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HUMANITIES ESSAY

What architects do with philosophy: Three case studies of the late-twentieth century

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Abstract

Why do architects seek out philosophy, and how do they do so?

An enormous variety of replies to this question have emerged throughout architecture and philosophy's long history together, especially during the late-twentieth century when their interactions reached the most prolific, intense, radical, innovative, and transformative moment yet. This article analyzes three famous case studies from this period of philosophers' thinking that influenced architects' work: Martin Heidegger's role in several of Kenneth Frampton's texts, Michel Foucault's discreet yet ineludible presence in a Rem Koolhaas design, and Jacques Derrida's collaboration with Peter Eisenman.

With their distinct approaches, aims, and outputs, each instance offers unique insights into the immense potentials, as well as the chronic problems, of the relationship between architecture and philosophy, which remains deeply ingrained in both design practice and theoretical discourse to this day.

Keywords:
Philosophy, architecture, panopticon, Parc de la Villette, Kenneth Frampton, Rem Koolhaas, Peter Eisenman, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida.

The last half-century of architecture and philosophy

Exceptional overlapping circumstances in the late-1960s and 1970s produced significant transformations in architecture. It was a time when modernism's dominance crumbled under the pressure of a combination of sustained critiques and emerging alternatives. Social unrest, from Paris in 1968 to student protests in the USA during the 1970s, deepened architects' questions about the foundations of their practice, while calling them to renew their relationship with politics. This elicited radically different responses: for some an active engagement, for others a total detachment in favour of purely formal concerns. Meanwhile, the oil crisis of the 1970s and its widespread economic impact left many architects out of work, which, for all its dramatic consequences, did yield the side-effect of freeing them to pursue much-needed reflection and innovation through an explosion of written production and fantastic unrealisable 'paper architecture' projects – all in all, the rise of theory of architecture as it is known today. Needing to reinvent itself against its own exhausted references, architecture sought new ones in other disciplines, from the arts to the sciences and including the notable influence of philosophy.

The relationship between architecture and philosophy, as ancient as the domains themselves, entered an unparalleled period of intense, experimental, and impactful exchange, feverishly flourishing through multiple iconic essays, projects, conferences, debates, and even collaborations. Its critical importance for architecture is patent in two canonical anthologies of the century's second half: Joan Ockman's *Architecture Culture 1943-1968* (1993) [1], in its selection of

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mid-1960s texts, introduced Roland Barthes, Paul Virilio, Michel Foucault, and Henri Lefebvre. The last three of these reappear in Michael Hays' 1998 book, *Architecture Theory since 1968* [2], joined by Jürgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson, and Jacques Derrida – along with numerous architects who read and wrote about them and others. The anthologists also testify to philosophy's profound and lasting effects beyond the matter of mere historical record. Hays' introduction to his anthology contextualises the period retorting to ideas from an abundance of philosophers and philosophical approaches, and explicitly imports notions from authors like Marx and Althusser to develop his own thoughts (while architects' names, on the other hand, scarcely appear before the acknowledgements). Ockman, in turn, became one of the main instigators of several major encounters between philosophers and architects, such as the symposium where Jameson presented the now seminal text, 'Architecture and the critique of ideology' (1982) [3: pp. 51-87; 4].

The rise of these anthologies in the 1990s coincided with the fall of landmark journals in architectural theory, such as the unwittingly ominous end of *Oppositions* in 1984 – edited by Ockman in various roles, and anthologised by Hays in 1998 as the *Oppositions Reader: Selected Essays 1973-1984* [5] (Figure 1) – and the historically conscious last issue of the journal that followed in its wake, *Assemblage*, in 2000 – co-edited by Hays. A feeling of fatigue and even disillusionment with the dense complexities of theoretical thinking found relief in a post-crisis economic boom, which architects capitalised productively. For some it was a moment of decline [6] and for others, a shift into new challenges, references, priorities, sources, methods, concerns, and debates [7], but in either case the moment represented the end of an era for architectural theory in which philosophy had played a privileged role [8: pp. 22-23].

