Deconstructivist Architecture at the Museum of Modern Art:

A Reevaluation

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#### Introduction

Deconstructivism in architecture is often associated with highly theoretical architects because of their inclusion in the Museum of Modern Art's 1988 exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture*. However the exhibition was based on visual stylistic similarity to Russian Constructivism from the 1920's, rather than on any strong theoretical basis. The association of deconstructivism and linguistic theory, specifically the work of Jacques Derrida and poststructuralism, has been imposed on the architects included over time as a way to legitimize linguistic theory as an architectural methodology separate from traditionally postmodern architectural forms. The intent of the exhibition was to showcase work that was visually similar to Russian Constructivism, but the legacy of the exhibition has been the integration of linguistic theory into architectural dialogue because of the atmosphere of social and intellectual crisis from which the exhibition emerged. Although the potential to incorporate meaningful ties with both Russian Constructivism and linguistic deconstruction were latent in the exhibition, it was ultimately a means for Philip Johnson to justify the stylistic pluralism present in his own architectural theory.

The latter part of the twentieth century in architecture was characterized by postmodernism, which many argue deconstructivism is a part of. Postmodernism is a "...pluralistic movement...The first, and still the most common, understanding of the term refers to the tendency that rejects the formal and social constituents of the modern movement and embraces a broader formal language, which is frequently figurative and historically eclectic."<sup>1</sup> In this sense, historicism means the use of historically recognized ornaments, motifs, and design elements used as a rejection of modernism rather than as a revivalist style.<sup>2</sup> While several notable scholars claim to have coined the term, including Robert A.M Stern and Charles Jencks, it was the Museum of Modern Art's publication of Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction* in 1966 that ushered in postmodernism as what would become one of the most popular modes of building in the United States.

Deconstructivism in architecture represents the conflicting ideology that characterized the 1960's through the 1990's. The term was first applied to architecture by the Museum of Modern Art for the 1988 exhibition. A close reading of the exhibition catalogue reveals that the first use of the term characterized architecture that had a distinct visual similarity of overlapping geometric shapes that was supposedly informed by Russian Constructivism. Since then, it has come to encompass a wide range of architecture, including work that is inspired by linguistic theory, primarily as it relates to Jacques Derrida's poststructuralist deconstruction. While Joseph Giovannini claims to have been the first to invent the term with his July 1988 publication "Breaking All the Rules," published in the *New York Times*, it is clear from the MoMA exhibition archives that the term was already in use during the planning of the *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition in 1987.<sup>3</sup> The term was applied to the architects included in the exhibition—Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelblau, and Bernard Tschumi–it was not assumed by any of the architects themselves until after the show.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Mary McLeod, "Architecture and Politics in the Regan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism," *Assemblage* no. 8 (Feb., 1989), 22-59.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Joseph Giovannini, "Breaking all the Rules," in *The New York Times*, (June 12, 1988).

Understanding the Deconstructivist exhibition historigraphically is unique within the field as a methodological study as opposed to one rooted in a discussion of style or of the individual architects included in the exhibition. While many scholars approach the study of twentieth century architecture from a linguistic or narrative perspective, none have specifically examined the role that the *Deconstructivist* exhibition played in the current dialogue. The message of the show was unclear—while the catalogue stresses the role of Russian Constructivism, it is a tenuous relationship at best. For this reason, it has been largely ignored in scholarly evaluations of deconstructivism. While the relationship was not articulated well by curators Philip Johnson or Mark Wigley, it nonetheless deserves reevaluation. Although linguistic theory was a major factor in architectural theory by 1988, Johnson and Wigley both emphatically deny that there was any connection between linguistic deconstruction and *Deconstructivist Architecture*. This resulted in major criticism of the exhibition for ignoring what was for many an obvious link. It reduced the architecture included to an exhibition based on style alone, with little to no theoretical framework.

It is perhaps for this reason that scholars have not evaluated the exhibition itself, focusing instead on linguistic elements that can be read into the work of the architects—specifically Peter Eisenman and Bernard Tschumi. Architectural historian Diane Ghirardo describes that "Many of the deconstruction texts of the late 1980's and early 1990's were enshrined in tomes on architectural theory. Abandoned by practitioners like Libeskind and Eisenman once they started to obtain commissions, and by the theorists because it soon became thoroughly unfashionable, deconstruction and the texts that celebrated it still gather dust."<sup>4</sup> While the other architects in the exhibition had little in common intellectually, Eisenman and Tschumi cultivated a relationship

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Diane Ghirardo, "Manfredo Tafuri and Architecture Theory in the U.S., 1970-2000." *Perspecta* 33, (2002), 38-47.

with Jacques Derrida. Thus the scholarly focus shifted away from the importance of the exhibition to critique the role of linguistics in architecture.

Evaluating the major voices surrounding the exhibition helps to reveal some of the reasons for the mixed messages that the exhibition conveyed. It was part of a lineage of architectural exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art. The role of Philip Johnson as guest curator is important for understanding the show's agenda. With a history at the MoMA of curating exhibitions focused on style, such as *International Style* in 1932 and *The Machine Art* in 1934, it follows that Johnson saw *Deconstructivist Architecture* as an opportunity to again establish a style—this time in order to justify his own shifting ideology and the reinforce the validity of the stylistic pluralism that characterized the 1970's and 1980's. The evidence used to place the exhibition in context at the MoMA comes primarily from the exhibition archives as well as from the Philip Johnson Papers housed at the MoMA.

The idea for the exhibition was originally conceived outside of the MoMA as a show titled *Violated Perfection*. Failing to obtain the funds necessary for an exhibition, *Violated Perfection* became a book deal. In the process of converting the concept from exhibition to book, Aaron Betsky was brought on board. After meeting with Philip Johnson, Betsky proposed it as an exhibition suitable for the MoMA. While the MoMA's execution of the show differs slightly from the original concept, there are still a number of similarities. Looking critically at Aaron Betsky's role in bringing the show to the MoMA, as well as the exhibition for *Violated Perfection* and its ultimate published form elucidates important elements of the notion of deconstruction in architecture that were lost at the MoMA. Assistant curator Mark Wigley is often credited with an attempt to bring a theoretical element to the exhibition. His essay is frequently characterized as an attempt to describe the selections through a poststructuralist lens because of his emphasis on tectonic exploration. This reading of Wigley requires a great deal of inference and interpretation. Although Wigley had completed his dissertation on Jacques Derrida and the possibilities for linguistic deconstruction in architecture two years prior to the exhibition, in his introduction for the exhibition catalogue he emphatically denies such a connection exists with the architecture included.

This denial is also in spite of the inclusion of Peter Eisenman in the exhibition, and his close friendship with Philip Johnson. Eisenman had an established history as a theoretician, and had built much of his early career in the 1970's on explorations of the linguistic theory of Noam Chomsky in architecture. He was involved with the *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition from the first planning meetings, and was the first architect to be confirmed for the show seven months before any of the others. Thus, Eisenman had a more significant role in the planning and in the reception of the exhibition than has been previously discussed. Wigley, Eisenman, and Betsky were all contacted during the writing of this thesis to discuss their experiences with the exhibition, however none responded.

The exhibition emerged relative to a much larger social and ideological debate. The claim that the work in the exhibition had a subconscious connection to Russian Constructivism speaks to larger issues of social anxiety that characterized the 1970's and 1980's. Because this connection was reduced in the catalogue to purely visual and reduced ideologically to a revolutionary spirit, the connection has been overlooked by many scholars. Although the exhibition was held in the late 1980's, its intellectual origins go back much farther. This is in part because Peter Eisenman became highly theoretical in the mid 1970's, and because of his heavy

involvement in the planning of the exhibition. His early ideas about deconstruction in architecture began with House X in 1978, and are manifest ten years later at the MoMA.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the writings of Jacques Derrida, who was a central figure of deconstruction in architecture, was first translated into English in the mid-1970's. Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, which is the first to describe linguistic deconstruction was translated into English in 1976.<sup>6</sup> The implementation of his theory into architecture took time. By the late 1980's was central to the dialogue surrounding the exhibition. There are several references to linguistic deconstruction from sources outside of the MoMA in the exhibition archives. For this reason, a close evaluation of the role of linguistics in deconstructivist architecture and how it might have affected the planning or reception of the exhibition is required.

The reactions to the work of the architects included in the exhibition were often hostile. A number of notable scholars in the years following the show attempted to situate deconstruction within the context of stylistic postmodernism and intellectual crisis. In the early 1990's, this often resulted in analysis focused on the commodification of architecture or the way buildings may be used in a neoliberal economy. Diane Ghirardo is critical of deconstruction, claiming it is guilty of making the same historical references as postmodernism, arguing that both package buildings that are designed purely for consumption. Mary McLeod is less critical of deconstruction. While she points out the problems with its loose definition as a symptom of the exhibition, she generally applauds an effort to find forms that attempt to look forwards, rather than backward at historical references. McLeod argues that what deconstructivists have in common is an attempt to isolate the architectural object. This is not necessarily for purposes of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Charles Jencks, "Deconstruction: The Pleasure of Absence," in Architectural Design vol 58, no. 3/4, (1988), 16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [De la grammatologie], translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, English ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

commodification, but in order to reconcile the spirit of modernity, placing its importance above formal packaging. More recent scholarship, including work by Aaron Betsky, demonstrates that the technological thread that characterized the early conception of *Violated Perfection* lingers, and must be acknowledged as a part of the lineage of exploration demonstrated by the deconstructivist architects.

With the perspective that comes from the time elapsed since the exhibition, a reevaluation of the role of key players, their motivations, the larger social moment from which the exhibition emerged, and the scholarship that responds to it is revealing. It is possible to place the exhibition in context as a part of a larger whole, and to assess its lasting contributions in a twenty first century context.

#### Decon at the MoMA

Despite the curator's claims to the contrary, the *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition became an attempt to define a style because of the distinct visual similarity of the works included. The curators invoked the *International Style* exhibition of 1932 to establish *Deconstructivism* as part of a lineage. The projects selected, the assertions in the exhibition catalogue text that deconstructivism comes from Russian Constructivism, and the name "deconstruction," reinforced the visual and theoretical pastiche that characterized 1980's postmodernism in America. Evaluating the genesis of the show at the MoMA as well as the role of key players in the execution of the exhibition reveals alternative narratives and elucidates motivations that underlay who was selected for inclusion.

## Context

The *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition was a part of a lineage of architectural exhibitions at the MoMA. The *International Style* in 1932, curated by Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, was the first, and set the tone for exhibitions to follow.<sup>7</sup> With an emphasis on modern art and design that broke with the classical tradition, the museum focused on shows that exemplified the most current design thinking and had shock value. Johnson described this in a lecture titled "Style and the International Style" given in 1955. In it, he states that the goal of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> For an analysis of the importance and legacy of the *International Style* exhibition, see Richard Guy Wilson, "The International Style: The MoMA Exhibition," in *Progressive Architecture* 2, no. 82 (February, 1982): 92-105.

1932 International Style exhibition since planning began in 1923 was in fact to dictate a visual style. Other exhibitions included the *Machine Art* in 1934, also curated by Johnson, *The Recent Work of Le Corbusier* in 1935, several shows dedicated to Mies van der Rohe that spanned several decades, and the *Committee of Architects for the Study of the Environment* in 1969, which established the New York Five, or the "whites"—those architects who continued to draw inspiration from the simplicity and structure of high modernism.

In a lecture given at Yale on May 9, 1958 titled "Retreat from International Style to Present Scene," Philip Johnson describes the shift away from the International Style—simple, unadorned glass structures based on a regular, repeating module—and return to ornament on buildings. He describes the engineering work of Buckminster Fuller and Nervi as the first phase of this process. Johnson says that the aesthetic of the International Style had become boring. Fuller's work is beautiful according to Johnson, but is merely "baubles." Johnson describes the undulating, wave-like walls of Marcel Breuer's assembly hall for UNESCO in Paris as the "most beautiful assembly room...of our time. And it shows that fascination that all of us are getting for the more interesting shapes."<sup>8</sup> The distinction he makes between Fuller and Breuer is that the latter's design is both decorative and structurally functional, not just one or the other. Johnson is signaling a distinct move towards architecture with decorative impact.<sup>9</sup>

In 1966, the Museum of Modern Art published Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, which radically changed the nature of architectural design as well as the MoMA's representation of it.<sup>10</sup> A reaction to the dogma and simplicity of the International Style that dominated the American city, Venturi turned outside of architectural practice for ways

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Philip Johnson, "Retreat from the International Style to the Present Scene," Lecture given 1958, (Philip Johnson Papers Series I, Museum of Modern Art Archives), 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture,* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

to consider form. He emphasized "the façade, on historical elements, on the complex play of materials and historical allusions, and on fragments and inflections."<sup>11</sup> To do this, he looked to language and narrative in order to express the communicative ability of buildings though their visual interest and diversity. He states in *Complexity* that "Architects can no longer afford to be intimidated by the puritanically moral language of orthodox Modern architecture. I like elements which are hybrid rather than 'pure,' compromising rather than 'clean,' distorted rather than 'straightforward,' ambiguous rather than 'articulated,' perverse as well as impersonal...."<sup>12</sup>

Venturi was an advocate of the ambiguity of form and ornament, which came to be the cornerstone of postmodernism, a term coined in the 1970's by scholars such as Charles Jencks and Robert A.M. Stern. The term as derived from *Complexity* was at first far too broad to be associated with a particular visual style, but it gradually came to mean a more specific association with a "cartoon" like aesthetic and compositions that referenced historical models as a means of communication. Central to this notion is that the elements of a building should be recognizable, drawing on our culturally and historically rooted concepts of components like columns and gabled roofs. This was a direct reaction to modernism: "The post-modern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revealed: but with irony, not innocently."<sup>13</sup> This requires looking backward to already established, recognizable decorative motifs.

The popularity of this brand of postmodernism is evident at the Museum of Modern Art. Not only did the MoMA press publish Venturi's hugely influential *Complexity*, but they began to shift from away from exhibitions that emphasized the avant-garde to ones that looked back at

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Diane Ghirardo, Architecture After Modernism, World of Art, (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 18.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Venturi, 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Franz Schulze, *Philip Johnson: Life and Work*, (New York, NY: A.A. Knopf, 1994), 333.

historical precedents. A turning point for the MoMA was *The Architecture of the École des Beaux Arts* exhibition in 1975.<sup>14</sup> The French academy had a long tradition of promoting classical architecture. Americans who trained there included Richard Morris Hunt, Henry Hobson Richardson, Charles Follen McKim, and others who upheld the Beaux Arts tradition of historically rooted, revivalist styles such as the Gothic and the Classical.

That the Museum of Modern Art would shift away from the cutting edge with an exhibition that was purely historical is indicative of the popularity of the historicist sentiment in the 1970's and 1980's. The *Beaux Arts* exhibition was the first of several to reference historical or traditional architects, including an exhibition dedicated to Sir Edwin Landseer Lutyens in 1979. In the early 1980's, Gerald D. Hines Interests Architecture program decided to sponsor a series of five architectural exhibitions at the MoMA. The first was an exhibition titled *Ricardo Bofill Leon Krier: Architecture, Urbanism, and History* that opened in 1985.<sup>15</sup> The series was intended to "examine current developments in architecture."<sup>16</sup> *Deconstructivist Architecture* was the second in the Hines exhibition series, following *Bofill/Krier*.

A memo from the head of the Hines Interests appropriations, Kenneth Hubbard, to MoMA's acting director of the department of architecture, Stuart Wrede, shows that the Hines program approved the funding for the Decon exhibition at the same time that they approved the funding for the exhibition that would follow in 1989 on Emilio Ambasz and Steven Holl already in the planning process. In a letter from Wrede to Hubbard dated November 12, 1987,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Peter Eisenman also references the significance of this exhibition being held at the Museum of Modern Art in "Post-Functionalism," in *Oppositions Reader: Selected Readings from A Journal for Ideas and Criticism in Architecture*, 1973-1984, 1998, 9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> The complete Hines Interests lecture series was comprised of the following exhibitions: Ricardo Bofill and Leon Krier: Architecture, Urbanism, and History (June27-Sept 3, 1985), Mario Botta (Nov 20, 1986-Feb 10, 1987), Decon (June 23-Aug 20, 1988), Emilio Ambasz/Steven Holl: Architecture (Feb 9-April 4, 1989), and Tadao Ando (Oct 3-Dec 31-1991).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> *Deconstructivist Architecture, Press Release*, (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489), 1988.

