph Kosuth, as an artist whose work can be attributed to the examples of the deconstruction-as-fashion.<sup>10</sup> Kosuth questioned test the ability of the translation through a series of installation: *One and three chairs* (1966), *Text/Context* (1979), and *Zero&Not* (1985). Installations *Zero&Not* are based on the relation to the concept of translation which according to Derrida's refers to interventional process of reading and writing. Actually, Derrida presents the translation process as interpretative re-articulation. The installation *Zero&Not* is specific because it is based on the re-articulation of the architectural interior in the textual ambience. The Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical writings are crossed, zoomed and printed in the form of the wallpaper. The walls of the showroom were completely plastered with the wallpaper, by which Kosuth's viewers/readers were introduced to translation of Freud's texts in the architectural space, by deconstructive method. In this installation two important modes of Freud's psychoanalysis are repeated – repetition and suppression. This is accomplished through the two metaphors: by repetition

<sup>7</sup> Mary McLeod, "Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism," *Assemblage* 8 (Feb. 1989): 55.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> Miško Šuvaković, "Hibridna pitanja o dekonstrukciji i umetnosti," in Petar Bojanić, ed., *Glas i pismo: Žak Derrida u odjecima* (Beograd: Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, 2005), 85.

of the wallpapers in the entire showroom and by crossing the printed text on them with repeating the tracing point to Freud's second scene – "The scene of writing", described by Jacques Derrida in a "Freud and the scene of writing" (1967). According to Šuvaković, a viewer or a reader is actually here, on the scene, the scene of reading that couldn't be done, so this space represents a scene for performing of the potentiality or promises of the unconscious. Specific contexts in this *reading scene* are elusive, as well as the subject of the writing. As Kosuth claimed: "The subject of writing is a system of relations between the layers: a magical notebook, psychological aspect, society and the world."<sup>11</sup>

### **Never-Ending Deconstruction in Architecture through an Open Project**

According to Derrida, a metaphor that combines the terms of *architecture*, *philosophy*, *translation* and *deconstruction* is *The Tower of Babel*.<sup>12</sup> At the same time *The Tower of Babel* represents an architectural object, the emergence of deconstruction, philosophical phenomenon and the need for translation. All this is caused by its main feature – *incompleteness*. Translation of deconstruction in architecture, according to Wigley, actually raises the question of its *state/materiality*. But, translation deconstruction in architecture is not a simple change of state of the architectural object.<sup>13</sup> Does this imply that the architectural work that yearns for translation is never complete, but that this *incompleteness* (in the formal sense) is not easy to spot?

Derrida developed deconstruction as a way of thinking which constantly examines the nature and possibilities of meaning. Consequently, according to Charles Jencks, the only solution for deconstruction in architecture is continuous, always open project, or continuous deconstruction.<sup>14</sup> Deconstruction brings into question a traditional attitude in architecture, and if it is about for example, function, deconstruction does not deny it, but takes away its priority. Through examining priority of a function of a building, it can be concluded that it could be determined also during the design process, because the building's aesthetics also conveys the meaning. Through this design process, dialectical terms in architecture were analyzed, such as the relationship of form and function. In this case, the function is not superior to the form, but it is integrated into the essence of the building. The following examples show different ways of achieving continuous deconstruction in practice.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Vigli, "Prevođenje arhitekture: proizvod Vavilona," in Miloš Petrović, ed., *Istorija moderne arhitekture, knjiga 3. Tradicija modernizma i drugi modernizam* (Beograd: Arhitektonski fakultet, 2005), 594–95.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 602.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Jencks, "Deconstruction: The Pleasure of Absence, Deconstruction in Architecture," *Architectural Design* 58, 3/4 (1988): 18.

Early deconstruction in architecture could begin in 1978, although it was officially proclaimed as a movement in 1988. In 1978, Frank Gehry reconstructed the house in Santa Monica (California), in which he moved in with his family, and it was actually his first deconstruction in practice (Fig. 1). This reconstruction project is a balance of fragment and whole, as well as a balance of new and old. The existing house in the Dutch colonial style was almost completely retained, with new parts of the house which were built around it. The holes are break through at some places in the house, and several walls were demolished. Newly cracks revealed and framed wooden beams and brackets. Dialectic of old and new can be read in the plans of the house, as well as in the details (original doors were preserved and new were added, etc.). Exterior creates the impression of incompleteness, and it seems that like the house is under construction, due to a combination of different materials (wood, glass, aluminum and wire fences) and new parts of the building, through which the old entrance is looming.