Nevertheless, as Hays' anthologies were published, Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel held their second public discussion in Paris [9]; the year *Assemblage* released its last issue, Luce Irigaray delivered a talk at the Architectural Association [10], while Ockman co-organised debates between Richard Rorty and Peter Eisenman, and between Cornel West and Rem Koolhaas, for an event on architecture and pragmatist philosophy at the New York Museum of Modern Art [11]. Meanwhile, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, although having little to say about architecture *per se*, emerged as highly sought-out figures in the field. Since

Figure 1:
Michael Hays, *Oppositions Reader: Selected Essays 1973-1984* (1998).

then, Bruno Latour and Albena Yaneva co-published a book chapter together [12], Karsten Harries and Roger Scruton debated at the third conference of the International Society for the Philosophy of Architecture [13], Jacques Rancière spoke at a session of *Architecture Exchanges* [14], and Giorgio Agamben attracted the attention of the architectural milieu, while uncountable other intersections between the two domains continue to multiply year after year. To be sure, these events differ from architecture and philosophy's blistering dynamic in previous decades, no longer appearing as a novelty or as an approach at the centre

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stage of architectural culture, nor exerting anything like the massive transversal influence of previous thinkers upon both its theoretical and practical domains. And yet, if anything, these encounters became even more frequent, direct, and wide-reaching both in the authors sought and the topics addressed. Architecture's interest in philosophy was not evaporating, as though an outdated ephemeral fad, but consolidating. Like a bright red-hot iron moulded by furious hammering, after the spectacular fiery sparks of the mid-twentieth century, their relationship cooled down and became institutionalised, an integral component of the discipline, a casually performed habit, a normal routine, and not just for the academic syllabi of theory and history courses but as an inalienable part of the thought, work, and discourse of architectural theoreticians and practitioners alike. Architecture's contemporary form of intertwinement with philosophy was forged.

Along with the stimulating benefits that encouraged the exchange, its standardisation also normalised chronic problematic issues undermining the motives and manners of architects' interest in philosophy. Many have become all too familiar: quotes that efface the original passages' context and adulterate their meaning to fit whatever pre-established intention, legitimizing it with an aura of authority and intellectuality; compilations of supposed close readings into a suspiciously colossal number of works by a massive quantity of disparate authors; or loose interpretations derived from fragmented, biased readings, explained either in cringingly simplistic terms or through a jargon-filled and unnecessarily convoluted discourse. One may rightly argue that architects are not philosophers, and thus assessing the methods and ends of architecture solely or primarily through the rigid metrics of philosophy not only seems unfair but also misses the point. Nonetheless, this should not imply simply shrugging off misunderstandings, misquotations, misappropriations, and downright getting things wrong as inevitable idiosyncrasies of the relationship, especially when they so often result in underwhelming, ungrounded theories, unreadable texts, and ultimately unbuilt projects – the discouraging bucket of cold water in which these burning experimentations hissed to a conclusion.

This metaphorical metallurgic process nevertheless yielded an object that can be held and closely inspected, as has recently been done mostly by a new generation of architects and philosophers who, brought up with the interlacement of architecture and philosophy, see it not as a novelty but as a fact. Their historical distance grants them hindsight to perceive problems which, with time, turned into increasingly identifiable patterns. As a result, their approach to the relationship's largely unthought processes developed the distinctive game-changing characteristic of rendering them explicit: instead of only repeating the traditional exchange between architecture and philosophy with an updated list of authors and topics, they frequently turn the very existence and nature of the relationship into a topic in its own right. In other words, the relationship between architecture and philosophy is thematised. This is what happens, for example, in the ongoing collection *Thinkers for Architects* edited by Adam Sharr since 2007, whose preface proposes a response to the difficulties architects face when trying to read philosophical texts in both an accurately contextualised way and with relevance for their work [15]; or in Branko Mitrović's *Philosophy for Architects* (2011) that promises college students an accessible introduction to various philosophical insights of architectural importance [16]; or in Saul Fisher's landmark entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* under the title 'Philosophy of architecture' (2015), one of the most comprehensive and compact overviews yet of the relationship's history and its debates [17]. For these and an increasing number of other recent works and discussions, the very fact that architects resort to philosophy – or vice versa – and the way this occurs has become an issue in itself, either as a consciously selected presupposition behind one's work, or as the point of departure upon which it is grounded, or as the central matter at hand. This very article is an instance of the latter.