Wrede writes "Your enthusiasm for the proposed group exhibition to be curated by Philip on new constructivist/deconstructivist tendencies in architecture was most encouraging."<sup>17</sup> This demonstrates Johnson's level of influence by inserting his own exhibition into the set schedule. Johnson, a man with deep connections to the MoMA as the arbiter of taste was acquainted with Gerald Hines, and used his connections to design the *Decon* exhibition in a way that helped legitimize the plurality of architectural theory that was dominating the intellectual landscape.

#### Genesis of the Exhibition

Philip Johnson was arguably the most influential voice in American architecture beginning with the *International Style* in 1932. When the Gerald D. Hines Interests in Architecture Program exhibitions were planned for the mid 1980's at the Museum of Modern Art, Johnson was already in his late seventies. He was infamous, having served as the Director of the Department of Architecture and Design at the MoMA, cultivating a reputation as a lecturer and prolific writer, and as an architect in his own right, most recently partnering with John Burgee in 1967. Philip Johnson and his involvement with *Decon* represent two different narratives—his theoretical legacy versus the architecture that he designed and promoted.

While his early architectural designs adhered to dogma of the international style, by the 1950's his ideas and aesthetics were changing with the tide of postmodernism with thinly veiled references to historical models. He proclaimed in 1954, "I'm a traditionalist. I believe in history."<sup>18</sup> At this time, Johnson began to turn away from the influence of his friend and mentor, Mies van der Rohe. He distanced himself from the aesthetic of the International Style. By the

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Stuart Wrede, letter to Kenneth Hubbard, (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489), 1987.
 <sup>18</sup> Philip Johnson, "The Seven Crutches of Modern Architecture," Lecture given at Harvard School of Architecture, 1954, (Philip Johnson Papers, Series I, Museum of Modern Art Archives, 1954), 8.

1950's he was facilitating "history-based eclecticism."<sup>19</sup> An informal lecture given to architecture students at Harvard in 1954 titled, "The Seven Crutches of Modern Architecture" was, as Johnson's biography Franz Schulze characterized it, an attack on all that Modern Architecture stood for in 1932—that is, "formula, of doctrine, of architectural theory."<sup>20</sup> In it, Johnson describes the crutch of engineering, citing Buckminster Fuller as an example of this. In an effort to distinguish between architecture and engineering, he says that:

Structure is a very dangerous thing to cling to...You can be led to believe that clear structure clearly expressed will end up being architecture by itself... I have believed this off and on myself...It's a very nice crutch, you see, because, after all, you can't mess up a building too badly if the bays are all equal and all the windows the same size."<sup>21</sup>

This not only shows Johnson shifting his design ideology as early as the 1950's, but also foreshadows the irony of his enthusiasm for the *Decon* show, which emphasizes the structural tectonics of the Russian avant-garde demonstrated by the "diagonals" the curators constantly emphasize.

Intellectually, this began with his identification shifting from the philosophy of Plato to that of Nietzsche. While at Harvard as an undergraduate, Johnson was an avid student of Plato, interested in the Plutonian notion of pursuit of the good life. After Johnson first resigned the MoMA in 1934, he went to Germany where he followed the Nazi party and was a supporter of Hitler. As his biographer Franz Schulze describes, Johnson's interest in Nazi politics closely parallels his ideological shift from Plato to Nietzsche. Rather than the pursuit of the good life, Schulze asserts that the Nietzschian "will to power" was more appealing to Johnson's privileged upbringing. This shift is represented architecturally through Johnson's designs for his own home,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Schulze, 251. <sup>20</sup> Ibid, 234.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Johnson, "Seven," 6.

where Schulze says Johnson's mutable ideology is apparent. The first phase was Glass House in 1949 and is distinctly Miesian. As he added onto it over the years, he became increasingly eclectic with his references, choosing instead to pull from historical models rather than from the International Style. Schultz specifically references the ceiling of the guest house as evidence of Johnson's mutable ideology. The raised dome of the ceiling is inspired by the domed ceilings of Sir John Soane's home in England. According to Schulze, Johnson's ideological rejection of Plato for Nietzsche legitimated his own desire for historical eclecticism.<sup>22</sup>

By the time Johnson was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine on January 7, 1979, he had established himself as a pillar of postmodernism. In the *Time* article by Robert Hughes, Johnson was treated as postmodernisms central figure. Johnson's AT&T building was the feature of the article. It established a new level of fame for Johnson and legitimized postmodernism as a style suitable for high-rise office buildings. Mary McLeod describes that "Philip Johnson's notorious Chippendale top for AT&T instantly convinced patrons of [postmodernism's] marketability and prestige value."<sup>23</sup> Johnson's introduction to Gerald Hines came in 1985 when he was commissioned to do a postmodern skyscraper for his real estate group in Houston, Texas following the immediate favorable reception of the AT&T and PPG buildings in 1984.<sup>24</sup>

As historicized postmodernism gained steadily in popularity during the 1970's and early 1980's, a counter movement began—one that looked to theory and experimentation as a way to expand beyond International Style, rather than looking back to historical models. In 1984, architects Paul Florian and Stephen Wierzbowski, adjunct professors at the University of Illinois, Chicago, developed the idea for an exhibition based on architecture that was "obsessed with

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Schulze, 228-317. <sup>23</sup> McLeod, 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Schulze, 228-317.

fragmentation and instability, 'torn between history and technology."<sup>25</sup> With the intention of holding the exhibition at the university's Gallery 400, they called the proposed exhibition Violated Perfection: the Meaning of the Architectural Fragment. Florian and Wierzbowski applied and were denied twice for a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and were denied additional funding from the Graham Foundation as well as the State of Illinois. They sought out Philip Johnson for additional support, according to a letter written by Stanley Tigerman, director of the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Architecture.<sup>26</sup> When Florian and Wierzbowski failed to obtain the monetary funding necessary to move forward with the exhibition, they turned to Aaron Betsky, an architect working in Frank Gehry's office. They asked Betsky to propose the exhibition to other institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art.

The opportunity to have Violated Perfection at the MoMA as his own show would have appealed to Johnson for two reasons. It was an opportunity to again distinguish himself as the arbiter of taste among the American avant-garde, as he had done with *International Style*. It was also an opportunity to defend the eclectic mix of visuals styles and theoretical controversy that dominated architecture during this period. His own designs in the late 1970's and early 1980's were met with a great deal of criticism from critics like Michael Sorkin and Ada Louise Huxtable.<sup>27</sup> They took particular issue with Johnson's AT&T building for its myriad of historical references. In the introduction to the *Decon* catalogue, Johnson writes, "In art as well as architecture...there are many-and contradictory-trends in our quick-change generation. In architecture, strict-classicism, strict-modernism, and all sorts of shades in between, are equally

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Michael Sorkin, "Philip Johnson's MoMA Hustle," Interiors 147, no. 9 (04, 1988): 28.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Stanley Tigerman, Letter to Richard Oldenberg, Jan. 20, 1988, (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489). <sup>27</sup> Schulze, 351.

valid...pluralism reins, perhaps a soil in which poetic, original artists can develop."<sup>28</sup> The exhibition was a platform from which he could legitimize the multiplicity of visual images and styles that were combined and for which he received criticism.

Because of his advanced age and questionable health, Johnson expressed to Stuart Wrede his desire to put the show together expeditiously.<sup>29</sup> Major decisions for the exhibition, including editing Florian and Wierzbowski's original list of "violated" architects, were made at one of Johnson's invite-only dinners at the Century Association. Those invited included "Philip, John Burgee, Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Aaron Betsky, Joe Giovannini, and Peter Zweig and Mark Wigley, two young academics recently elevated to the Johnson retinue...Not present were Florian and Wierzbowski, completely cut out."<sup>30</sup> Florian and Wierzbowski claim they never revived any contact about the dinner, or even requests to use the title "Violated Perfection," although one of the original titles of the MoMA's exhibition used "Violated Perfection" as a subtitle. Schulze speculates that "violated" was too suggestive for the MoMA, and that *Decon* was more palatable. In a letter to Florian dated December 23, 1987, Johnson wrote that they would not be using "Violated Perfection" as the title for some enigmatic "bureaucratic reason."<sup>31</sup>

Mark Wigley, a Princeton professor and recent PhD graduate in Architecture from the University of Auckland, was brought on as assistant curator. Johnson was to write the exhibition introduction at a length of two thousand words, and that Wigley would write the ten thousand word essay.<sup>32</sup> Schultz notes that this was the first and only time in Johnson's history curating at

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture*, (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1988).
 <sup>29</sup> Wrede.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Schulze quoting Sorkin, pp394-395.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Philip Johnson, Letter to Paul Florian, Dec. 23, 1987, (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> *Deconstructivist Architecture Exhibition Files.* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489), 1988.

the MoMA that Johnson did not take full control of the exhibition essay himself. It is unclear from the archives when Wigley became involved with the exhibition. The Century Association dinner in 1987 is the earliest record of his involvement. There is no indication of when it was decided that he would be the assistant curator, or why he was chosen over the other newcomer to Johnson's circle, Peter Jay Zweig.

#### Limitations of Style

The Museum of Modern Art held a series of exhibitions in the 1970's related to Russian Constructivist artwork. Until then, Russian Constructivism was not included in major art and architectural history textbooks. There is no mention of any Russian Constructivist work in Siegfried Gideon's Space, Time and Architecture as late as the fifth addition in 1967. Although the Russian Constructivists had yet to appear in the seminal architectural history surveys, it was during the 1970's and early 1980's that it began to be more widely known. Perhaps because of the tumultuous, revolutionary spirit that characterized the social climate in the years leading up to the exhibition-the collapse of the Soviet blockade, lingering Cold War tensions, and the Vietnam War—Russian Constructivism was experiencing a renaissance. The MoMA held several exhibitions to this end: Constructivism in Poland: 1923-1936 in 1976, Russia: The Avant-Garde in 1979, and following the Decon exhibition, Architectural Drawings of the Russian Avant-Garde in 1990. The Decon exhibition flies clearly show that the 1988 exhibition's primary goal was to establish a relationship with Russian Constructivist work, such as that of Tatlin and Malevich. The problem with this type of stylistic association is that it leads to a conflicted, ambiguous set of claims, which is evident in the Johnson and Wigley catalogue essays.

Johnson and Wigley both go to great lengths in the Decon catalogue to assert their claim that the architects included had strong visual connections to the Russian avant-garde of the early twentieth century. Johnson writes that there is an "obvious formal theme...the diagonal overlapping of rectangular or trapezoidal bars" among all of the architects in the exhibition. Johnson even tries to insist that the influence of Russian Constructivism is inherent in the work to the point that it is a subconscious manifestation on the part of the architects, saying that "...it is perhaps not strange that the new forms of deconstructivist architecture hark back to Russian Constructivism of the second and third decades of this century. I am fascinated by these formal similarities...Some of these similarities are unknown to the younger architects themselves, let alone premeditated." Both Johnson and Wigley claim that that deconstructivism explores the "instability of the Russian avant-garde and the stability of high modernism."<sup>33</sup> It speaks to the exhibition's lack of a theoretical foundation that Johnson and Wigley make this claim, as they have very little in common besides a visual similarity of diagonals and rectangles that overlap

The curators spent a great deal of time on the Constructivist component of the exhibition. Frederick Taylor was put in charge of coordinating and the logistics of obtaining models and original products from the architects involved, and more importantly, the acquisition of the extensive number of Russian Constructivist artworks specifically requested by Johnson. The exhibition files at the MoMA contain extensive records that support the importance of the Russian work, and show how much time was dedicated to obtaining the works. In the exhibition space, the deconstructivist architecture was preceded by a front room entirely dedicated to the Russian avant-garde pieces of painting, sculpture, and collage. In this way, the visitor's perception of the deconstructivist architecture was colored by the visual suggestion of Russian

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Deconstructivist Architecture, Press Release.

Constructivism—one had to pass through the historical models in order to access the deconstructivist work.

The front room also contained two images that Johnson discusses in the catalogue introduction. Displayed was the image of the ball bearing that Johnson had included in the *Machine Art* exhibition in 1934, juxtaposed with a photograph of a dilapidated, abandoned 19<sup>th</sup> century spring house. Johnson writes that each is beautiful in its own way and in its own time. The ball bearing had its moment in the 1930's, valued for its smooth, precise, clean lines. Johnson explained that taste had shifted. The spring house held more relevance for a 1980's audience, valued for its ambiguity, imperfection, and general dilapidation. This again speaks to Johnson's desire to legitimize pluralism under the guise of the shocking, disturbed, imperfect architecture in the following rooms. Its placement with the Constructivist work underscores the lack of clarity and mixed messages of the overall exhibition design.

The curators attempted to establish with Russian Constructivism is often overlooked and discredited although the time and attention paid to the Russian work necessitates evaluation. There were originally more than thirty nine constructivist works requested for loan. They included a variety of paintings, sculpture, and other media from revolutionary Russia, the period spanning approximately 1915-1930, by notable artists such as El Lissitzky, Kasimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko, and Vladimir Tatlin. They were examples of specific, desired visual characteristics—strong, overlapping, and diagonal lines thought to be revolutionary. The only distinction between the work of the constructivists and that of the deconstructivist architects that the curators wished to express was articulated by Johnson in a draft of his introduction:

"[Deconstructivism] has none of the baggage of utopian ideals and functionalist aims that the Russian movement had."<sup>34</sup>

Mark Wigley's essay focuses on the link between the two movements. He expresses the connection to the Russian avant-garde, and at the same time denies that the work was chosen for any other theoretical reason. He specifically denies that the work has any connection to structuralist or post-structuralist linguistic theory. This is surprising given that it is clear that the linguistic connection was of great importance at the time. Not only were the historical postmodernists advocating an architecture that *communicated* through historical pastiche, but major architectural figures were speaking about architecture in linguistic terms—Robert Venturi, Peter Eisenman, Colin Rowe, and Charles Jencks, among others. Each approached the idea of buildings as language from different perspectives, but the ideas of linguistics in architecture, having just completed his dissertation on the influential post-structuralist Jacques Derrida in 1985. Yet Wigley denies any connection to linguistic theory, emphasizing only Russian Constructivism.

There are several pieces of correspondence in the *Decon* exhibition files that mention the connection of deconstructivist architecture to various linguistic theories. These range from letters written by architects hoping to be included to other intellectuals contributing their thoughts. One of the more compelling pieces of evidence for this is a letter and essay written to Johnson by David Kesler. The letter, dated April 4, 1988 describes "The Culture of Fragments," an essay Kesler wrote for *Precis 6*. He develops links between architecture and post-structuralist linguistic philosophy, specifically that of Jacques Derrida. Kesler describes that the essay was based on an

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Deconstructivist Architecture, Wall Text, (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489, 1988).

interview he conducted with Derrida, which took place before the *Decon* exhibition was planned.<sup>35</sup> The essay uses as examples the work of several of the architects that would later be chosen for the exhibition—Eisenman, Tschumi's Parc de la Villette, Koohaas, Libeskind, and Hadid—to demonstrate a link to Derridean philosophy. Immediately prior to the 1988 Decon exhibition, Derrida began collaborating with two of the architects who would later be in the show—Eisenman and Tschumi. Kesler describes this collaboration as validation of his study.

Peter Eisenman is at the center of the exhibition planning, and is often the crux of the linguistic connection that is imposed on the exhibition. In the 1970's, Philip Johnson became interested in the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS). It had been founded by Eisenman in 1967 with Arthur Drexler, who was head of the department of architecture and design at the MoMA at that time. There was a close relationship between the MoMA and the IAUS from the beginning. Not only was Drexler a founder, but several MoMA trustees were also on the board of the IAUS. Although Johnson was not involved with founding the IAUS, he quickly associated himself with Eisenman and the ideas coming from the Institute.<sup>36</sup>

Johnson did not care for Eisenman's architecture, and Eisenman likewise disliked Johnson's eclecticism, but they became friends in self-promotion, each benefitting from the success of the IAUS. The Institute was responsible for and associated with the most innovative architectural talent at the time:

Privately funded, the IAUS functioned as a research center, development agency, nonaccredited school, and forum for exhibitions, programs, and publications. Its faculty of designers, critics, and historians included such aspiring figures as Kenneth Frampton,

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> David A. Kesler, "Precis 6: the Culture of Fragments," (New York: NY: Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489, 1988). Kesler claims this was prior to Derrida and Eisenman meeting.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Schulze, 330.

