ARBE3200 History and Theory in the Built Environment 3
Assignment 1 Critical Analysis
Jonathan Langille 3023329
**Literary Beginnings**

Jacques Derrida, a 20th century philosopher, the so called founder of Deconstruction, started a long running career as a literary theorist in the mid 1950’s. His most well-known work and the subject of this report is *De la Grammatologie (Of Grammatology)* published in 1967 in France by Les Editions de Minuit with an English translation by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak coming later in 1976 published by John Hopkins University Press. *Of Grammatology* was the culmination of Derrida’s theories and is considered to be the foundation text for Deconstruction in literary theory.¹

When placed among his contemporaries Derrida’s work was a reaction against the predominant structuralist era of France in the 1950’s, which derived most of its discourse from the logocentric traditions that preceded it. A common root for the Poststructuralist movement was the writings of 19th Century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. *Of Grammatology* provided many critics within the literary world a crucial tool set for the poststructuralist critique to follow.²

Derrida proposes that the Western model of knowledge, language and metaphysics derives its form from a process of violent differentiation where the natural pairings of terms such as life/death and day/night are taken apart and one is privileged above the other.³ To demonstrate the techniques used in a Deconstructive critique a large portion of *Of Grammatology* devotes itself to readings of Rousseau, Saussure and Levi-Strauss using the Deconstructivist method to illustrate the main ideals of the theory. Paul de Man, a colleague and close friend of Derrida’s, provided the following critique of Derrida’s treatment of Rousseau:

> “The accusations or apologies of so many of Rousseau’s commentators, irritated or baffled by frequently contradictory utterances, become thus superfluous; we ignore Rousseau’s riches by attempting to reduce him to strict coherence.”⁴

While traditional literary theory attempted to reduce the writings of Rousseau down to understandable discourse, Derrida’s application of the Deconstructivist method opened up a wealth of possible meaning within a classic literary text at the heart of the Structuralist ideal.

**Architectural Reaction**

During the years after the first publication of *Of Grammatology*, Modernism as a movement within the built environment was grinding to a halt and the profession of architecture was reaching out to many of the humanities for inspiration to provide a direction for the future of the practice of architecture. The grand “International Style” of the Bauhaus and Le Corbusier gave way to more fragmented urban proposals to adapt to the changing global climate.⁵ During this period of change Deconstruction as an architectural movement began to appear, through the work of Bernard Tschumi and Peter Eisenman. However, Deconstruction in the sense that it was first put forward by Derrida, has little to do with the style of architecture under the same title. Nonetheless it provides powerful

---

³ Ibid. 73-74.
conceptual tools for the practice of architecture through the play and slippage of meaning during the process of signification in the language of the built environment.\textsuperscript{6}

In an interview with Italian architectural magazine, \textit{Domus}, Derrida attempts to explain the intersection between architecture and philosophy and the adaptation of deconstructive practice within the world of architecture. During the interview Derrida remarks that:

“\textit{If modernism distinguishes itself by striving for absolute domination, then postmodernism might be the realization or the experience of its end, the end of the plan of domination. The postmodernism could develop a new relationship with the divine which would no longer be manifest in the traditional shapes of the Greek, Christian, or other deities, but would still set the conditions for architectural thinking. Perhaps there is no architectural thinking. But should there be such thinking, then it could only be conveyed by the dimension of the High, the Supreme, the Sublime.”}\textsuperscript{7}

This sense of reevaluation and undermining of traditional power structures within Western society is very much the perceived aim of the postmodern reaction to modernism in the 1980’s. Derrida’s critique of the architectural process is directed at the traditional “binaries” in language that Deconstruction aims to dismantle.\textsuperscript{8}

\textbf{Theoretical Opposition}

In direct conflict with Deconstruction was the theory of Phenomenology. While Deconstruction sought to dismantle power structures put in place in order to disorient and question the users of space, the Phenomenologist view believed that a building should focus on reaffirming the experience of ‘place’ as based on the writings of Martin Heidegger.\textsuperscript{9} Robert Mugerauer, a strong believer in Phenomenology, situates Deconstruction as a continuation of Nietzsche’s nihilist project to dismantle the notion of a permanent reality.\textsuperscript{10}

Mugerauer’s essay, \textit{Derrida and Beyond}, was presented at “Buildings and Reality: A Symposium on Architecture in the Age of Information” held in Austin, Texas in 1986. This conference was to showcase the two adversarial positions of Phenomenology and Deconstruction. \textit{Derrida and Beyond} goes through the process of demonstrating “the lack” that Deconstruction has within the realm of an architectural reality. Using the work of Peter Eisenman at the “Museum for California State University at Long Beach” as an example, Magerauer proposes that the failure of Deconstruction within architecture is that when the architect chooses one option over another they are inadvertently betraying the ideals of Deconstruction by locking down the play of meaning with the language of the form.


\textsuperscript{8} Ibid. 142.


“But the deconstruction and transformation of ordinary reality is not totally accomplishable. Eisenman’s work, as a series of projects, attests to that; each settles for being unsettling or, if built, uncomfortable. By choosing one possibility he lets go of the others, of course. Is a stronger position necessary to adequately demonstrate the illusion that Derrida says is reality? Is it possible to keep the choices always open and difference perpetually presented?”

**Practical Application**

Derrida’s more direct forays into the realm of architecture have included several correspondences with Bernard Tschumi and Peter Eisenman, including a primary role in the design process of the Parc de la Villette in Paris. The master plan competition for the Parc de la Villette was won by Tschumi in 1982 and became the first large scale urban project under the guise of Deconstruction. The design features several abstract shapes for the housing of public events and activities but at the same time questions the meaning of the activity taking place within the space.

During the design process contributions by Derrida and Eisenman helped Tschumi construct the massive superimposition of “any city.” The Parc de la Villette showcases a very public application of Derrida’s theory of Deconstruction as applied to an urban program. The program of the Parc de la Villette in terms of the Deconstructive process can be described such that:

“... every utterance, linguistic or otherwise, resonates with the answering words (or images) of the receiver; that those answering words or images will have come from a context or experience that is different for every individual; and that there can accordingly be no single unique correspondence of signifier and signified and no universalizing potential in architectural meaning.”

**Conclusion**

The question remains as to how Derrida has contributed to architectural theory. Critics such as Mark Wigley propose that Derrida’s theories have been violently reassembled to force a single convoluted argument to present itself in the built environment. Evidence seems to show that the more relevant writings on architecture by Derrida have been largely ignored by the profession with many architects and theorists focusing on the origin of the ideas put forth in *Of Grammatology* and his other early works. In conclusion, the relationship between *Of Grammatology* and the theory of architecture is clearly drawn by Derrida and his colleagues through the plethora of writings on the subject. The specifics of that relationship however, are frequently confusing and convoluted which is to be expected. As Derrida used to say:

“Let’s complicate things.”

---

11 Ibid. 189-190.
Bibliography