The following sections delve into how and why three different architects turned to three different philosophers in the course of their work. A selection of exemplary case studies are placed under the lens, summarily expounded, and critically analysed: first, Martin Heidegger's place in Kenneth Frampton's 'On Reading Heidegger' (1974), in 'Towards a critical regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance' (1983), and in 'Rappel à l'ordre: The case for the tectonic' (1990); second, Michel Foucault's discreet yet ineludible presence in Rem Koolhaas' design for the Koepel Panopticon Prison (1979-1981) as well as its explanation in the text 'Revision' (1981); third, Jacques Derrida's collaboration with Peter Eisenman in the design for a garden in Parc de la Villette (1985-1987), transcribed and expanded by each protagonist in their book *Chora L Works* (1997).

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Figure 2: Eisenman, Frampton, and Koolhaas among other members of the IAUS. (Courtesy of Diana Agrest, who has very kindly allowed the publication of this photo which appears in her 2013 documentary 'The Making of the Avant-Garde: The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies 1967-1984').

Stretching from the 1970s to the 1990s, these case studies arise from the relationship's most prolific, intense, radical, innovative, and transformative period, that directly precedes and shapes its state today. They involve some of the most famous and influential protagonists of both fields along with a selection of their most renowned works, revealing the pivotal role of philosophy, in particular, for the course of architecture during this period. Simultaneously, they also emerged as paradigmatic examples of this intersection, begging the question of what makes them so. This line of inquiry digs beneath what is already abundantly known about them though, seeking specific and fundamental motivations, methodologies, results, and ramifications of philosophy's contributions to the architectural thinking and practice at play. Remarkably, each case study shows astonishingly disparate and even idiosyncratic characteristics, all the more surprising given that these three architects all operated in the same narrow context – another point of interest in this triad. Well-acquainted with one another, Frampton, Koolhaas, and Eisenman responded to similar problems in many of the same debates while working on the East Coast of the USA at the same time, in each other's company at Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS) in New York (Figure 2). Yet despite their proximity, working just a few steps apart, their philosophical references, approaches, and intended output turned out remarkably different, a sharp contrast that highlights one essential trait of this relationship, and a guarantor of its continuous appeal: the inexhaustible variety of its forms. While impossible to summarise them all – if anything, these case studies prove as much – the following pages explicitly address the complex mechanics behind three major interactions between three different forms of architecture and philosophy, witnesses of the ineludible role of the latter in shaping the identity of the former throughout and since the late-twentieth century.

Frampton's building blocks

In a life-changing year of 1965, Kenneth Frampton, while visiting the United States of America for the first time, read a book that would exert a profound and lasting influence upon him like no other until then or ever since: *The Human Condition* (1958) [18], by Hannah Arendt. There he discovered a new intellectual framework, vocabulary, ideas, and issues to ponder, which brought about essays like 'Labour, work & architecture' (1970) [19] – also the title of a collection of texts published in 2002 [20] – 'Industrialization and the crises in architecture' (1973) [21], and 'The status of man and his objects: A reading of the *Human Condition*' (1979) [22]. While unsurpassed as the architectural historian's main philosophical reference, Arendt was by no means the only one. Decades later, shortly before retiring from his teaching position at Columbia University, Frampton's course on 'Critical theory and environmental design: Philosophy and the predicament of architecture in the age of consumption' (2017) revisited his indebtedness to other thinkers, such as Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty, Jürgen Habermas, and Gianni Vattimo. Elsewhere he also named Karl Marx, Paul Ricoeur, Theodor Adorno, and Massimo Cacciari [23: p. 43; 24: pp. 1-2]. Significantly, of the four lectures Frampton did not delegate in his course, two addressed a noticeably recurrent and decisive presence in his works: Arendt's teacher, Martin Heidegger.