Anthony Vidler, Rem Koolhaas, and Emilio Ambasz...Aldo Rossi, Bernard Tschumi, Arata Isozaki, Leon Krier, and others of similar stature...Throughout the 1970's, the IAUS was unsurpassed as a crucible of innovative architectural thought in the United States.<sup>37</sup>

Gerald D. Hines, the same financial backer of the *Decon* exhibition, provided some financial support to the IAUS in the 1970's.

It was during his tenure as head of the IAUS that Eisenman was producing some of his most theoretical work. He founded *Oppositions*, the major theoretical journal at the time, and also produced his "Ten Houses" projects, several of which were based on the linguistic theory of Noam Chomsky. Just prior to the *Beaux Arts* exhibition at the MoMA in 1975, Eisenman had been featured in the *Committee of Architects for the Study of the Environment* exhibition, which established the famed "New York Five," or the "whites"—Eisenman, Graves, Gwathmey, Hejduk, and Meier. Not surprisingly, Johnson wrote the post script for the exhibition catalogue.<sup>38</sup>

Peter Eisenman played a major role in shaping the *Decon* exhibition.<sup>39</sup> It is no surprise, given Johnson and Eisenman's close friendship and professional association, that Eisenman was the first architect selected for the exhibition. A letter written by Johnson to Eisenman confirms his participation in May of 1987, while none of the other architects were confirmed until December of that year. There is one letter written by Eisenman, as well as handwritten notes by

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Schulze, 330-331.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Schulze describes an incident between Johnson and Eisenman. Eisenman was helping Johnson write his autobiography in the 1970's. Johnson envisioned it as a series of interview questions asked by Eisenman. Johnson's architectural partner, John Burgee, alleges that after a few drinks at a party, Eisenman reveled to Burgee that he planned to use Johnson's responses to expose his Nazi past and homosexuality, using photos of lovers and of Johnson on car rides with Nazi's in Pottsdam in the 1930's. Burgee appealed to Johnson to stop the interviews, revealing Eisenman's alleged plan. According to Schulze, Johnson loved the idea of Eisenman revealing these things, and thought that they added to his character. Yet Burgee's appeal was persuasive enough for Johnson to call off the book deal. If there is any truth to the allegations, Johnson and Eisenman's friendship was unaffected. While Burgee insists Johnson had to buy Eisenman off with ten thousand dollars, Johnson and Eisenman both maintain that this was simply the publisher's fee for breaking the book deal. They remained good friends. Schulze, 373.

someone involved in the early stages of planning, that show Eisenman was making recommendations about architects to include, specifically for Wes Jones, a former student and employee of his, although he was ultimately not selected. While this is only one example or Eisenman's voice directly involved in the planning, it stands to reason that he had a great deal of involvement with the selection process because every single architect included is directly connected to Eisenman professionally. Zaha Hadid was a student of Rem Koolhaas, who was teaching at the IAUS. Koolhaas and Bernard Tschumi, both graduates of the Architectural Association in London and former students of Peter Cook, were both teaching at the IAUS in the years preceding the *Decon* exhibition. Frank Gehry was Eisenman's friend, and participated in the Century Association dinners—he was present at the planning meeting for Decon.<sup>40</sup> Daniel Libeskind studied architecture at Cooper Union under John Hejduk, one of Eisenman's friends and fellow New York Five member. Wolf Prix of Coop Himmelbleau also studied architecture at the AA, which shard a close relationship with the IAUS. Betsky describes the IAUS as the "the American equivalent for the [Architectural] Association [in London]. An active publication and exhibition program sustained a lively debate, which ended in 1983 when Eisenman left his position as director."41

There is a relationship between the IAUS and the AA, between Eisenman and Peter Cook. There is a reference to the AA and Peter Cook in the exhibition files for the *Decon* exhibition. A copy of "Johnson's Acknowledgement of Drafts," which included an essay on Peter Cook's groundbreaking conceptual work with Archigram and has a highlighted image

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Schulze, 393-400.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Aaron Betsky, *Violated Perfection: Fragmentation in Modern Architecture*, (New York, NY: Rizzoli International, 1990), 61.

caption regarding an award Cook received.<sup>42</sup> Without any context, it is difficult to concern what role this might have played in the exhibition planning, but it is clear that there is a link between Eisenman, Cook, and the architects selected for inclusion.

The exclusion of James Wine's architectural firm SITE supports that the architects included were selected based on a connection to Eisenman and distinct visual similarity. As Betsky describes in the published version of Violated Perfection, Wines work is the most truly "deconstructed" of any of them—both literally and figuratively. Wines buildings literally crumble. They visually distinctive, and look unlike anything else in the exhibition. In 1987, Wines wrote an angry letter to Philip Johnson regarding the exhibition: "...I think the only reason you [Johnson] called is because you, as well, sensed the presence of some pretty flabby intellectualism....He [Wigley] committed the cardinal sin of all criticism – to assume that the superficial appearance of an object is, in fact, its meaning; that fragmented and dematerialized sections of buildings refer specifically to demolition and ruins alone."<sup>43</sup> He goes on to voice the problem inherent in the exhibition, which is the use of the term "deconstruction" because it is a linguistic term used without any reference to linguistics in the exhibition. Wines goes on to say that "The main problem with this entire exhibition...is the use of deconstruction, which is a form of literary criticism, in order to defend a philosophically disparate group of formalist architects whose work is derived from De Stijl and Russian Constructivism."44

The sentiment expressed by Wines is at the heart of the exhibition's methodological issues. The link of the deconstructivists to Russian Constructivism requires closer examination than it has received. Yet without a strong theoretical foundation uniting the architects selected

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Deconstructivist Architecture Exhibition Files.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> See Appendix 1. James Wines, Letter to Philip Johnson, March 25, 1988, (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489). <sup>44</sup> Ibid.

for the exhibition, it becomes a matter of style and visual similarity, despite the curator's claims to the contrary. Johnson asserted the importance of architectural multiplicity. Wigley denounced any link to linguistics, although the very name of the exhibition, supported by letters and essays in the *Decon* exhibition file, begs for linguistics to given an intellectual framework within the context of deconstructivism in architecture.

#### Alternatives

It is undeniable that Paul Florian, Steve Wierzbowski, Aaron Betsky, and Mark Wigley all contributed in convoluted ways to the exhibition as realized at the MoMA. Each stood to gain from association with Philip Johnson, each starting out his career in the early 1980s. Although Florian and Wierzbowski were credited by Johnson in the exhibition catalogue as the originators of the idea for deconstructivist architecture when it was still *Violated Perfection* at the University of Illinois, it is clear that they were quickly removed from the planning process at the MoMA. Aaron Betsky was Johnson's contact as Betsky developed *Violated Perfection* for publication as an independent book. It was a broader approach to the notion of deconstructed architecture than what Johnson reduced down to Russian Constructivist forms for the MoMA exhibition. Introduced to Johnson by Peter Eisenman, Mark Wigley would also benefit from an association with Johnson and the MoMA as a newcomer to the American architectural and academic scene. Wigley's dissertation, catalogue essay, and book on Jacques Derrida deserve careful consideration for the ways in which they clarify the context of the exhibition, and also confuse the legacy of its reception.

## **Betsky and Violated Perfection**

Accounts of Betsky's initial involvement with *Deconstructivist Architecture* differ. Franz Schulze and Michael Sorkin fall just short of accusing Betsky of stealing the idea for "Violated Perfection" as his own. Florian and Wierzbowski were unable to garner the funds necessary to hold the exhibition at the University of Chicago. After applying for several grants and allegedly contacting Philip Johnson for assistance, Aaron Betsky, a young architect in Frank Gehry's office, was contacted to help salvage the project. According to Sorkin in his 1987 editorial, "Philip Johnson's MoMA Hustle," Betsky was having a casual lunch with Wierzbowski when he was told about the proposed exhibition of *Violated Perfection*. Sorkin implies that Betsky proposed the project as a book in order to sell the idea as his own for the purposes of exhibition elsewhere. Regardless, Betsky shopped the idea around to publishers, reaching a deal with Rizzoli Press, who published the book in 1990.<sup>45</sup> Betsky conceived of *Violated Perfection* as "a cross between the Communist Manifesto and 'Popular Mechanics."<sup>46</sup>

It was with deliberate underhandedness, according to Sorkin, that Betsky proposed the idea to Philip Johnson after he had secured the book deal with Rizzoli. In his editorial, Sorkin first discusses the original conception of the show by Florian and Wierzbowski, called *Violated Perfection: The Meaning of the Architectural Fragment*, giving them full credit from the beginning. According to Sorkin, the exhibition they planned included the architects Coop Himmelblau, Peter Eisenman, James Wine's office SITE, Krueck and Olsen, Eric Moss, Hiromi Fuji, and Zaha Hadid.

Betsky was on Johnson's personal list of contenders for the position of the director of architecture and design at MoMA, a spot left vacant by Arthur Drexler, filled temporarily by Stewart Wrede. It was at a lunch regarding this position that Betsky proposed the idea for

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Sorkin, 333.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Geoffrey Collins, "Violated Perfection: Consumed Lunch with Aaron Betsky," in *Offramp*, vol 1, no. 4, (1991), 38-39.

*Violated Perfection*, and Johnson took an interest.<sup>47</sup> A letter written to Philip Johnson from Aaron Betsky supports this account. Betsky expresses his gratitude to Johnson for his enthusiasm about the project. Betsky describes that the "whole event made my investigations seem to come one step closer to reality...I am hard at work hunting and gathering, and hope that I can count on you support in my applications for research funds for 'Violated Perfection.'"<sup>48</sup> The letter makes no mention of Florian or Wierzbowski—they are credited only in the enclosed manuscript prospectus. It is clear that by this point in 1987, Betsky had taken on the project as his own.

In a letter to Richard Oldenberg at the MoMA, Stanley Tigerman is considerably kinder than Sorkin when he asks Johnson to acknowledge Florian, Wierzbowski, and the University of Illinois as the originators of the exhibition.<sup>49</sup> Tigerman describes in his letter that Betsky contacted Philip Johnson, among others, to sponsor the exhibition. Tigerman implies that in 1987 Florian and Wierzbowski asked Betsky to propose the idea to other institutions. Tigerman says that "Although I realize that ideas on the subject abound...I feel that the history of contact between Gallery 400, Aaron Betsky and Philip Johnson, together with the use of our list of exhibitors, provide sufficient grounds for acknowledgement." Johnson does so, suffice to say in the introduction:

I must thank...Aaron Betsky, who called my attention to the telling phrase 'violated perfection'—originating from the title of an exhibition proposed by the team of Paul Florian and Stephen Wierzbowski for the University of Illinois, Chicago.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Sorkin, 393-400.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Aaron Betsky, Letter to Philip Johnson, Nov. 3, 1987, (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489). This particular reference is to the "Century Association" dinner Johnson convened to discuss the details of the exhibition. Florian and Wierzbowski were not invited.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> See Appendix 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Johnson and Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture*, 9.

The original exhibition "Violated Perfection" as conceived by Florian and Wierzbowski explored the fragmented forms that derive from the conflict between historicity and technology. The MoMA exhibition intended to "undermine basic assumptions about building" and "violate" the forms of modernism with "twisted volumes, warped planes, and clashed lines."<sup>51</sup> What distinguishes the *Decon* exhibition from the original concept is that the major emphasis placed on the relationship of deconstructivism to Russian Constructivism and the revolutionary spirit each supposedly represents. The technological component that was central to the original concept is completely abandoned.

Technology is a major factor in Betsky's proposal for *Violated Perfection*. For Betsky, what unites the architects selected is their use of technology as the means by which they conceive of the architectural zeitgeist, rather than in terms of historical models or with any specific social or political agenda. In the prospectus sent to Johnson, Betsky writes that the architects are "high tech with dirty hands...This work wishes us to see the technology in which and by which we live....It is technomorphic."<sup>52</sup> This term "technomorphic" is used consistently to describe the work in the proposed book—deconstruction is never used with respect to the architecture. The book as he envisioned it in 1987 hinged on technology—from movements like Archigram to Rogers and Foster who were totally absorbed with understanding the implications of technology—to electronic mass media and architecture's methodological ability to respond to technology. Betsky does not elaborate on what he means by technology specifically, or what types of technology.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Deconstructivist Architecture, Press Release.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Aaron Betsky, "Proposal, Violated Perfection," (Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489, New York, NY: 1987).

Technology bookends Violated Perfection. Betsky cites technology as the source of anxiety and a loss of self.<sup>53</sup> He writes that the "effort to escape the dilemma of the individual struggle with the modern world, a willful struggle against the affirmation of architecture as the negation of a critical making, is the subject of this book."<sup>54</sup> Each section of the book is then framed by the architects technological contribution. For example, Venturi is the godfather of violated perfection because he "argued for a new kind of design, one acknowledging electronic communication as the basis of the latest cycle of production and consumption....<sup>55</sup>

While technology is the lynchpin of the books organization, linguistic deconstruction is also a critical component of Betsky's argument. In his original proposal, he lists several French post-structuralist philosophers, among them Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, and credits them with technomorphic architecture. This is seen in the chapter outlining the "Four Godfathers:" Venturi, Eisenman, Hejduk, and Gehry. Betsky describes that all of them are interested in the communicative nature of buildings. All of these men established a legacy of subversion using linguistic post-structuralism, whether that was subversion of the Miesian "less is more," formal, structural, or fantastical experimentation. He traces a linguistic thread through all of the architects who had been included in the Deconstructivist Architecture exhibition. In addition to the binaries of Eisenman and the fantasy of Gehry, Betsky points to the narrative influence in Tschumi and Koolhaas' work, and a less convincing justification of Libeskind's efforts to use drawing to uncover the hidden texts that underlay the destiny of the world-"architecture surfaces and rewrites its hidden texts."56

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Collins.
<sup>54</sup> Betsky, *Violated*, 13.
<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Ibid. 71.

Betsky says that the people he selected in conceiving the book version prior to the exhibition planning all have a common ideology as well as visual style.<sup>57</sup> *Violated Perfection* describes all of the architects included in *Deconstructivist Architecture*. Although he thanks Philip Johnson in the acknowledgements, Betsky does not directly reference the exhibition. His book is an attempt to read versatility into a group of architects that he says all "violate" perfection, in that their architecture is exploration of disturbed structural forms. He attempts to establish a lineage for this type of architecture, going back to de Stijl, as well as Russian Constructivism, though he places a significantly less emphasis on this connection that the exhibition did.<sup>58</sup>

#### Wigley and Post-structuralism

In an interview from 2011 about the *Decon* exhibition, Mark Wigley said that "The mission was obvious: to kill postmodernism. It was never said. It never had to be said. It was simply a group of people talking about new experiments, new ideas and the need to discuss them. If that's what the discussion was, all of the so-called debates about postmodernism would become immediately uninteresting."<sup>59</sup> Wigley was brought on as a new protégé of Johnson's, serving as associate curator responsible for the main catalogue essay. He had just completed his dissertation on Jacques Derrida in 1985, but denied any connection to linguistics in the essay despite the obvious connection between the exhibition's title "deconstruction" and Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction. Wigley followed up exhibition with the publication of his dissertation as *The Architecture of Deconstruction* in 1993. The short time frame makes it easy to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Betsky, Letter to Philip Johnson.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Mark Wigley, and Martin C. Pedersen, "Deconstructivism: The Kamikaze Mission." *Metropolis* 30, no. 9 (2011), 80.

see an implicit connection between the tectonics of the architecture in the exhibition to poststructuralism, despite Wigley's explicit statements in the exhibition catalogue essay that there is no connection to linguistics.