**Fig. 1:** Frank Gehry, reconstructed house in Santa Monica, California, 1978

Frank Gehry explained how deconstruction of the house affects residents: “I loved the idea of leaving the house intact... I came up with the idea of building the new house around it. We were told there were ghosts in the house... I decided they were ghosts of Cubism. The windows... I wanted to make them look like they were crawling out of this thing. At night, because this glass is tipped it mirrors the light in... So when you’re sitting at this table you see all these cars going by, you see the moon in the wrong place... the moon is over there but it reflects here... and you think it’s up there and you don’t know where the hell you are...”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Caroline Evensen Lazo, *Frank Gehry* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 2005), 54.

Peter Cook, as a visitor, simplifies, but not banalizes, the image of Gehry's house as "a normal little middle-class Santa Monica house, screened up and layered over, with its one cactus in the back yard framed as a special artwork",<sup>16</sup> while his impression of Gehry's office he can compare to the adrenalin spirit which he remembers from early days of Archigram. After 1991, this house has undergone significant changes, which greatly influenced the change and the loss of its original spirit and aesthetics of deconstruction.

Architects from the "Coop Himmelblau" group create architecture, which, they said, opens possibility of a different perception and use of the same space, so users could continue deconstruction in a certain way. Their open architecture has several interpretations. One aspect of their open architecture can be read through the project for Baumann Studio in Vienna, built in 1985. The goal was reconstruction, so the studio could be used as working and living space. Architects' first association of this space led toward the poetic deconstruction project. They described their impressions about the space and reconstruction possibility: "We saw high walls and high doors and thought of movable stairs, flying platforms, bridges and galleries. We thought of paintings hanging in three rows one above the other. We thought of collapsed roof that had turned into frozen wings and sliding glass."<sup>17</sup> With addition of a gallery and a platform, total area has increased, while the ground floor was left open – without walls. This open architecture takes the form of open opportunities for functions and uses of space.

Another type of open architecture is a Coop Himmelblau's project of a wine bar and mini singing theater "The Red Angel". Construction, which consists of the interpretation of an angel spreading wings above the stage, symbolizes what is happening on the stage. This structure of curved metal rungs extends across the facade. The presence of architecture remained an open question.

Through this project, symbolically named "Open House", Coop Himmelblau investigated the dialectical contradiction of form and function. The space is designed for living and interpretation of open architecture is in multiple options for arranging the living functions. It could be defined after construction, but also it could be never finally determined. This house was built in 1987 in California, and it was created from sketches drawn eyes-closed, which resulted in explosive form, as a reflection of the architects' intentions, and their deconstructive way of thinking and creating. Through the design process, architects were more focused on the relationship of opposites that bind to the atmosphere – brightness and darkness, light and shadow, height and width, vaults and whiteness.

In 1982 Eric Owen Moss designed his house in California "708 House" as a one-story addition and renovation of the existing house from 1948. Three parallel load-bearing walls have been extended to adapt the second floor. The original roof was extended towards the east and the west and the ridge shows the height of the second floor. New stairs connect the old with the new through the pierced hole in the northeastern corner of the living room. The architect divided the concept of "708 House" in several characteristic parts which were named to indicate deconstruction: Flying buttresses, Flying Door,

<sup>16</sup> Peter Cook, "Los Angeles comes of age," *AA Files* 1 (Winter 1981–82): 20.

<sup>17</sup> Coop Himmelblau, "The Open House," *Quaderns* 173 (1987): 101.

Flying Wall, Swiss Cheese, '70'8; Flying Grid, flying Horticulture, Gang Plank, Wood and Interior Wall Grid. For example, "Flying buttresses" emphasizes the position of the entrance and, at the same time, caricatures the role and structure of building that modernism regarded. Moss overestimates architectural motifs. House number – 708, is high positioned on the facade and oversized, printed from parts on three sides of the facade (South, West, and North walls) (Fig. 2). Because of oversized numbers, the windows are actually part numbers. According to Moss, the concept and appeal of the house carries a series of comments on architectural doctrine, so through this project he examines the architecture through architecture itself, referring directly to the philosophy of deconstruction.



Fig. 2: Eric Owen Moss, "708 House", Los Angeles, California, 1978–1982

### **Conclusion: Never-Ending Deconstruction in Architecture as a Reality or as an Utopia**

The difficulty of translation deconstruction into architecture results with criticism and questions whether this translation could take the form of realized project, or is deconstruction in architecture nothing more or less than an utopia. Through open projects, 'architects of deconstruction' create 'incomplete' architecture, so users could continue deconstruction in a certain way. It seems like it could be a reality in houses of architects themselves.

But, can deconstruction survive architecture? In art concept, as well as in concept of architecture, there are the remains which can be translated so that the original becomes unified. In these cases translation becomes original, and the original translation and vice versa. Deconstruction may not have survived the architecture, but it



has survived *through it*. The moment when the discourse inversion occurred cannot be located, so, at a certain point, both discourses represent both – original as well as translation. Open projects should make this moment of translation possible, whether their formal properties belong to Constructivism or Dirty realism. Are open projects an architectural reality or utopia remains an open question.

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