The German philosopher's best-known contribution to architecture remains the keynote lecture delivered at architects' request for the *Darmstadt II* conference in 1951: 'Building Dwelling Thinking' ['Bauen Wohnen Denken']. It was published in German the following year in the conference proceedings, then in 1954 amongst Heidegger's *Lectures and Essays* [*Vorträge und Aufsätze*], and eventually translated into English by Albert Hofstadter in 1971. In 1974, when future leading Heideggerian theoretician Christian Norberg-Schulz was still buying his first copy of the text [25: pp. 173, 287], Kenneth Frampton became one of the earliest

architects to acknowledge and react to it: he opened the fourth issue of the IAUS's journal *Oppositions* with a four-page editorial called 'On reading Heidegger' (1974) [26].

Its suggestive title seems to promise an introduction, explanation, in-depth analysis, or at least a commentary of Heidegger's philosophical pertinence for architects, as Norberg-Schulz attempted in his 'Heidegger's thinking on architecture' (1983) [27]. Instead, the reader finds a fairly archetypal text of Frampton's concerns at the time, namely the difficult distinction between architecture and building, or the socio-political critique of post-modern architecture and urbanism in populist and elitist forms. Heidegger, however, hardly comes up, save for a few exceptions. For example, Frampton finds support for his claims in a summarised version of Heidegger's distinction between 'space' and 'place':

> *Nowhere are the turns of this labyrinth more evident, as Heidegger tries to make clear, than in our own language, than in our persistent use of, say, the Latin term 'space' or '*spatium*' instead of 'place' or the Germanic word '*Raum*'* [26: p. ii]

Additionally, he begins and concludes the editorial with a concern for 'building' which, apparently, vaguely, and imprecisely alludes to Heidegger's use of the term in his lecture. In his single use of the 'Heideggerian', once more *a propos* the topic of language, he says:

> *It becomes increasingly clear … that we have long been in the habit of using too many synonyms; not only in our everyday speech but also in our more specialized languages. We still fail, for example, to make any satisfactory distinction between architecture and building. … In the physical realm of the built world, we seem to be presented with dramatic proof of the paradoxical Heideggerian thesis that language, far from being the servant of man, is all too often his master. We would, for instance, invariably prefer to posit the ideal of architecture – the monument in every circumstance be it public or private, the major opus – for situations that simply demand 'building'* [26: p. i]

Figure 3: Heidegger's Hut, Todtnauberg, Germany (Courtesy of the author).

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However, the only explicit reference to 'Building Dwelling Thinking' appears to identify the source of the opening quote – just loosely related to the editorial – while Heidegger's name is found in the text as often as it is in the title: once. One might notice a shared understanding of the world in the face of its contemporary challenges, namely in how Frampton's lamentations about the exploitation of the natural environment *qua* resource, such as the 'exhaustion of non-renewable resources' or on how 'large amounts of prime agricultural land are continually lost to urbanization and mining' [26: p. ii], resonate with Heidegger's 'The age of the world picture' ['Die Zeit des Weltbildes'] (1938) [28] or 'The question concerning technology' ['Die Frage nach der Technik'] (1954) [29]. These ideas are not necessarily inherited from Heidegger though, as nothing suggests that Frampton had read the former by then, while the latter was only translated into English in 1977. The connections between the two therefore oscillate between tenuous and incidental, in a text that does not really focus 'on reading Heidegger' so much as it recognises a general kinship with him, and '*from* reading Heidegger' tackles the topics truly at the heart of Frampton's work.

The architect's manner of addressing philosophy, and Heidegger in particular, would mature into its paradigmatic form and play a major role in outlining his two most celebrated conceptual contributions to architecture: critical regionalism and tectonics.