In the opening statement of his introduction to the catalogue, Johnson references the images of the ball bearing used for *Machine Art*, and a photograph of a spring house built in 1860, deserted and dilapidated, given to him by sculptor Michael Heizer. In early drafts of the *Decon* introduction text, Johnson broke down the images of the ball bearing and the spring house into their sets of binary oppositions. He made a two column list with terms written under each image, set in direct opposition to one another. The ball bearing is perfect, functional, measured, and pure. The spring house is jumbled, torn, violated, shards, and messy. He describes that each has appealed to him at different time in his life. Johnson states that, "The photo of the spring house strikes the same chord in the brain today as the ball bearing did two generations ago. It is my receiving eye that has changed."<sup>60</sup> The binaries which Johnson uses to characterize the images relative to one another, as well as the notion of the "receiving eye," or the interpretation of the viewer, is central to Jacques Derrida's theory of linguistic post-structuralism.

Derrida, the father of "deconstruction," a subset of post-structuralism, described deconstruction as "the experience of the impossible."<sup>61</sup> In *Of Grammatology*, the publication in which he coined the term, Derrida explained that writing had semiotic priority over speech—the visual symbols that we associate with language had greater communicative power than the spoken word. Derrida's aim was to demonstrate that the structuralist binaries typically associated with Western philosophy—man/woman, black/white, good/evil—were critical to our

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Johnson and Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture*, 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Tucker, Thomas Deane. *Derridada: Duchamp as Readymade Deconstruction*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 2.

understanding of language, but that they also undermine social democracy because of their implicit hierarchy. Deconstruction of those binaries would "reveal the absence of a transcendental signified."<sup>62</sup> This would destroy the concept of a sign all together—a sign would have no definitive meaning, the sign is only a reflection, open to manipulation. Linguistic deconstruction was not intended to be a method, which would imply a set of rules. Rather, it is a process of "close-reading," and is described by philosopher Christopher Norris:

One begins by locating those key points in the text where its argument depends on some crucial opposition of terms, as between speech and writing. Then it is a matter of showing: 1. That these terms are hierarchically ordered, the one conceived as derivative from, or supplementary to, the other; 2. That this relation can in fact be inverted, the 'supplementary' term taking on a kind of logical priority; and 3. That the pattern of unstable relationships thus brought to light is characteristic of the text in every last detail of its rhetorical organization.<sup>63</sup>

The dissolution of traditional philosophical binaries would subvert their implicit hierarchy that undermined social order. For Derrida, these hierarchies were too often the cause of racism, anti-Semitism, and social exploitation.

Given the interests in Derrida in the 1980's, in part because his work was being translated into English in the years prior to the exhibition, it is easy to understand why there might be a tendency to impose a connection to post-structuralism on to the exhibition. Several pieces of correspondence in the MoMA exhibition files show that architects unconnected with the exhibition were also attempting to connect deconstructivist architecture to linguistic methodology, even before the show opened.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Martin McQuillan, *Deconstruction: A Reader*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 109.

Because of architects included like Bernard Tschumi and Peter Eisenman who acknowledged and developed a relationship with Derrida concurrent to the exhibition, it is easy to retrospectively interpret Wigley's essay in the catalogue as an attempt to unite the architects through a post-structuralist lens. This is also because of the difference in the way he and Johnson describe the architects relative to Russian Constructivism. Johnson's essay focuses on the subconscious effect of Russian Constructivism on the work selected for the exhibition, as well as the more pervasive trend he identifies in art and sculpture in the work of Frank Stella and Michael Heizer and their use of conical shapes and warped volumes. Johnson's essay can be summarized by two central ideas. The first is a subconscious yet ubiquitous connection to Russian Constructivism across artistic disciplines. The second is the change of the receiving eye demonstrated by the opposition of the ball bearing versus the spring house which is used to briefly communicate and justify the stylistic plurality of the late twentieth century.

Wigley sees the relationship with Russian Constructivism in terms of structural tectonics, although this too ultimately rests on visual similarity. It is about the visual nature of the buildings that result from experimentation with structure and a relationship to ornament. Russian Constructivist strategies, according to the essay, is the mechanism by which the structure is expressed as ornament. While Johnson claimed that many of the architects were unaware of their connection to Russian Constructivism, Wigley says that each of the architects employs "formal strategies developed by the Russian avant-garde early in the twentieth century," which is contradictory to Johnson's previous statement that they were unaware of such a strategy.<sup>64</sup>

Wigley's discussion of the tectonics of structure has been understood by some scholars to mean that there is also a relationship between the architecture selected and post-structuralist

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Johnson and Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture*, 11.

linguistics. Yet this asks that too much be inferred from Wigley's arguments rather than based on evidence that can be substantiated by the exhibition archives or any of the accounts from people involved. Wigley explicitly denies a relationship to linguistics in the essay, saying "It is the ability to disturb our thinking about form that makes these projects deconstructive...not that they derive from the mode of contemporary philosophy known as 'deconstruction."<sup>65</sup>

Because "Deconstructivist" was the name of the exhibition, the temptation is to search for a connection between the architecture selected and linguistic deconstruction. Despite Wigley's statement to the contrary, it is tempting to infer such a connection, which is best articulated in his 1986 dissertation on Jacques Derrida. Because his scholarly work to date was focused on the relationship between Derrida's deconstruction and architecture and because he was involved in the exhibition planning from the beginning, it is surprising that he did not at least acknowledge the linguistic link. It follows that the complete denial of linguistics in the catalogue by Johnson or Wigley was likely coming from Johnson, since almost all of the documents regarding Russian Constructivism make some reference to Johnson, while Wigley is only mentioned in an administrative context.

A close reading of Wigley's dissertation further reinforces the that linguistics was not a factor in the exhibition because it focuses on Derrida as a means by which to explore the crisis of representation, rather than Derrida as a tool for tectonic exploration. Titled "Jacques Derrida and Architecture: The Deconstructive possibilities of Architectural Discourse," it is one of the earliest direct uses of the term deconstruction in a blatant association with architecture.<sup>66</sup> Referencing Husserl, Wigley explains that the crisis of representation results when the symbols

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Wigley, "Jacques Derrida."

used to represent the real world (language) takes over the "realm of everyday perception." Wigley says this crisis can be attributed to the abandonment of philosophy in architectural theory. Derrida's motifs of the edifice and the house are used to evaluate the impact of deconstruction on architecture and to establish the possibilities of deconstruction in linguistics applied to architecture.<sup>67</sup>

Wigley's dissertation details at great length that philosophy was separated from architecture when modern science was incorporated into the humanities. Philosophy, architecture, from, and ornament were all subservient to observable phenomena. Artistic representation no longer carried meaning because it was not scientifically quantifiable. In an effort to reconcile this trend with the arts, Husserl argued that it is more important to consider the conditions surrounding the object. Husserl's argued that there should be a universal, standardized set of symbols that describe conditions, which would eliminate free play associations. It is precisely this notion and the resulting limitation on free play that Derrida reacts to. He argued that Husserl had to engage in free play in order to demonstrate his own point, and that limitations on free play cause anxiety.

After carefully situating Derrida's philosophy within the context of Husserl and Saussure, Wigley draws a parallel with architecture. He argues that Perrault restricts the free play of ornament in the same way that Husserl restricted the free play of the sign. Wigley sees Derrida's deconstruction is the antidote. For Derrida, to expel something is to relegate it to a state of "otherness," and once it has been cast out, it may be controlled. Derrida's use of Plato's *pharmakon* rids the body of the unseen "other." In an architectural application, this means that disturbing the forms of architecture is to excise "otherness" through a disturbing, unsettling

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Ibid, 11.

transformation.<sup>68</sup> In architecture, the act of producing the architecture parallels Derrida's privileging of speech other writing, translating to the act of making or of experiencing the space over the form of the space, or specifically over the way the space is ornamented.

The crux of Wigley's application to architecture is summarized when he references Derrida's metaphor of the Tower of Babel. Wigley quotes Derrida: "The deconstruction of the Tower of Babel, moreover, gives a good idea of what deconstruction is: an unfinished edifice whose half-completed structures are visible, letting one guess at the scaffolding behind them."<sup>69</sup> Babel is a structural failure—not an ornamented one. This notion brings Wigley back to where he started his dissertation. It is a reconciliation of the idea of modernism having an impact on the possibility for architecture, rather than the forms of modernism. The incompletion of the tower leaves limitless possibility for a multitude of languages and histories. It is about multiplicity. Wigley argues that this means the incompletion *is* the structure.<sup>70</sup>

At first, Wigley's suggestion that the inherent structure of building must be broken down might seem akin to Derrida's suggestion that western binaries must be broken in order to be challenged and overcome. Statements that the architecture disturbs "a set of deeply entrenched cultural assumptions which underlie a certain view of architecture" seem to relate to references Derrida makes to the privileging of western culture in philosophy.<sup>71</sup> But the context in which Wigley makes such a statement has nothing to do with the notion of structure in architecture as a system of opposition. He is emphasizing the visual possibility of architecture by playing with structure and reinforcing the link to Russian Constructivist forms. Wigley does not express that there is a deeper need to explode structure other than for the sake of visual abstraction that goes

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Betsky, Violated ,10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> Wigley, "Jacques Derrida," 114.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Johnson and Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture*, 20.

beyond applied ornament. The need for visual interest to be created by structural elements rather than applique does not speak to Derrida or linguistics, but rather to the larger context of postmodernism and the use of applied decoration. Additionally, the purpose of breaking binary oppositions for Derrida was to introduce the possibility that there are multiple readings of a text rather than the existence of one universalized reading determined by the author. While architects like Eisenman and Tschumi explored the notion of multiple readings of buildings in their later architecture, at the time of the exhibition, it was not the focus of their work. What Wigley emphasized was important about their work at the time was their use of structure that he saw as similar to Russian Constructivism. The notion of multiple experiences or readings was never a part of Wigley's analysis for the exhibition catalogue.

The incompletion of the Tower of Babel as representative of the deconstruction of architecture is also problematic when applied to the exhibition catalogue. Wigley says that "While [the works included] diagnoses certain structural problems within apparently stable structures, these flaws do not lead to the structures' collapse."<sup>72</sup> The work enhances flaws that are inherent to the structure. The collapse outlined in his dissertation is lost in the catalogue, replaced with sensationalized and dramatized structural elements used as ornament, justifiable because they are essential elements of the building. The catalogue essay contradictions his discussion of the Tower of Babel as it appears in the dissertation. While the incompletion of the tower is the linguistic deconstruction in his example, in the catalogue essay he describes that incompletion alone is not enough to be "deconstructivist" for the purposes of the exhibition. In the catalogue he writes that "…any provocative architectural design which appears to take structure apart—whether it be the simple breaking of an object or the dissimulation of an object

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Ibid, 11.

into a collage of traces—has been hailed as deconstructive. These strategies have produced some of the most formidable projects of recent years, but remain simulations of deconstructive work in other disciplines because they do not exploit the unique condition of the architectural object.<sup>773</sup> The exhibition files show that this is a direct effort to acknowledge the work of James Wines firm SITE, responsible for the line of Best products stores, which are sculptural forms that literally crumble. Wines understood the importance of Derrida to architecture and asserted in his letter to Johnson that his work with SITE exemplified deconstructivist strategies. Aaron Betsky in *Violated Perfection* stated that the work of SITE did indeed exemplify the work of linguistic deconstruction. In the exhibition catalogue, Wigley abandoned the Tower of Babel, and by excluding the work of SITE, further reinforced that the exhibition was not concerned with linguistic deconstruction, despite the show's title. Wigley does not clearly define or articulate what he means by the architectural object, and thus does not demonstrate a connection to linguistics as he would later do with the publication of his dissertation in 1993.

The dissertation is meticulously mapped out and articulated and would have been interesting groundwork from which to organize the Decon exhibition. While the dissertation is explicitly about Derrida and architecture, the implication is that the architectural connection to Derrida need not be overtly about linguistics, but rather about acknowledging a relationship to modernity through a reinvigoration of philosophical context.

Shortly after the exhibition, Wigley published his dissertation as *The Architecture of Deconstruction*.<sup>74</sup> He broadens the scope of the argument first put forth in his dissertation in a way that makes the book applicable to the work included in the exhibition. He discusses the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Wigley, Mark. *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990.

influence that architecture should have on philosophy, rather than just the translation of Derrida into architecture. He begins by refereeing Bernard Tschumi and Peter Eisenman's collaboration with Jacques Derrida on Tschumi's Park de la Villette project subsequent to the project's inclusion in the exhibition. Wigley then loosely defines deconstruction in architecture as "a subversion of the architectural logic of addition that sets in play a certain kind of thinking about translation."<sup>75</sup> He shifts away from an emphasis on incompletion as structure, as in the Tower of Babel, to argue that the deconstruction of architecture lies in its use of metaphor. Specifically, architectural structures serve as metaphors for metaphysics. It is through a discussion of metaphor in Derrida's philosophy that Wigley clarifies the tectonic play in deconstructivist architecture in a linguistic context. He makes reference to the disturbance of the architecture's essential structure as a form of ornament. Through the context of metaphor, structure as ornament becomes legitimized as a mechanism to understand the metaphysics of the building. Structure in architecture serves as a metaphor for the inherent stability associated with building. This connection was not articulated in his dissertation, and was in no way a part of the exhibition essay—the tectonic play was important as it related to Russian Constructivist aesthetics, rather than Derrida's use of metaphor.

Wigley demonstrated in his dissertation the importance of structural play in order to confront that anxiety in architecture using Derrida as an example. In the context of the exhibition, he used a similar argument about ornament as a way to justify a specific visual style relative to Johnson's agenda. The work selected is clearly a visual reaction to postmodernism, and as he expressed was the goal, changed the nature of the conversation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Ibid, 2.

I pressed him about what the show was, what it stood for, and [Johnson] responded that "it represents a direction that interests us." But what is it about, I wondered?

"That's what we're trying to work out. That's why I've got [Mark] Wigley."

"And where'd you get Wigley?"

"From Peter....It's no big deal, really, this is not a new International Style show."

I said that Peter'd been saying it was.

"Maybe for Peter it is."<sup>76</sup>

Mark Wigley was made assistant curator at Peter Eisenman's recommendation. He was likely chosen over the other newcomer to the group, Peter Jay Zweig, because Zweig expressed concern about the theoretical foundation of the show in a 1987 letter to Philip Johnson.<sup>77</sup> If expressing concern or descent from Johnson's agenda was enough to prevent Zweig from rising to the role of assistant curator, it helps to explain why Wigley promoted Philip Johnson's connection to Russian Constructivism in the catalogue essay at the expense of a post-structuralist interpretation. He was a young scholar with much to gain from a connection to Johnson and Eisenman. The importance of Peter Eisenman's contributions to the intellectual climate surrounding the exhibition cannot be exaggerated. Charles Jencks credits him as being the first deconstructivist architect as early as 1978 with his design of House X. which Jencks describes as his "first use of decomposition which is opposite to a rational transformational process."<sup>78</sup> He remains a giant in the intellectual field of architectural theory, affecting an entire network of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Sorkin, 31.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Peter Jay Zweig, Letter to Philip Johnson, Nov 4 1987, (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Jencks, 26.

theorists and practitioners around him. As discussed in the previous chapter, the *Decon* exhibition files as well as the nature of Eisenman's friendship with Philip Johnson that preceded the exhibition would suggest that Eisenman was a major voice in the exhibition decision making process, influencing the selection of the architects included. The publication he founded and edited, *Oppositions*, as well as the IAUS, in addition to his own experimental and built projects were undeniably critical in shaping the intellectual landscape from which the MoMA exhibition emerged.

Eisenman was involved with a symposium dedicated to linguistic deconstruction in architecture that was held at the Tate Museum in London in early 1988. *Architectural Design* magazine published three separate issues dedicated to the symposium and ideas related to it in 1988, 1989, and 1990.<sup>79</sup> The concept for the symposium is credited to Charles Jencks. It was grounded on the work of Peter Eisenman and Bernard Tschumi, emphasizing their collaboration with Jacques Derrida for Tschumi's Park de la Villette. The symposium opened with an interview between Jacques Derrida and Christopher Norris. The magazine issue included an essay by Andrew Benjamin titled "Derrida, Architecture, and Philosophy," and featured the works of several of the architects who had already been selected for inclusion in the MoMA's show in late 1987, including Hadid, Gehry, and Coop Himmelbleau. Charles Jencks' firm SITE was also included in the Architectural Design issue.<sup>80</sup> The Tate symposium as published by *Architectural Design* raises two issues that are important relative to the MoMA's exhibition evident when closely evaluating the nature of the association with Peter Eisenman. The symposium demonstrates the pervasiveness of the linguistic connection to architecture at the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> "Deconstruction in Architecture," *Architectural Design* 58, no. 3/4 (1988), see also "Deconstruction II," 59, no. 1 (1989), and "Deconstruction III," 60, no. 8, (1990).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Andrew Benjamin, "Derrida, Architecture, and Philosophy," Architectural Design 58, no. 3/4 (1988): 8.

time, and underscores the conscious choice that was made by Johnson and Wigley to exclude that aspect for the sake of visual similarity. It also speaks to the different ways in which the architects associated with deconstructivism were understood relative to the legacy of modernism. While Wigley emphasized the tectonic exploration stemming from the formal exploration of the Russian avant-garde, Charles Jencks sees this lineage as expressed primarily by Peter Eisenman's Nietzschian reading of architectural solids and voids.

In the introductory essay, "Deconstruction at the Tate Gallery," the editors express that Peter Eisenman is critical to the symposium. Without his explorations of Noam Chomsky's linguistic theory in House II, the integration of linguistic deconstruction in architecture would not have been possible.<sup>81</sup> The essay paraphrases Eisenman as saying "Architects who fracture, such as Gehry and SITE, he claims, are not really deconstructing, they are merely *illustrative*, they do not attack the system of architecture as a whole."<sup>82</sup>

Attacking the system would suggest that deconstructivism is an approach to architecture. Charles Jencks in his featured essay "Deconstruction: the Pleasure of Absence," picks apart the work of deconstructivist architects, focusing his argument on Eisenman and Tschumi, in an attempt to show decon as a fad rather than a lasting movement united by a similar approach. In this way, he reduces decon to an extension of Modernism, an "abstraction to an extreme [of] already known motifs."<sup>83</sup> His problem with deconstructivism is that in order to subvert forms, the forms must already exist. Jencks takes the deconstructivists to task for using historicist, albeit modernist forms despite that they are abstracted beyond recognition. By relegating deconstructivist architecture to a fad, Jencks is implying that a lasting architecture is that which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> "Deconstruction at the Tate Gallery." Architectural Design 58, no. 3/4 (1988): 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> Jencks, 17.

uses non-abstracted historical references, or in other words, historicized postmodernism. Jencks fails to recognize that working within a set of established motifs in order to subvert them does not undermine the forms.<sup>84</sup>

Jencks explicitly says that deconstructivism has been most developed by Eisenman. He uses Eisenman's references to Nietzschian philosophy as evidence for his argument that deconstructivism is an extension of late modernism, which Jencks refers to as "urban emptiness." There was a distinct shift in Eisenman's philosophy that marked his transition to deconstructivism. In the late 1960's and early 1970's, Eisenman was exploring forms based on the universal forms an semiotics of Noam Chomsky. While these projects focused on forms that were similar no matter how they were turned, emphasizing continuity of form from all angles, Eisenman abandoned these explorations by 1978. As Jencks describes, this was a turn towards Nietzsche, seen in Eisenman's sudden interest in the void, or the in between spaces. Jencks takes issue with this because he sees architecture as inherently solid and social, rather than empty and isolated. Jencks expressed deconstructivism as an extension of modernism because of the abstraction of established forms.

Eisenman's personal friendship with Philip Johnson, his investment in the promotion of the IAUS, and the evidence in the exhibition files that proves he was highly involved in the *Decon* exhibition planning from the beginning would suggest that Eisenman was instrumental in its formation. By including architects with whom he was closely affiliated, the exhibition canonized several of his protégés, legitimizing their avant-garde explorations as much as it did his own.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> Jencks, 16.

## Context

Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley's claims that *Deconstructivist Architecture* had a direct relationship to the strategies of Russian Constructivism is indicative of the social climate of the years preceding the exhibition. By repeating that the architects included were not chosen based on stylistic or theoretical similarity, but rather an underlying, subconscious relationship to Russian Constructivism, Johnson undermined larger themes such as the notion of "revolution" represented by the Russian avant-garde's use of technological innovations, and the relationship to linguistic theory implied by the title "Deconstructivism."

The instability and chaos of the designs combined with the rhetoric of disturbance and violation come from a lineage that has its origins in the social upheaval of the late 1960's and 1970's. By the 1980's, the American economy was growing steadily, having recovered from a major economic recession in the 1970's. The socially motivated riots of the late 1960's and 1970's had abated. Improved technology provided an unprecedented quality of life. The exhibition reflects the years for two reasons. First, Peter Eisenman was directly involved in the exhibition planning from the beginning, and was invested in making the exhibition as influential as the *International Style* exhibition. His formative years were in the 1970's during which time he was highly engaged with experimental, intellectual projects. Secondly, Jacques Derrida had begun to infiltrate the American intellectual community much later than he had in Europe, as his writing was only first translated into English in the late 1970's. The original concept for *Violated* 

*Perfection* focused on the anxiety caused by technology, which is grounded in the events of the late 1980's more than the MoMA's exhibition, which reacts more to the preceding decades.

As discussed, one of the reasons that the Deconstructivist Architecture exhibition appealed to Johnson was as a way to legitimize eclecticism and plurality across architecture in the 1970's and 1980's. As in earlier periods of the twentieth century, there was not an agreed upon aesthetic that represented the time, which was the case with *International Style*. Schulze says that by the 1980's, "pluralism became a standard term, not to say bromide, of critical parlance in the 1970's, a device meant to encompass expressive views various enough to discourage encompassment."<sup>85</sup> The 1970's saw Miesian loyalists, "new rationalists, representationalists, semioticists, organicists, ad hoc urbanists, and hybrids of all of these and more."<sup>86</sup> This led to intellectual anxiety that lingered into the 1980's.

Philip Johnson expressed this anxiety as early as the 1960's in a discussion published in *Progressive Architecture* in "The Sixties: A P/A Symposium on the State of Architecture: Part 1."<sup>87</sup> Johnson says that "It has got so that a critic can hardly say, 'this must be a Zilch building; it has the earmarks of his style or manner.' The very best known of my own generation, do one building in one day and the very opposite the next. We seem, even more so than in that much-maligned 19<sup>th</sup> Century, to be making a new architecture every day. Where exactly are we?"<sup>88</sup> He and the other panelists agree that chaoticism rules. As expressed by moderator Thomas

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>85</sup> Schulze, 329.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> Philip Johnson, et. al, "The Sixties: A P/A Symposium on the State of Architecture: Part 1," *Perspective Architecture* 42, (March, 1961): 122-133.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>88</sup> Ibid, 124.

Creighton, accepting chaos as a "state of being in architecture—a period, a movement—implies a certain self-consciousness about it."<sup>89</sup>

The breakdown in visual forms, or the "deconstructed" part of deconstructivist architecture, speaks to this chaoticism. The distinct lack of theoretical underpinning for the exhibition demonstrates the self-consciousness described by Creighton. Wigley writes in his introductory essay, "...the dream of pure form has been disturbed. Form has become contaminated. The dream has become a kind of nightmare."<sup>90</sup> The hallmark of deconstructivist architecture is expressed in the Museum of Modern Art press release as "apparent instability...in states of explosion of collapse."<sup>91</sup> The breakdown of forms and the descriptions of this type of architecture as burning, explosive, collapsing, and violated, demonstrates the anxieties felt socially.

## Constructivism and Reflections of Society

The 1970's saw a major economic recession, which led to a halt in building and an increase in intellectual, theoretical projects in the United States and abroad. These paper projects were a reaction to a considerable amount of social conflict: "Movement, violent upheaval, and partisan clashes: the eras after 1970 were marked by momentous changes, including the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the lightning-quick mobility of capital, and enormous migrations of people fleeing war and economic hardship."<sup>92</sup> These issues often boiled down to disagreements over the flow of capital, inherent in the conflict between Communism versus Capitalism. It is not a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>89</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> Johnson and Wigley, Deconstructivist Architecture, 10. See also Deconstructivist Architecture, Press Release.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>91</sup> Deconstructivist Architecture, Press Release.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>92</sup> Ghirardo, Architecture, 41.

coincidence that it was during this period that the MoMA began to reinvigorate Russian avantgarde artworks with several exhibitions related to revolutionary work. Russian Constructivism represented Russia at the height of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. It was social commentary that had a renewed relevance as the Cold War and the Vietnam Wars were in full force in the 1970's.

Russian Constructivism's relationship to Deconstructivism speaks to these social conflicts. With the shift to theoretical projects following the economic collapse in the 1970's, architecture became "a near Babel, where new journals and new critics strove to outdo one another in the abstruseness of their prose and...intellectual contention threatened to replace design as the currency of the profession."93 In Violated Perfection, Aaron Betsky describes that as a result of the social upheaval and economic recession, the work produced was some of the most radical to date. He specifically references the theoretical architecture coming out of London's Architectural Association in the late 1970's and early 1980's, to which several of the architects involved with Decon had close ties. Betsky also references the AA with respect to the Russian revolution; "[Peter Cook, Rem Koolhaas, and Bernard Tschumi's] teaching coincided with the rediscovery of the most radical work produced in the aftermath of the Russian revolution. The work of Chernikov, for instance, became a historically validated antidote to high tech, all the more compelling due to its unrealizable nature."<sup>94</sup> Betsky describes that Tschumi's design for the Parc de la Villette which earned him a spot in the Deconstructivist Architecture exhibition, is:

nostalgically recalling the propaganda pavilions of the Russian revolution—perhaps in the hope that they will also engender revolution. Red, signifying danger, they are named follies—purposefully non-functional, a built craziness, the antithesis of order.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>93</sup> Schulze, 330.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>94</sup> Betsky, *Violated*, 61.

Architecture as revolution....The Parc de la Villette is the most complete statement of an architecture of violated perfection ever constructed.<sup>95</sup>

Betsky characterizes Zaha Hadid's work relative to constructivism as well. He has dubbed her work, "shards ad sharks," meaning it is subversive and explosive, meant to underscore the instability and violence of society.<sup>96</sup> He describes that "Her student projects distilled modernism to its most abstract and ideal state, resembling both Malevich's supremacists space compositions and similar efforts by Theo van Doesburg."<sup>97</sup>

To reduce Russian Constructivism to a statement on revolution is as uninformative and reductive as describing *Decon* as diagonals. As described, Russian Constructivism was experiencing a renaissance in American artistic and intellectual circles. The Guggenheim held an exhibition titled *Art of the Avant-Garde in Russia: Selections from the George Costakis Collection* in 1981. The MoMA was no exception. Johnson and Wigley expressed Russian Constructivism as a visual style, which is congruent with prevailing attitudes towards constructivist work. However, there were attempts to understand the constructivist work in a more meaningful way that predated the exhibition. In one of the first comprehensive explorations of Russian Constructivism, Christina Lodder attempts to situate notable Russian Constructivism situates the work within the period of post-revolutionary Russia and details its distinct utopian agenda, which is precisely what the *Decon* curators stress that deconstructivism is not. Although this publication was available at the time of the exhibition, it was not referenced by Johnson or

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>95</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>96</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>97</sup> Ibid. 141.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>98</sup> Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983). Lodder cites Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art, 1863-1922*, 1962 as the first survey of Russian Constructivism in the United States, but points out that Gray's analysis is purely visual. See also Yve-Alain Bois, "El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility," in *Art in America* 76 (April 1988), 161-181.

Wigley. Wigley reduces the whole of Russian Constructivist artwork to "a threat to tradition by breaking the classical rules of composition," resulting in "impure,' skewed, geometric compositions." Wigley fails to acknowledge the impetus of the Russian avant-garde. As Lodder explains, the primary motivation behind the Russian work was to explore the relationship of artists to society following the revolution. The aim was for art and architecture to incorporate industrialization. Even the term "Constructivism" reinforces this notion: "this first use of the term 'Constructivism' links it to the concept of the emerging of art and life through mass production and industry."<sup>99</sup> She points out that the western world viewed constructivism as a purely aesthetic movement. It was much more. As Lodder explains, it was "an approach to working with materials, within a certain conception of the potential as active participants in the process of social and political transformation."<sup>100</sup>

Drawing a connection between Russian Constructivism and deconstructivist architecture was not original to Johnson and Wigley. The 1988 issue of *Architectural Design* magazine dedicated to deconstruction in architecture that preceded the MoMA exhibition included the essay "The Lessons of the Russian Avant-Garde," written by Catherine Cook. In her analysis of the connection to deconstructivism, Cook calls for a close evaluation of constructivist strategies that would go beyond aesthetic similarity. She points out that the strategies of the Russian Constructivists were lumped together as if each employed the same principles. She teases out the conceptual side of the Russian artists from whom a few of the deconstructivist claim they drew inspiration. Cook is critical of Rem Koolhaas and his student, Zaha Hadid, both of whom acknowledge an intellectual connection to constructivism. In the case of both of these architects, Cook points out that "the source itself is not the vehicle for any very extensive or rigorous

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>99</sup> Lodder, 2-3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>100</sup> Ibid, 1.

theoretical position.<sup>1101</sup> The connection is purely aesthetic. Cook explains that they both claim a connection to Leonidov, whose work was based on the notion that constructivism was not a visual style, but a method. He synthesized constructivism and suprematism working towards a highly stylized architecture built on the idea that architecture must establish the agenda for technology. By appropriating only Leonidov's visual style, Koolhaas and Hadid have missed the point entirely.

Cook's argument is particularly interesting when she expands upon the intricacies of Constructivism combined with Suprematism, as in the case of Leonidov. She explains that "Constructivism was focused on real three-dimensional space in a measurable 'real' time, whereas Suprematism asserted the integral and equivalent position of the fourth dimension of an experiential time as the dematerialiser," or in other words, events.<sup>102</sup> This applies to deconstructivist architecture in a cognitive way, most blatantly to Tschumi's work with architecture as "event space," or the idea that architecture is relevant only when activated by occupation. Cook describes his Parc de la Villette project in terms of Suprematist collisions of space time, measured by events rather than physical proximity. Although Tschumi does not himself acknowledge a connection to Constructivism or Suprematism, Cook makes a compelling argument placing Tschumi within that framework.<sup>103</sup> The idea of a Suprematist fourth dimension is also akin to Derrida's deconstruction. He articulates space and time in terms of an architecture *maintenant*, the French now. It is non-linear event that is still occurring, or event that is atemporal.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>101</sup> Catherine Cook, "Lessons of the Russian Avant Garde," Architectural Design 58, no. 3/4 (1988), 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>102</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>103</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>104</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Point de Folie—Maintenant L'Architecture Bernard Tschumi: La Case Vide—La Villette, 1985," AA Files: Annals of the Architectural Association School of Architecture 12 (Summer, 1986), 65.

Johnson specifically says that there is no set of rules that govern Deconstructivist architecture, but there was a manifesto that guides Russian Constructivism. For Constructivists, art had no place in the new Russian society because it was elitist. Therefore, emphasis was placed on "intellectual production," combining the process of making with the Marxist ideology of industrial production. Lodder credits Vladimir Tatlin with the first "non-utilitarian" constructions by translating his two-dimensional paintings into small models around 1913. His *Monument to Third International* is referenced by Wigley in the catalogue only to say it "announced a new revolution in architecture," which trivializes its critical importance to Constructivism.<sup>105</sup> As Tatlin described, it was a monument "to the Russian Revolution, monuments to a relationship between the State and art which has not existed until now."<sup>106</sup> Tatlin's goal was to synthesize different arts and to express the dynamism of socialist theory.<sup>107</sup>

After Tatlin, the Constructivists entered a period marked by the effort to theorize Tatlin's emphasis on the incorporation of technology into the arts resulting in the primacy of the art object. The abstracted forms with overlapping diagonals that Wigley and Johnson reference in the catalogue are a result of the Constructivist's theoretical effort to emphasize the object, radically abstracted so that the focus was on the materials from which is was made as well as the relationship of the parts and the interaction of the object with the environment.<sup>108</sup> For example, Rodchenko's radio station, referenced in the *Decon* exhibition catalogue, explored a relationship between the parts of a whole by creating elements that folded and unfolded. Lodder says Rodchenko provided the clearest and earliest articulation of the Constructivist position: "Principles of composition had to be replaced by principles of construction and organization.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>105</sup> Johnson and Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture*, 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>106</sup> Lodder, 55.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>107</sup> Ibid, 55-67.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>108</sup> Ibid. 72-73.