The iconic text 'Towards a critical regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance', as published in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (1983) [30] edited by Hal Foster, follows immediately after the reprint of a talk by another German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas: 'Modernity – An incomplete project' (1980) [31]. This starts with a critique of the 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale, which Frampton so polemically broke away from and would continue to do so in his six points. 'Towards a critical regionalism' does not mention Habermas unlike 'On reading Heidegger' [26: p. ii] – but does resort to a panoply of other philosophers' insights, side-by-side with architects' texts and designs. Frampton treats both sources in a similar manner: he extracts very specific notions, concepts, or ideas, outlines them carefully within their original meaning, and employs them as individually crafted building blocks to construct his argument. Thus the essay opens with a long quote from Ricoeur's *History and Truth* [*Histoire et verité]* (1965), which sets up the complicated framework of mediating local culture with modern civilisation [30: pp. 16-17]; Kant is indirectly mentioned to condemn

Figure 4: Alvar Aalto, Säynätsalo Town Hall, Jyväskylä, Finland (1951). Kenneth Frampton included a photograph of this staircase in 'Towards a Critical Regionalism' (Tiia Monto: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Säynätsalon_kunnantalo_2.jpg licensed under CC BY 4.0).

an apparent contemporary renewed interpretation of his aesthetics that imposes itself upon modernity's cultural project [30: p. 19]; Marcuse sustains the critique of a technology-driven avant-garde that can no longer fulfil its modernist ideals [30: pp. 19-20]; Arendt introduces 'the space of human appearance' in a comparison between the Greek polis and modernity's megalopolis [30: p. 25] ; and Benjamin adds the notion of a 'loss of aura' in mechanical reproduction [30: p. 27].

Heidegger is called once more too, to inform the fourth and fifth points especially – and this time both he and his Darmstadt lecture are explicitly named in the text:

> *In his essay of 1954, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking,' Martin Heidegger provides us with a critical vantage point from which to behold this phenomenon of universal placelessness. Against the Latin or, rather, the antique abstract concept of space as a more or less endless continuum of evenly subdivided spatial components or integers – what he terms spatium and extension – Heidegger opposes the German word for space (or, rather, place), which is the term Raum. Heidegger argues that the phenomenological essence of such a space/place*

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> *depends upon the concrete, clearly defined nature of its boundary … Heidegger shows that etymologically the German gerund building is closely linked with the archaic forms of being, cultivating and dwelling, and goes on to state. that the condition of 'dwelling' and hence ultimately of 'being' can only take place in a domain that is clearly bounded. While we may well remain skeptical as to the merit of grounding critical practice in a concept so hermetically metaphysical as Being, we are, when confronted with the ubiquitous placelessness of our modern environment, nonetheless brought to posit, after Heidegger, the absolute precondition of a bounded domain in order to create an architecture of resistance.* [30: pp. 24-25]

'Towards a critical regionalism' recants the familiar etymological distinction between 'space' and 'place' through the German word 'Raum' but conducting a more attentive and more reactive reading that refines and expands the editorial's short reference. First, Frampton delves deeper into these passages and explores new notions such as the sense of boundary (*horismos*) within which things are understood, as well as connections between the words 'building', 'dwelling', 'being', 'cultivating', and even a capitalised 'Being', central to Heidegger's writings. Second, readers can distinguish when Frampton paraphrases Heidegger's thought from when he interprets it, which in 'On reading Heidegger' is confusingly conflated. Third, this deeper analysis enables a sharper critical engagement with Heidegger's work, such as when Frampton questions the viability of the philosopher's thinking for actual architectural practice. Fourth, this refreshed manner of reading and thinking helps Frampton assemble his own concepts, clearly and convincingly – in this case, 'placelenessness', an important piece of the text's argument [30: pp. 24-25]. Notwithstanding, issues remain with his approach, ranging from occasional imprecise or questionable interpretations. Heidegger would shudder at the notion of categorising 'Being', born from a fundamental critique of metaphysics, as 'metaphysical' itself [30: p. 24], while *horismos* – the horizon that limits the context in which we can experience things and beyond which one cannot reach – is reduced here to a kind of frontier separating inside and outside.