'All new approaches to art arise from technology and engineering and move towards organization and construction.' ... construction represented the culmination of centuries of artistic development."<sup>109</sup>

Alternative titles for the *Decon* exhibition also speak to the violence and crisis from which the exhibition responded. In November of 1987, the exhibition was titled "Constructivism/Deconstructivism." By the first draft of Philip Johnson's catalogue introduction, the title had been changed to "Deconstructivist Architecture: Violated Perfection," dropping the constructivist connotation and incorporating the Florian/Wierzbowski/Betsky title. This emphasizes the "violated" nature of the architecture in the exhibition more directly, rather than the constructivist references. This is one of the most explicit examples of the Constructivist connection being undermined in favor of pluralism—for a less specific association of "violation."<sup>110</sup> The final title, *Deconstructivist Architecture*, makes no reference to Russian Constructivism or the social relevance, the connection to technology, or the notion of atemporal time that might have been explored.

In a letter from Johnson to Hiromi Fujii, a Tokyo based architect who had submitted a project for consideration in the *Decon* exhibition, Johnson says "The disintegration of your building [The Ushimado International Art Festival Center] and the process of reassembling it is typical of the 'disquiet' that we all feel in today's world."<sup>111</sup> Johnson is reaffirming the "disquiet" inherent in this period. He cites the west's relationship with Russian Constructivism as the distinguishing factor for the work in the *Decon* exhibition to say that this is what Fijii's projects lack. In a letter to Johnson from Michael W. Beye he says "Since you were so very

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>109</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>110</sup> Deconstructivist Architecture Exhibition Files.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>111</sup> Philip Johnson, Letter to Hiromi Fujii, Jan. 6 1988, (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489).

interested in the new 'burning architecture,' I am sending you a little book about the 'Lineares Haus' by Haus-Rucker-Co,, that has just been finished...<sup>112</sup> Clearly, this type of disturbed architectural form was on Johnson's mind from the beginning of the *Decon* planning.

There are a number of references to "burning" architecture in the Decon exhibition files, perhaps the most important of which is made by Peter Jay Zweig. Zweig was present at the Century Association dinner convened by Johnson to discuss the planning of the Decon exhibition, along with Betsky, Wigley, Eisenman, and others. In his letter, Zweig provides a dissenting option. He disagrees with the concept of "Explosions' and an 'architecture that burns."<sup>113</sup> He describes that this sentiment is just a trend for the "MTV and Star Wars generation."<sup>114</sup> To him, the notion of burning architecture had the possibility to transcend from a fad into an architectural phenomenon. To do so, it must be characterized as a "regional variation of an L.A. culture attuned to the fashions of the media." He refers to this as *simple simultaneity*, which is "a state whereby, more than one reality can exist side by side, simultaneously."<sup>115</sup> Zweig stresses the importance of theory and intellectual continuity. He says that he agrees with Mark Wigley in that the deconstructivist architecture should be seen as part of a modernist lineage, but is unique in that *simply simultaneity*, or multiple realities and media-affected regionalism, acts upon the strictures of modernism to reflect "violated perfect" in its truest sense.<sup>116</sup>

Zweig includes a diagram in his letter, which he intends to demonstrate a stronger theoretical context than he felt as expressed in the exhibition planning. He writes:

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>112</sup> Deconstructivist Architecture Exhibition Files.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>113</sup> Zweig.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>115</sup> Ibid.

Although the outward appearance of the work selected resembles a constructivist view of architecture (the use of the diagonal, etc.), it is my contention that the classical, figurative room with contained corners is being conceptually fused with the modernist notion of "destroying the box"....It is this interplay, this frame of reference, that allows such diverse architects as Himmelblau, Eisenman (Frankfurt), Morphosis, or Gehry (Loyola or his own house), to be linked on a purely architectonic armature.<sup>117</sup>

Zweig, from the first conceptual meeting for Decon, was alluding to one of the problems that carried through to the final exhibition—a non-existent theoretical foundation. While the importance of the link between Russian Constructivism and Deconstructivism is important, the only thing that ultimately linked the architects included was their visual similarity, undermines the importance of the connection.

## Linguistics and Intellectual Anxiety

The linguistic connection to architecture was critical to the intellectual community. Many saw *Decon* as post-structuralist rather than in terms of Russian Constructivism. Architect and critic Herbert Muschamp said about the *Decon* exhibition that:

...the idea with which Wigley promotes the doctrine of impure form [does not] arise from the center of architectural practice (or, for that matter, from Russia during the teens). They [the curators] have drifted into his impressionable mind from post-structural philosophy as it developed in Paris following the student uprisings of 1968: buzzwords like strategy, agent, intervention, subversion...<sup>118</sup>

The connection to linguistics is one of the most important contributions of the exhibition. Not all of the architects involved worked with linguistic philosophy, and to raise the issue of linguistics

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>118</sup> Schulze, 397.

would have undermined the visual similarity Johnson and Wigley were trying to draw through Russian Constructivism. Although it was not a factor in the exhibition as executed, by leaving out the linguistic component it did just as much to contribute and reinforce the dialogue about linguistics in architecture.

Several notable architects began to infuse architecture with linguistic theory during the 1970's. Venturi stressed the communicative power of buildings, while members of the New York Five, like Hejduk and Eisenman, experimented with architectural forms that might directly express various elements of linguistic theory. Using linguistics as system of thinking about space, they attempted to uncover structure and the rules that govern it. The particular aspect of that theory varied—while Eisenman was exploring structuralist binaries, particularly through the work of Noam Chomsky, others such as Bernard Tschumi were interested in the disjunctions of Jacques Derrida's post-structuralism. These ideas began to play a major role architectural discourse in the 1960's and 1970's. Jacques Derrida coined the term "deconstruction" in his 1967 publication *Of Grammatology*. Since linguistics was a major theme in architecture, naming the exhibition "deconstructivist" raised questions about the role that linguistics played in informing the exhibition.

Derrida's post-structuralism was a reaction to structuralism, which dominated philosophy in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. With applications across disciplines, from linguistics to anthropology and literary criticism, structuralism is a method or ideology aimed at "uncovering or developing a common basic approach to the social sciences, literature, and art which would unify them and put them on a scientific footing."<sup>119</sup> It is defined by a belief that surface events are explained by

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>119</sup> Richard T. De George and Fernande M. De George, *The Structuralists: From Marx to Lévi-Strauss*. 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1972), xi.

their structures. The explicit is explained by the implicit. Structuralism seeks to uncover the deeply rooted, unconscious motivators of human action.

Karl Marx is considered one of the fathers of structuralism, along with Sigmund Freud, and Ferdinand de Saussure, and is an important figure who underlies the social and intellectual crisis that characterized the 1970's. Much of the violence and social instability during this period stem from arguments related to Marxist economics versus capitalism—the Paris riots, the Vietnam War, the Berlin wall and lingering Cold War tensions. Cultural Marxism played a critical role in the intellectual development of the humanities. For Marx, the underlying cause of man's actions is determined by his ability to live, which precedes his ability to think. Thought is the defining characteristic of humanity, and is shaped by the way that man lives, which is determined by his ability to produce his own subsistence and the conditions that act upon the resources available to him. According to Marx, the structures that support the production process are always changing, developing tensions between one another, primarily between production and ownership. Tensions between structures and revolutions define each of Marx's historical epochs—primitive society, slaveholding society, feudalism, and capitalism. Each results in conflict between masters and slaves. These tensions then translate into social relationships.<sup>120</sup>

The foundation of this theory is the opposition between structures. Marx's theory rests upon the dichotomy between ownership and the means of production. These sets of oppositions are fundamental to structuralism. Saussure was the first to conceive of language as a system of signs representing signifiers to express the way these oppositions act upon the subconscious. The way that signs are interpreted with respect society is what he termed semiology, which went beyond language to include any ritual or custom studied in terms of signs, or symbolic meanings

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

within social systems. To study these systems, they must be broken into their most basic component parts, which were referred to as "binary oppositions." Semiology was appropriated across disciplines, most notably in anthropology by Claude Lévi-Strauss, and a dependency on binary oppositions developed in an attempt to uncover implicit structure.<sup>121</sup>

Marx was appropriated by disciplines across the humanities, perhaps most famously in an architectural context by Manfredo Tafuri. In 1976, Tafuri published Architecture and Utopia in which he "analyzed the crisis of the ideological function of architecture and had pronounced its death."<sup>122</sup> It is a Marxist reading of architecture as a bourgeois institution that "had been replaced in our late capitalist society by more advanced ideological apparatuses."<sup>123</sup> Tafuri conflates Hegel's "death of art" with Benjamin's "death of aura" to demonstrate the end of architecture as dependent on its "authenticity, uniqueness, and production by a single author."<sup>124</sup> The death of the architect as the author is problematic in that it calls into question not only the role of the architect, but the role of architecture in a society. It is a fundamental question of the relationship between social issues and architecture—of whether architecture has the ability to fundamentally change society, or whether it is merely a reflection of society at a given moment. For Tafuri, avant-garde architecture should strive to divorce itself from nostalgic models in order to dissolve into the surrounding urban landscape, no longer an independent object, so that it is able to challenge the way architecture is produced and consumed.<sup>125</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>121</sup> Ibid, introduction.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>122</sup> Ibid, 32. See also Manfredo Tafuri, Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>123</sup> De George, 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>124</sup> Esra Akcan, "Manfredo Tafuri's Theory of the Architectural Avant-Garde," The Journal of Architecture 7, no. 2 (2002), 135-170. <sup>125</sup> Ibid.

As discussed, Jacques Derrida sought to destroy the structuralist notion of binaries that informed western philosophy. He held that these types of oppositions privileged the western tradition. George Bataille was a major influence on Derrida, who had in turn been influenced largely by Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. Bataille's concept of "base materialism" attempts to disrupt the foundations of oppositions, which directly relates to Derrida's notion of deconstruction. The "violation" that would be a major part of deconstructivist architecture is perhaps most clear in the linguistic philosophy of Bataille, who wrote about metaphor, eroticism, and pleasure as a response to social crisis. Bataille, writing in predominantly in the 1940's and 1950's, translated linguistics and semiotics to notions of the erotic and pleasure to reconcile what would become associated with a Marxist or Tafurian reading of the death of architecture. Although he was "obsessed with architecture," Bataille never made a direct connection between architecture and eroticism.<sup>126</sup> However, "Bataille's eroticism did have an architectural equivalent in the ruin, which he presented as both the most erotic of objects and the symbol of architecture's resistance to society."<sup>127</sup> The subverted from that is a cornerstone of deconstructivist architecture in the exhibition has a direct link to Bataille's metaphor of the erotic ruin as a means of reconciling social crisis.

Another important example of the connection between this mode of linguistics and architecture is Roland Barthes use of Bataille's metaphor. Barthes gave a lecture in 1967 titled "Sémiologie et urbanisme," published in *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* in 1970. Although Barthes wrote very little specifically on architecture, in this lecture he discusses the meaning of the city, describing it as a kind of writing. The problem for Barthes is that the language of the

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>126</sup> Louis Martin, "Transpositions: On the Intellectual Origins of Tschumi's Architectural Theory," *Assemblage* no. 11 (Apr., 1990), 22-35. See also Renata Hejduk, "Death Becomes Her: Transgression, Decay, and eROTicism in Bernard Tschumi's Early Writings and Projects," *The Journal of Architecture* 12, no. 4 (2007), 393-404.
 <sup>127</sup> Martin, 28.

city could only ever be a metaphor, "the urban signified was never definitive."<sup>128</sup> He saw metaphors in a city as a chain—the "signified is always a signifier in another group of signs, and vice versa."<sup>129</sup> For Barthes, this was the erotic dimension of the city. "The erotic dimension was not functional but semantic and hence social."<sup>130</sup> The city is interpreted by the subjectivity of each reader, and thus has a multiplicity of meanings. Barthes recognized that "most fields, including architecture, were resistant to the binary reading of Saussurian linguistics," thus encouraging the deconstruction of Western hierarchical binaries, especially in an architectural application.<sup>131</sup>

The breakdown of Western philosophical binaries is indicative of the intellectual crisis that accompanied the social upheaval during this time. In the 1970's Barthes noted that "resistance" was a crucial component of modern literature. Louis Martin describes:

Looking at the economy of the work, [Barthes] defined modernity as the constant attempt to defeat exchange: it resists the market (by excluding itself from mass communication), the sign (through exemption of meaning, through madness), and sexuality (through perversion, which shields bliss from the finality of reproduction.) Therefore, [Barthes] argued, the split perversity of the modern author is to exploit the uselessness of the text and to write, simultaneously, two texts, one participating in the profound hedonism of culture and the other in the destruction of that very culture.<sup>132</sup>

By the mid 1970's, Barthes conceived of "semiology as a deconstruction of linguistics." The influence of Derrida in Barthes is clear. For Barthes, semiology became the mode by which signs could be deconstructed. The deconstruction of oppositional binaries became erotic. It is not a nightmare, as is it for Wigley in the *Decon* catalogue, but rather a source of pleasure.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>128</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>132</sup> Ibid, 25.

The connection of deconstruction in linguistics and deconstruction in architecture did not escape the notice of the curators—they chose to ignore and deny it. The Deconstructivist Architecture exhibition files contain a letter and essay written to Philip Johnson by David Kesler, who had worked in Bernard Tschumi's office during the design work for Tschumi's Park de la Villette entry. Kesler takes credit for introducing Derrida to the notion of deconstructed architecture by showing him pictures of Tschumi's Park de la Villette, Rem Koolhaas' entry for the same competition, Daniel Libeskind's "Chamber Works" projects, Zaha Hadid's entry for the Hong Kong Peak, and "Eisenman's projects." Kesler states that the collaboration taking place between Tschumi, Eisenman, and Derrida on the Park de la Villette designs by 1988 was validation of his own research on linguistics and architecture.<sup>133</sup>

In "The Structure in Poststructuralism—Metaphoric Violence and its Effect on Architecture," Kesler describes the importance of structural innovation. In a call to arms, referencing the "Violent instability [that] is perhaps the single most prevalent condition of world culture," he infers that the "boldest imaginings of future times" are possible through the "metaphoric violence [that] suggests an integration of worldwide instability into all aspects of architectural form-making." The essay describes that through the integration of linguistic deconstruction, architectural form may be liberated by embracing the violence inherent in the dissolution of "non-Euclidean geometries." He cites Derrida's "Writing and Difference," in which Derrida discusses the traditional notion of a fixed structure which is used to orient the system, but that limits the opportunity for structural play. Play is only possible within the total form—coherence is only possible relative to the established center. For Kesler, creating a structure in which the center remains dynamic becomes a method by which postmodernist

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>133</sup> David A. Kesler, Letter to Johnson, Philip. April 6 1988, (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489), 1988.

historicism may be overcome. For Kesler, dynamism derives from violence, which breaks down traditional notions of historically rooted symbols as a means of avoiding "the other," or the hierarchy of Western philosophies binary oppositions. Violence becomes the alternative to historicism: "In architecture we can read the current dominance of pre-twentieth century historical styles as a suppression of the 'other' through nostalgia."<sup>134</sup> Kesler's essay attempts to capture the violence and intellectual issues inherent in the system during this time.

James Wines poignantly relates the problems of these themes relative to the exhibition in his letter written to Johnson regarding SITE's exclusion. He writes that linguistic deconstructivism can be used as a model for methodology. He references his own book, *De-Architecture*, in which he takes Derrida's assertion that a new interpretation of a traditional narrative "must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands what he does not command of the patterns of the language he uses," and translates it into architectural form.<sup>135</sup> Wines interprets Derrida's notion of authorship to mean for the architect "a way of dissecting, shattering, dissolving, inverting, and transforming certain fixed prejudices about buildings in the interest of discovering revelations among the fragments."<sup>136</sup> Wines' letter shows that the exhibition, despite awareness of the importance of linguistics, willfully ignored the connection between the varied work of architects like Wines, who were clearly incorporating linguistic theory into their work, in order to emphasize the visual characteristics they saw as congruent with Russian Constructivist art.

Violence, disturbance, disjunction—all of these concepts are central to the social and intellectual crisis of the 1970's, which became a precondition for deconstruction. Linguistics is a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>134</sup> Deconstructivist Architecture Exhibition Files.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>135</sup> Wines, Letter. See also James Wines, *De-Architecture*, (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1987).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>136</sup> Wines, Letter.

method by which many of those associated with Eisenman, the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, and the Architectural Association, were searching for ways to reconcile the social theory of Marx, which characterized the "violated" nature of the 1970's leading into the exhibition. Rather than referencing this with any theoretical context, Johnson and Wigley chose to emphasize Russian Constructivism with a vague reference to revolution. This emphasized the architect's visual similarity, rather than intellectual similarity. Barthes writes in *Elements of Semiology*, that in most "semiological systems, the language is elaborated not by the 'speaking mass' but by a deciding group...the sign...is founded in artificial fashion by a unilateral decision...."<sup>137</sup> Applied to the exhibition, the forms chosen are the signs, and Johnson and Wigley become the deciding group arbitrarily elaborating the language of architecture. Although the curators denied any connection of the exhibition to linguistics or semiotics, they could not avoid association. As a result, the exhibition was a major contributor in legitimizing linguistics as an alternative methodology to historicized postmodernism as a way to imbue buildings with communicative meaning.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>137</sup> Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* [Éléments de semiologie. English. 1968]. 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 31.

## Implications

Deconstructivist architecture is a critical part of the late-20<sup>th</sup> century narrative. The way that the Museum of Modern Art packaged deconstructivism for consumption must be considered as part of the dialogue. Almost thirty years have elapsed since the exhibition, providing new perspective on the exhibitions problems, and its lasting impact. The exhibition is rarely given the credit it is due for its contributions to architectural dialogue and methodology. Emerging largely from the work of Peter Eisenman and translations of Derrida in the 1970's that were the result of social and intellectual anxiety, the exhibition manifest the crisis of the object and the loss of identity stemming from consumer culture that characterized the zeitgeist of the late 1980's. The original concept for *Violated Perfection* spoke to this anxiety in a way that the realized *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition did not. Eschewing the not only the role of linguistics but also the role that technology played in the creation of deconstructivist architecture in order to privilege Russian Constructivist aesthetics damaged the reception of these experimental forms. By ignoring these factors, the exhibition made as must of a contribution to the dialogue by inciting a reaction to their exclusion as if they had been recognized.

With technology and the appropriation of images in the digital age, deconstructivism continues to have appeal. Images are chaotic, flashing by, coming and going. They have created a generation comfortable with what once caused anxiety—the dynamism of images and voids formed by their absence. The scholarly writing that emerged relative to the exhibition as well as

those that have continued the discussion recently all respond to these issues by attempting to reconcile the architectural object relative to modernism, whether that is done by employing linguistics, by evaluating architecture as a commodity, or by acknowledging the way that technology has forever altered the architectural landscape. Each of these approaches owe a debt to the *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition for using the legitimizing power of the museum to establish a movement counter to historicized postmodernism.

Peter Jay Zweig identified that there was a relationship between Decon and the theoretical foundations of modernism during the planning process of the exhibition, identifying early that the exhibition must be reconciled within the modernist context in order to lay a theoretical groundwork. He describes and diagrams his own "theoretical vision" for the exhibition. Zweig was concerned that Johnson envisioned the exhibition in historical terms, rather than in terms of its future implications. Zweig wanted to clarify the work of the deconstructivists beyond that of Russian Constructivism and diagonals. Instead, he framed it the connection as "the classical, figurative room with contained corners [being] fused with the modernist notion of 'destroying the box."<sup>138</sup> It is the interplay of the classical frame with the diagonal frame that allows for the diversity of the architects included to be linked. Not only does Zweig express the deconstructivists in terms of their distinction from modernity, but uses the concept of simple simultaineity to incorporate Derrida's linguistics-it is architecture without a beginning or end point.<sup>139</sup>

In his 1976 essay "Post-Functionalism," Eisenman goes on the defensive of the modern movement. He states that architecture is defined by "dialectical oppositions," specifically of form

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>138</sup> See Appendix 3.<sup>139</sup> Zweig.

and function. Industrialization disrupted the balance between the two—form was an appropriate expression of what the building needed to be and how it should perform. The reason for the postmodern backlash against modernism in the 1970's was, as Eisenman sees it in his essay, not necessarily stemming from an issue with modernist forms but rather with the modernist sensibility. He says that by misunderstanding modernism as a style, it reveals that the form and function dialectic is culturally based. This misunderstanding of modernism points to a "displacement of man away from the center of his world," explaining that the social aspect of modernism made it more humanist, more like the form-function architecture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, than was able to be expressed by postmodern historical eclecticism.<sup>140</sup>

Mark C. Taylor reinforced the Nietzschian link between modernism and deconstructivism indirectly by examining the work of Eisenman and Derrida in theological terms in his essay, "Nuclear Architecture or Fabulous Architecture or Tragic Architecture or Dionysian Architecture or." He begins by first describing the Kantian influences in Eisenman's work, explaining Kant's three regulatory influences in western culture: God, self, and the world. Eisenman's explorations of Chomsky's work, which likewise draws heavily on Kant, is a response to the loss of humanism in architecture, which is equated to the loss of God or the self as guiding principles in design. This loss occurred as each was replaced in Modernism with technology, which was the key to their utopian vision, which was ended with the drop of the atom bomb on Hiroshima in 1945. Taylor implies that the atom bomb accounts for the dystopic, anxious attitude of Eisenman's theory. Taylor explain that the theological component is one in the same with linguistics vis a vis "Nietzsche's interpretation of the relation between God and grammar by way of Derrida's account of the sign." Eisenman's pursuits are essentially classical—his aim is the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>140</sup> Peter Eisenman, "Post-Functionalism," *Oppositions* 6, (1976).

same search for truth in form as the classical architectural search for beauty through proportion. In linguistic terms, it is the search for a universal signifier. It is when Eisenman abandons this search and turns toward Nietzsche that he was able to escape "the confines of classicism" to explore deconstruction in architecture. Taylor describes that in Derridean philosophy, when the universal is taken away, the void is filled with fable. It is the introduction of the narrative element that fills a void, introducing the atemporal event component of Derrida's philosophy into Eisenman's work.<sup>141</sup>

Eisenman's relationship with classicism is subtle but pervasive throughout the trajectory of his writings. This is also seen in his affinity for Renaissance scholar Manfredo Tafuri. It was because of Peter Eisenman that Tafuri became a giant among American intellectuals. His selective appropriation and interpretation of elements of Tafuri's theory were published in *Oppositions*, specifically Tafuri's "L'Architecture dans le Boudoir: The language of criticism and the criticism of language" and was extremely influential. Recalling the inescapable shadow of Manfredo Tafuri during the 1980's in America helps to qualify the position from which notable scholars approached and understood Deconstructivism around the time of the exhibition and into the early 1990's. Not only did Tafuri pronounce the death of architecture, but his Marxist readings of architecture sparked a dialogue about buildings as objects that were part of a system of production like any other commodity.<sup>142</sup>

Diane Ghirardo demonstrates the influence of Tafuri through her reading of deconstructivism as a part of postmodernism in *Architecture After Modernism*. Her arguments focus on architecture within the world economic system. She argues that postmodernism uses

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>141</sup> Mark C. Taylor, "Nuclear Architecture Or Fabulous Architecture Or Tragic Architecture Or Dionysian Architecture Or," *Assemblage* no. 11 (April, 1990), 6-21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>142</sup> Manfredo Tafuri, "L'Architecture Dans Le Boudoir: The Language of Criticism and the Criticism of Language," *Oppositions* 3, (1974).

historical references and facadism as any other type of product packaging. As deconstructivism as one branch of postmodernism spread globally, becoming a fad, she argues that the "style" of deconstructivism had little to do with cultural relativity. She equates it to the promotion and consumption of any other product, like Coke or Levi's. Ghirardo sees the highly stylized, specific look of deconstructivist architecture as just as much a type of branding within the capitalist system as the postmodernism that it claims to undermine.<sup>143</sup>

Ghirardo, like many scholars, lumps all of the deconstructivist architects together to discuss their collective use of linguistics, despite that Eisenman and Tschumi were the only ones to claim such a connection. She does not address the exhibition at all, much less to clarify that the label of "Deconstructivism" was applied to the architects included and that they were not self-identifying as "deconstructivists." She criticizes all those who were connected to deconstructivism for their use of linguistic theory, saying that it privileged the western tradition at the expense of other cultural histories. With a closer at the exhibition, Ghirardo might have made these important distinctions and recognized that Eisenman and Tschumi's incorporation of Derrida was used in part to critique the western philosophical tradition, which she asserts they all consciously privileged. Ghirardo describes that "Deconstructivism conveniently allowed its practitioners to avoid coming to terms with power and its exercise, or with social and political life…. It seemed sufficient to theorize problems of race, gender, and identity in order to have confronted them, obviating the need for further action."<sup>144</sup>

Ghirardo also criticizes the association of deconstructivism to Russian Constructivism without acknowledging the exhibition or that this association was imposed on the group as a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>143</sup> Ghirardo, Architecture, 34-36.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>144</sup> Ibid, 35.

whole without evidence to substantiate such claims. Only Rem Koolhaas and Zaha Hadid acknowledge a link to Constructivism in their wok, but Ghirardo discusses the entire group in order to trivialize the deconstructivists "avant-garde" nature. She describes them all as consciously designing an architecture with revolutionary connotations when Tschumi was the only architect in that group with any type of revolutionary context. Further, she conflates anyone who represented an alternative vision from historicized postmodernism in to the group that she refers to as deconstructivist architects, without qualification or definition.<sup>145</sup>

Ghirardo dramatically changes her tone to speak to the importance of the type of intellectual inquiry that the deconstructivists were undertaking, specifically referring to the influence of linguistics in their explorations. She vaguely alludes to what can one can only assume to be Derrida's disjunction of binary oppositions. She reverses her previous criticism that decon privileges the western tradition, saying that they "helped structure feminist and post-colonial critiques...[and positioned it] within the domain of political engagement."<sup>146</sup> Ghirardo states that although the number of architects who were interested in incorporating disciplines like linguistics was "marginal," their voice was not. Through publications like *Oppositions* and *Perspecta*, the possible applications for the philosophy of Derrida and Foucault spread. Without acknowledging the importance of the exhibition itself, Ghirardo nonetheless demonstrates the importance of the exhibition for the distribution of ideas, exposing deconstructivist architecture to a wide audience.<sup>147</sup>

To demonstrate that some architects during the 1980's were searching for an approach to architecture that was more intellectual than historicism, Ghirardo refers to Eisenman's early

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>145</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>146</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>147</sup> Ibid.

experimental projects based on the linguistic theory of Noam Chomsky in her 1989 essay "Out of Site." She conflates Eisenman and Bernard Tschumi, focusing on these two architects as representative of the entire movement because of their use of linguistics. Less than one year after the exhibition, Eisenman and Tschumi had been identified as providing the main intellectual contributions to deconstruction in architecture.<sup>148</sup>

Ghirardo was not the only one to pick up on the similar intellectual influences in Eisenman and Tschumi's work. In 1989, Mary McLeod made a similar connection in her essay "Architecture and Politics in the Regan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstruction."<sup>149</sup> Less critical of the incorporation of linguistics in architecture than Ghirardo, McLeod articulates that architecture, even if viewed as a network of signifiers, is still a part of a system of commodification. She recognizes the emphasis that was placed on form during the 1980's, whether that took the shape of historical pastiche or as deconstruction, attributing this to postmodernism's simultaneous development with an increasing interest in architecture among the general public. McLeod makes no specific mention of the Decon exhibition, although she gives equal weight in her essay to postmodernism and deconstruction, separating them into their own sections in her paper in order to place each within the economic system, rather than conflating them as Ghirardo would do in 1996. McLeod's essay, while skeptical of deconstruction, articulately describes the nuance of situating the issues that she identifies within the larger cultural context. One critical way that she does this is to emphasize the deconstructivist project as a cultural object, rather than as a product.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>148</sup> Diane Ghirardo, "Introduction," in Out of Site: A Social Criticism of Architecture, edited by Diane Ghirardo, (Seattle WA: Bay Press, 1991), 9-16. <sup>149</sup> McLeod, 22-59.

In order to qualify architecture within the larger political system, she talks about buildings in two distinct ways: architecture and the economy, and as a cultural object. By the former she means considerations like the cost of materials, the budget, and the function. By the latter she means the experience with the building that is informed by repeated contact. The meanings of buildings that are subtly implied are not initially recognized, but form over time with repeated contact and interaction with the space. The two ideas are linked for McLeod materials and forms can reflect the means of production, e.g. standardization reflected in modernist design.

McLeod describes that with the economic crash in the 1970's, architects like Peter Eisenman, had little to no commissioned work which underscored the diminished role of the architect in society and shifted emphasis from the modernist goal of redemptive architecture, to architecture as an art form, or as a cultural object. The crux of this argument rests on Eisenman and Tschumi as the link to explorations that were intellectual beyond conventional postmodernism. She argues that other architects usually thought of as outside of postmodernism are not so unique in that they also make reference to historical forms. Many of the deconstructivists, she says, reference modernism and machine age forms instead of more distant historical references.

The distinction between Eisenman, Tschumi and others that were considered deconstructivists is that both men stressed the importance of process over the finished design and a dependence on intertextuality—that meanings are inherent and extend beyond and through the built forms. The primacy of process and the concept of intertextuality are ideas that come directly from Derrida. McLeod's criticism is that the emphasis on process results in an emphasis on form. She explains that in the case of Tschumi and Eisenman, form becomes an end in itself because it is an architecture that is intentionally without meaning and totally autonomous, or more specifically, that is self-referential. She carefully notes that deconstructivism is elitist. The general public might be able to respond to the reduction of architecture to a series of images, but that only intellectuals will recognize the subversion that the forms attempt.<sup>150</sup>

Because of the notoriety of Bernard Tschumi's Parc de la Villette project, which was in part a collaboration with Jacques Derrida, many scholars who reacted to the deconstructivist trend in architecture rely on Tschumi to support their argument about linguistics in architecture as much as they rely on Eisenman's early work. Yet Tschumi was only added to the exhibition in the very last phases of planning. His name appears on early, handwritten lists among the prospects, but there is no notation to indicate he had made the first cut—no check marks or question marks appear by his name the way that they do beside others who were mentioned in the documents early on.<sup>151</sup> In Michael Sorkin's account of the planning dinner at the Century Association, he relates an anecdote in which Giovannini advocated for Tschumi's inclusion, but someone unnamed thought his work was too decorative, and thus he was originally excluded.<sup>152</sup> Tschumi's name appears penciled in to later versions of the documents. He was added just before the plans were finalized in December of 1987. By the publication of McLeod's essay in 1989, he had become a part of the trifecta with Wigley and Eisenman, that scholars referenced for intellectual substance relative to deconstructivism.

McLeod incorporates Mark Wigley into her argument about Eisenman and Tschumi, which considered together speaks to the need to find intellectualism in the exhibition. She claims that the legacy of post-structuralism in architecture is that it forced a closer evaluation of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>150</sup> Ibid, 35-59.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>151</sup> See Appendix 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>152</sup> Sorkin, 28.

opposite end of the postmodern spectrum, challenging the more optimistic view that historical references can reintroduce cultural regionalism as espoused by the likes of Venturi, Graves, and Stern. She says "Already [in 1989], deconstructivism has played a major role in undermining the pseudohistoricism, mindless contextualism, and conciliatory values of postmodernism."<sup>153</sup>

McLeod is careful to point out that deconstructivism succumbs to the Marxist power and economic structure in that pleasure, pain, fear, and subversion can be just as commodifable as historicism. By framing the exhibition relative the fashion of Russian Constructivism, Johnson and Wigley were doing exactly what McLeod would caution against. The exhibition took an architecture of subversion, meant to undermine political, economic, and cultural structures, and made it a fashion. Johnson turned it into the very fad that he and Wigley insisted they were undermining.<sup>154</sup>

### Decon and Beyond

In an interview regarding *Violated Perfection* in 1991, Betsky addressed concerns that this type of architecture was as much a part of the consumer system as any other postmodernist style of architecture. Betsky says that "What I hope is that the work collected [in *Violated Perfection*] contains many ways of questioning architecture as the built affirmation of the economic, social, and political status quo....As capitalism progresses, it reduces architecture to the creation of empty boxes. If you can exploit that very emptiness then you might have

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>153</sup> Ibid, 694.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>154</sup> Ibid.

something beyond building.<sup>155</sup> In the published version of Violated Perfection, Betsky writes that the modern world is:

characterized by continual technological change—a dynamic system of production and consumption that creates a profound instability in everything from social conditions to the physical environment--[modernity is a consciousness of that world] that must continually wrestle with defining itself....Architecture...acts as an aura of stability and continuity in order to perpetuate relative relationships of economic and social power. Modernity or modernism is not a "look" or historical period, but a definition of a consciousness of process and modernization, or continual change and perfection in how things are made, how society operates. As such, modern architecture can only mirror or map our world.<sup>156</sup>

Betsky introduced technology as one of the factors influencing the relationship of decon to modernism and places it within a continually evolving landscape of economy and culture.