'Rappel à l'ordre: the case for the tectonic' (1990) [32] picks up the concern for Baukunst, or the 'art of building' of 'On reading Heidegger' [26: pp. i, ii], and the call for a rappel à l'ordre in 'Towards a critical regionalism' [30: p. 19] to introduce the notion of the 'tectonic'. It also takes the previous texts' relationship with Heidegger to the most extensive, rich, and decisive form yet, both in the methods employed and the concepts borrowed.

Methodologically, one may highlight the reinforced prevalence of etymological disassembling as a way of understanding and explaining certain notions, not just by copying Heidegger's examples – to whom this strategy was pivotal – but developing different ones such as 'tectonic'. Conceptually, some passages reprise familiar insights, like the connections between 'building', 'dwelling', 'being', 'cultivating', and (a no longer capitalised) 'being', explicitly credited to 'Building Dwelling Thinking' [32: p. 23]. Others pick up new terms, such as 'thing' [32: p. 20] (also clearly attributed to Heidegger) and the cosmological framework of 'sky/earth' [32: p. 21] (mentioned around Heidegger's name) both of which could potentially be linked to another of the philosopher's works addressing architecture, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' – even if Frampton conceives these concepts in a way of his own once more, especially the latter two: associating 'sky' with a building's structure, which pushes upwards, and 'earth' with its mass, which pushes downwards [32: p. 21]. Some previously encountered concepts simply disappear, most notably what had thus far been Frampton's anchor on Heidegger's works, the notion of 'place' – although its presupposition remains very much implied and engrained in the text overall. Additionally, some key terms reappear significantly transformed, such as 'building', that receives here an ontological dimension in opposition to empty representation – which is to say against the kind of postmodern scenography he sees in authors like Robert Venturi, ousted in the essay's opening lines [32: p. 19]. Frampton never explains what he means by 'ontology', but it reads with a light Heideggerian taste of an enrooting and/or being enrooted within a meaningful ensemble, and indeed all his discourse around the notion of the ontological alludes to Heideggerian-like formulations, such as that 'around which a building comes into being, that is to say, comes to be articulated as a presence in itself.' [32: p. 22], and the '"thingness" of the constructed object, so much so that the generic joint becomes a point of ontological condensations rather than a mere connection.' [32: p. 22] – the latter impressively developed to reconcile the pinnacle of Frampton's abstract philosophically inspired thinking, the ontological, with a technical constructive component, the joint.

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‘On reading Heidegger’, ‘Towards a critical regionalism’, and ‘Rappel à l’ordre’ thus depict Heidegger gradually entering, expanding, and eventually instilling himself in Frampton’s thinking, be it through his direct contributions or by affinities that develop for themselves and happen to meet. This is reflected in Frampton’s maturing engagement with philosophy overall, resulting in an approach that may be described as balanced, cautious, localised, and autonomous. His work incorporates a series of very specific ideas from different – though not always disparate – thinkers, such as Arendt’s ‘labor, work, and action’, Ricoeur’s ‘universal civilization’, Marx’s concept of alienation and the division of labour, and Heidegger’s ‘place’ – transferred and preserved as faithfully as possible to their original meanings. He does not however capitulate to the philosophers’ influence by surrendering his thought for theirs, not even to Arendt. To the contrary, these play their part in support of Frampton’s own thinking, such as informing discussions of architecture’s social and political role and contributing to concepts such as critical regionalism or tectonics. This *modus operandi* does not quite constitute an ‘appropriation’, for the imported concepts and their sources remain explicit or at the very least hinted at, and any deviation most likely comes from a misunderstanding rather than from a deliberate distortion. It would be more suitable to speak of ‘absorption’, as these concepts and the thinking behind them, though flagged as foreign, integrate Frampton’s own proper project, distinctively and inseparably. In philosophy, he seeks and finds concepts, ideas, approaches, arguments, and modes of thought that assist his inquiries, mostly centred around architecture and its role and mission. He does not merely adopt words to coin the meanings he already pre-defined, but, in genuine openness and a transformative desire to learn, opens up to the potentially rupturing, revealing, and revolutionary force of philosophical thought.

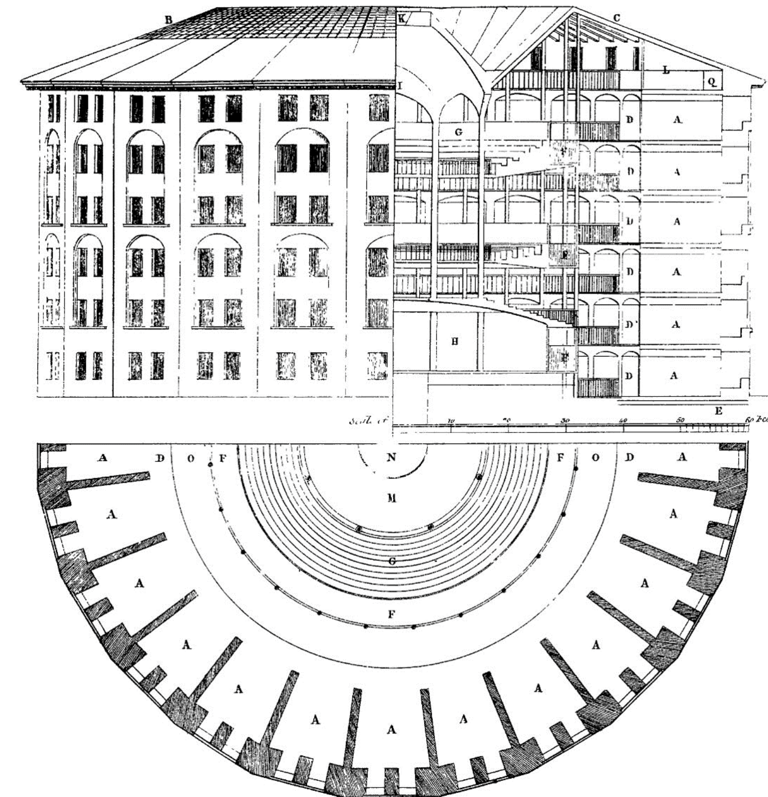

Figure 5: The Panopticon, as shown in Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon; or, the Inspection house (1791).

Koolhaas’ melting pot

Shortly after Frampton’s unsuccessful bid for the directorship of the Architectural Association in London and the same year he left Princeton for Columbia University, in 1972, another Architectural Association alumnus, tutor, and supporter at the school also moved to the United States. A young Rem Koolhaas studied at Cornell until 1973, when the two were reunited at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS) in New York. Like Frampton, Koolhaas turned to a number of philosophers in his work, but his approaches and references differed considerably. He addressed them explicitly decades later, at a public talk with another philosophically inclined former member of the IAUS, Bernard Tschumi. Speaking of *Delirious New York* (1978), Koolhaas conceded a rare acknowledgement:

> *[Something which is generally not recognised is] that actually this book was a kind of French book, in the sense that it was profoundly influenced not only by Barthes, but also to some extent by Foucault, and particularly by somebody who had become my personal friend, Hubert Damisch.* [33: 1.16.30 – 1.16.54]

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Damisch actually introduced Koolhaas to Foucault in 1972 when the latter gave a three-week lecture series at Cornell's Romance Studies Department. By that point Foucault's main research interest revolved around prisons: since 1971 he had been actively engaged with the Group of Information about Prisons [Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons]; in the academic years of 1972-73 and 1973-74 he lectured at the Collège de France about, respectively, 'Penal theories and institutions' ['Théories et institutions pénales'] and 'The punitive society' ['La société punitive']; earlier in 1972 he visited the Attica Correctional Facility in the USA [34: p. 26]; and at Cornell, was seen 'in the library, reading voraciously on the subject' [35]. These studies culminated in *Discipline and Punish* [*Surveiller et punir*] (1975) [36], particularly famous for its ineludible analysis of panopticism. Four years after the book's publication, Koolhaas' office, OMA, received a commission from the Dutch government to assess the viability of extending the lifetime of a panoptical prison, the Koepelgevangenis in the municipality of Arnhem.