Technology was a major concept for the original *Violated Perfection* exhibition, though it was abandoned for the MoMA's show. It continues to be an important component of the scholarship that draws upon deconstructivism. Almost without exception, the scholars most closely related to the exhibition have all transitioned into discussions of architecture in the digital age and how space and design are conceived with the aid of computer and communication technologies. Derrida placed great emphasis on process, which Eisenman and Tschumi both took into account with their own design work. The means by which the architectural process occurs is now almost entirely digital.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>155</sup> Collins, 38-39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>156</sup> Betsky, Violated, 11-12.

Gevorak Hartoonian considers the incorporation of technology in terms of deconstructivism in his 2012 publication Architecture and Spectacle: A Critique.<sup>157</sup> For Hartoonian, reconciliation of the commodified architectural object within the context of the legacy of modernity occurs through the use of technology to proliferate images. His evidence is based solely on the work of several of the architects included in the exhibition, Peter Eisenman, Bernard Tschumi, Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, and Frank Gehry with the addition of Steven Holl. Yet he makes no reference to the *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition. After defining the crisis of the object and theatrically of tectonics, he goes into the evidence for this thesis which begins with chapters dedicated to Eisenman first, followed by Tschumi second.

He accepts that the architecture is a commodified object, and as such has become a "spectacle." Theatricality has replaced tectonic exploration. Hartoonian carefully links Russian Constructivism closely to Semper's notion of theatricality. This forms the foundation of his argument, that as a commodity, architecture has been reduced to surface explorations upon which the spectacle takes place. He does not equate surface with form, but rather with image. For him, crisis is only achieved with advancing technology, which he sees as a reflection of capitalisms tendency to commodify objects, including architecture. It is also a matter of the current historical moment, in which the "image" has become ever present, which Hartoonian says is because of digitization.<sup>158</sup>

In his 2007 essay "Virtual Realities," Betsky speculates about the ability of digital tools to help manifest theory that was previously unable to be built because of structural limitation. Further, he asks if computer technology represents the balance between production and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>157</sup> Gevork, Hartoonian, Architecture and Spectacle: A Critique. (Farnham, Surrey, England ;Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012). Hartoonian thanks Mark Wigley in his acknowledgments. <sup>158</sup> Ibid, 1-54.

consumption. He says that computer based architecture has its roots in the paper projects of the 1970's—Peter Cook, Tschumi, and of course, Eisenman.<sup>159</sup>

Betsky credits Tschumi with spearheading the digital revolution in architecture with the implementation of a paperless studio while he was dean of Columbia's school of architecture.<sup>160</sup> He also credits a student of Peter Eisenman, Wes Jones with making computer aided drafting a tool for making more interesting, innovative, "strange" buildings. Not surprisingly, Jones was a student of Eisenman's, who Eisenman had recommended be included in the Decon exhibition. Regardless of their intellectual strength, others close to Decon have been just as instrumental in responding to technology—Gehry using AutoCAD for the structure of the Bilbao is perhaps the most famous example. Zaha was also among the first to exploit the possibilities of digitization techniques for her BMW building, using computer aided design to maximize the possibilities of materials, in this case, concrete.

The explorations of the architects associated with the *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition were important to demonstrate the separation of man from object. The abstract forms that result should be considered within the context of space and time. It was critical to reconcile spatial experience with notions of non-linear text, of experiences without beginnings or endings. Deconstruction was a flowering of ideas that have proliferated and mutated, but owe their genesis to the exhibition. It represents the exploratory spirit—that architecture can move forward when the tide was pushing it back.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>159</sup> Aaron Betsky, "A Virtual Reality: Aaron Betsky on the Legacy of Digital Architecture," *Artforum International* 46, no. 1 (September 1, 2007), 440-449.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>160</sup> Ibid, 440-449.

### Conclusion

The Deconstructivist Architecture exhibition has been ignored in favor of individual architects and isolated theoretical arguments. Because it failed to clearly articulate a theoretical groundwork, many scholars dismissed the importance of the exhibition in starting a dialogue that was outside of historicized postmodernism. The MoMA legitimized the notion of deconstruction in architecture. Ignoring the exhibition itself is to overlook a critical moment in architectural theory.

The agenda of Philip Johnson is evident from the exhibition files—the swan song of a giant in twentieth century architectural taste. It also introduced a number of architects and intellectuals who would go on to be instrumental to architectural practice and discourse, principally Bernard Tschumi with the paperless studio at Columbia, and Mark Wigley who was appointed dean of the School of Architecture there when Tschumi stepped down.

It is also clear that Eisenman was much more involved in the exhibition than he has been given credit. Each of the key players connects back to him or to the IAUS. His shadow dominated the reception of the exhibition because of his use of linguistic theory. Combined with the critical success of Bernard Tschumi's Parc de la Villette project, this provided enough fodder for intellectuals to impose linguistic deconstruction in the work of the group as a whole. This is what came to dominate the idea of deconstructivist architecture—a theoretical groundwork that was imposed on everyone associated with the exhibition, even though Tschumi and Eisenman were the only ones connected to Jacques Derrida.

Despite the flaws of the exhibitions groundwork that emphasized a shallow visual connection to Russian Constructivism, it nonetheless reflects the moment of social and intellectual confusion from which it emerged. By evaluating Russian Constructivism within the context of Deconstructivism, it is evident that there is a richer connection between the two than Johnson or Wigley articulated at a time when Russian Constructivism was still relatively new to the American academy. Both movements isolated architecture as an object in order to reconcile it with moments of social upheaval, and both recognized the importance of changing technologies.

The ability of a building to communicate is at the crux of this entire period. Whether it is through historical pastiche, or by more intricately evaluating the nature of western philosophy in order to experiment with forms in a subtle defense of the Modernist spirit, architecture was consumed with the notion that it might speak. A debt is owed to the Museum of Modern Art for recognizing the need for multiple voices, and for exposing a wider audience to the complicated work of such notable figures in architecture as those associated with *Deconstructivist Architecture*.

### Appendixes

#### Appendix 1: James Wines letter to Philip Johnson

S I T E

Mr. Philip Johnson c/o John Burgee Architects 885 Third Ave. New York, N.Y. 10022

Dear Philip,

Thank you for your phone call and for reading me the section of Mark Wigley's essay concerning deconstruction that touches on the work of SITE. I appreciate your effort; but, quite frankly, I think the only reason you called is because you, as well, sensed the presence of some pretty flabby intellectualism. To say Mr. Wigley missed the point of SITE's and Matta-Clark's work is an understatement. He committed the cardinal sin of all criticism - to assume that the superficial appearance of an object is, in fact, its meaning; that fragmented and dematerialized sections of buildings refer specifically to demolition and ruins alone. On superficial reading, obviously they do; but, consistent with any analysis of language, the surface imagery must be read assignification that invites interpretation and <u>not</u> as the content. As I mentioned to you on the phone, to assume that SITE's and Matta-Clark's work is strictly about crumbling buildings is as stupid as interpreting Giacometti's dematerialized figures as nothing more than an artist's rendition of skinny, war-torn, people.

Let me explain a bit further. The main problem with this entire exhibition, as we discussed, is the use of deconstruction, which is a form of literary criticism, in order to defend a philosophically disparate group of formalist architects whose work is derived from De Stijl and Russian Constructivism. I must agree with most of my literary world and philosopher friends who feel that dragging the term "deconstruction" into architecture is probably an absurdity to begin with. By stretching the application of the word, it can perhaps be used as a model for critical methodology. Deconstruction, in literary analysis refers to a way of reading directed toward new interpretations of traditional narrative and the uses of language. Derrida describes this way of reading as one that "... must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language he uses. This relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of the shadow and light, of weakness or of force, but a signifying structure that the critical reading should produce." In my own book, DE-ARCHITECTURE, (which I shall assume that Mr. Wigley has never read), I substitute my title term as "... a way of dissecting, shattering, dissolving, inverting, and transforming certain fixed prejudices about buildings, in the interest of discovering revelations among the fragments." De-architecture proposes that the search for expanded meanings and new definitions of architecture lie in its capacity to use its own archetypal

-continued

65 BLEECKER STREET, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10012 TELEPHONE 212/254 8300

PJ

March 25, 1988

# SITE

language, its own methods and processes, as a source of analysis and criticism. For obvious reasons, this "archetypal language" cannot be interpreted as strictly those stylistic devices derived from a selection of Modernist/constructivist architects. Instead of perpetuating those traditions (or adding borrowed historicism), my view interprets architecture as the critique of architecture. This aligns quite well with Derrida's notions of "archetexts" as the source of his deconstructive analysis because such texts embody reflex identifications in literature. It stands to reason, therefore, if one is trying to apply deconstruction to architecture, one must identify similar archetypes or the analytical process will not be fruitful. For example, Gordon Matta-Clark's split house in New Jersey was readable as the source of critique in architecture to the degree that the archetypal ingredients were present. Indeed, the house was torn apart; but this act or its resulting image were hardly the point of the work's underlying implications. Matta-Clark's purpose, like Derrida's, was to discover revelations among the fragments. In the case of "Splitting," the processes of demolition became the source of critical dialogue. As I point out in my book, in this Matta-Clark project, architectural meaning was altered by using demolition as preservation. "While being acted upon by the artist, the building gained significance as art, shifting the emphasis from occupancy to cultural merit. Architecture gained new meaning according to the extent of its elimination." This kind of critique clearly falls into an aspect of deconstuctionist dialogue that should be celebrated in your exhibition.

My feeling is that, if the Wigley text goes to print as written, the author will ultimately look foolish in the critical community and your eminent name will be permanently attached to some very questionable analysis.

When we first spoke on the phone some months ago, there was plenty of time for research and personal interviews to help shape an intelligent essay on deconstructionist applications to architecture. Now you tell me it is too late for changes and you are willing to endorse the absurdity that you read to me in yesterday's conversation. I am very disappointed in you and disheartened as a person in the building arts who has contributed significantly to this dialogue for twenty years.

Sincerely yours, James Wines, President

SITE SITE

P.S. On re-reading this letter, I feel you should make it available to Stuart Wrede and others involved in your exhibition. Who knows, it might prove useful. It seems to me a good summary of the problem.

James Wines, Letter to Philip Johnson, March 25, 1988, (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489).

# Appendix 2: Stanley Tigerman's letter to Richard Oldenberg

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<ul> <li>Director</li> <li>Maseum of Modern Art</li> <li>11 West 53rd Street</li> <li>New York, NY 10019</li> <li>Dear Richard Oldenberg:</li> <li>As I understand that the Museum of Modern Art will install a temporary exhibit provisionally entitled "The Deconstructivists" in June of 1988, I am writing to request that the museum credit the University of Illinois at Chicago and its staff as originators of the exhibit concept.</li> <li>In 1984 adjunct professors Paul Florian and Stephen Wiersbowski developed an exhibit entitled "Violated Perfection: The Neaning of the Architectural Fragment" as one of a series of exhibits for the University's Gallery 400. After approaching a group of internationally known architects as sponsors (including Philip Johnson) and compiling a list of invited exhibitors, the State of Illinois. When the exhibit failed to garner grants the curators asked Aron Betsky to propose the exhibit idae and lists to appropriate unstitutions, including the Museum of Modern Art, in the spring of 1987.</li> <li>Athough I realize that ideas on the subject abound, and that the curators at MoW are no longer using "Violated Perfection" to identify the exhibit of eat the history of contact between Gallery 400, Aaron Betsky and Philip Johnson, together with the use of our list of exhibitors, provide sufficient grounds for acknowledgement.</li> <li>I neclosed an article from <u>The Village Voice</u> which is, in my estimation, accurate, and other pertinent documents.</li> <li>I hope you will honor this modest and typical academic request.</li> <li>Jiner Fy, Jung Yingtram, FATA Briegoria, FATA Briegoria, FATA Briegoria, Schol of Architecture Briversity of Illinois at Chicago</li> </ul>			
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accurate, and other pertinent documents: I hope you will honor this modest and typical academic request. I look forward to hearing from you. Sincerely, Stanley Tigerman, FAIA Director, School of Architecture University of Illinois at Chicago		at MOMA are no longer using "Violated Perfection" to iden I feel that the history of contact between Gallery 400, A Philip Johnson, together with the use of our list of exhi	aron Betsky and
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Sincerely, Stanley Tigerman, FAIA Director, School of Architecture University of Illinois at Chicago		I hope you will honor this modest and typical academic re	equest.
Stanley Tigerman, FAIA Director, School of Architecture University of Illinois at Chicago		I look forward to hearing from you.	
		Stanley Tigerman, FAIA Director, School of Architecture	
	F.		

Stanley Tigerman, Letter to Richard Oldenberg, Jan 20 1988, (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489).

Appendix 3: Peter Jay Zweig's letter to Philip Johnson

**PETER JAY ZWEIG** • A R C H I T E C T S

November 4, 1987

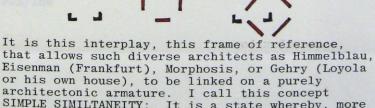
Philip Johnson, FAIA 885 Third Ave Suite 300 New York, New York 10022

Dear Philip;

I can't thank you enough for including me in your "roundtable" discussion. Your pursuit of an idea is quite remarkable: The  $3\frac{1}{2}$  hour intensity was invigorating. Please don't misinterpret my shyness in the face of such distinguished company.

NOV 1 0 1987

I truly wanted you to catch the implication of my diagram. I believe it is important to clarify what you are seeing in historical terms, in light of a theoretical vision. Although the outward appearance of the work selected resembles a constructivist view of architecture (the use of the diagonal, etc.), it is my contention that the classical, figurative", room with contained corners, is being conceptually fused with the modernist notion of "destroying the box".



architectonic armature. I call this concept SIMPLE SIMILTANEITY: It is a state whereby, more than one reality can exist side by side, simultanieously. I believe Frank Stella is pursing this idea with his SHARD pieces.

I disagree with Erins notion of "Explosions" and an "architecture that burns". I feel the rationales or aesthetic of an MTV and Star Wars generation is not the basis of this architectural phenomena. I think that this idea is rather, a regional variation of an L.A. culture attuned to the fashions of the

• • •	Page 2
	media. I believe the concept of SIMPLE SIMULTANEITY
	media. I believe the concept of Similar Simolian
	Thank you again for inviting me. This is a great "moment in time" for me, and if I can help you in anyway, please let me know. Till the next round- table rolls around. Best wishes,
	Peter Jay Zweig,
	Architect
	PJZ/ldw
	4823 Stillbrooke Houston, Texas 77035 713 526-2495

Peter Jay Zweig, Letter to Philip Johnson, Nov 4, 1987, (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489).

### Appendix 4: Planning Notes

Early exhibition planning notes written by an unknown person at the Museum of Modern Art. The notes reference architects considered for inclusion. Several have check marks by their name, while others received question marks or no notation at all. Bernard Tschumi, for example, is often considered along with Peter Eisenman to be one of the critical contributors to deconstructivism in architecture, yet at this phase of the exhibition planning he was not considered for inclusion.

Conversation Philip 2 Rich of the of Decompoor Donont Kenny Price alista mit The + motions ragmentary Park he lones 2/ asemblage articles by Vieles

Deconstructivist Architecture Exhibition Files, (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art Archives, File 1489, 1988).

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