The Koepel Panopticon Prison design (1979–1981) and its accompanying explicative text 'Revision: Study for the renovation of a Panopticon prison' (1981) [37] appeared likely to engage Foucauldian philosophical themes, considering not only the context from which they emerged but their content as well, and indeed this has been the generalised self-evident assumption ever since. As early as 1982, Anthony Vidler wrote that '[in the Arnhem prison project] we find echoes of a reading of Michel Foucault, whose studies of discipline and power have strongly influenced the politics and strategies of the generation of OMA,' and '[it is] in the space marked by Foucault after Nietzsche, that the project has been conceived.' [38: p. 21]. Not coincidentally, Vidler's article 'The ironies of Metropolis: Notes on the work of OMA' came out in the same issue of IAUS's magazine *Skyline* as Paul Rabinow's interview with Michel Foucault 'Space, Knowledge, and Power'. 'Revision' was later included in the massive book *S,M,L,XL* (1995), a compilation of Koolhaas' writings and OMA's projects traversed by a dictionary of terms explained with quotes from other authors, amongst which 'Power' and 'Visibility' [39: pp. 1052, 1280] described with passages of Alan Sheridan's 1972 English translation of *Discipline and Punish* [40: pp. 200-201].

The connection between Koolhaas and Foucault thus appears to go without saying. But perhaps it only goes without saying, for as soon as the assumption is questioned one struggles to find concrete proof to actually support it in the project or in the text. 'Revision' calls directly on sources like the Jacobs Committee [37: p. 239] and a nineteenth-century Dutch parliament member [37: p. 237], uses two frames from Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali's 1929 Un Chien Andalou [37: pp. 233, 235], and cites another philosopher, Jeremy Bentham [37: pp. 236-237, 240], who devised the panopticon as a building typology in the first place; Foucault however is nowhere to be found. The quotes from *S,M,L,XL* appeared too late to mean much, and may very well represent a subsequent endorsement of the commentators' interpretation, rather than a confirmation of the design's original intent. Moreover, Koolhaas repeatedly dispelled any myths about his promising encounter with Foucault, as in his harshly unambiguous reply when interviewed by *The Cornell Journal of Architecture* (2004): 'I cannot claim any kind of significant intellectual influence of course, because I only picnicked' [41].

So is there even a case study of architecture and philosophy's intersection to begin with here? An excruciatingly detailed analysis of certain ideas and terminology applied in 'Revision' suggests that Koolhaas probably read a couple of pages at the very least from *Discipline and Punish*. But the complex answer to this fundamental question is most accurately revealed by two insights into different stages of the Koepel renovation's design process.

The first appears in the opening paragraphs of 'Revision', where Koolhaas lays out his analysis of Arnhem's prison as it stood. This description never corresponds to mere neutral acknowledgement of a single objective reality, but is necessarily an interpretative effort which, as certain aspects are foregrounded, assembles the matter upon which the architect will then intervene. It is the architect's first intervention upon the existing site. Koolhaas very appropriately chose to read the Koepel qua paradigmatic instance of the panoptical typology. The decision led him to philosophy, particularly to Jeremy Bentham's meticulous description the typology's characteristics and its way of functioning; however, Koolhaas does not pick up on Bentham's words directly, and much less on his unshakeable optimism in the scheme, but rather on Foucault's grim critique of it in *Discipline and Punish*. In other words, OMA's renovation project engages a philosophical object, conceived in terms of one philosopher's attack on another philosopher's work embodied in an architectural typology. Resorting to a Foucauldian view and jargon to formulate his own assessment of the Koepel's fate, Koolhaas declared, 'the Panopticon Principle, with its mechanistic ideal – the naked power exercised by

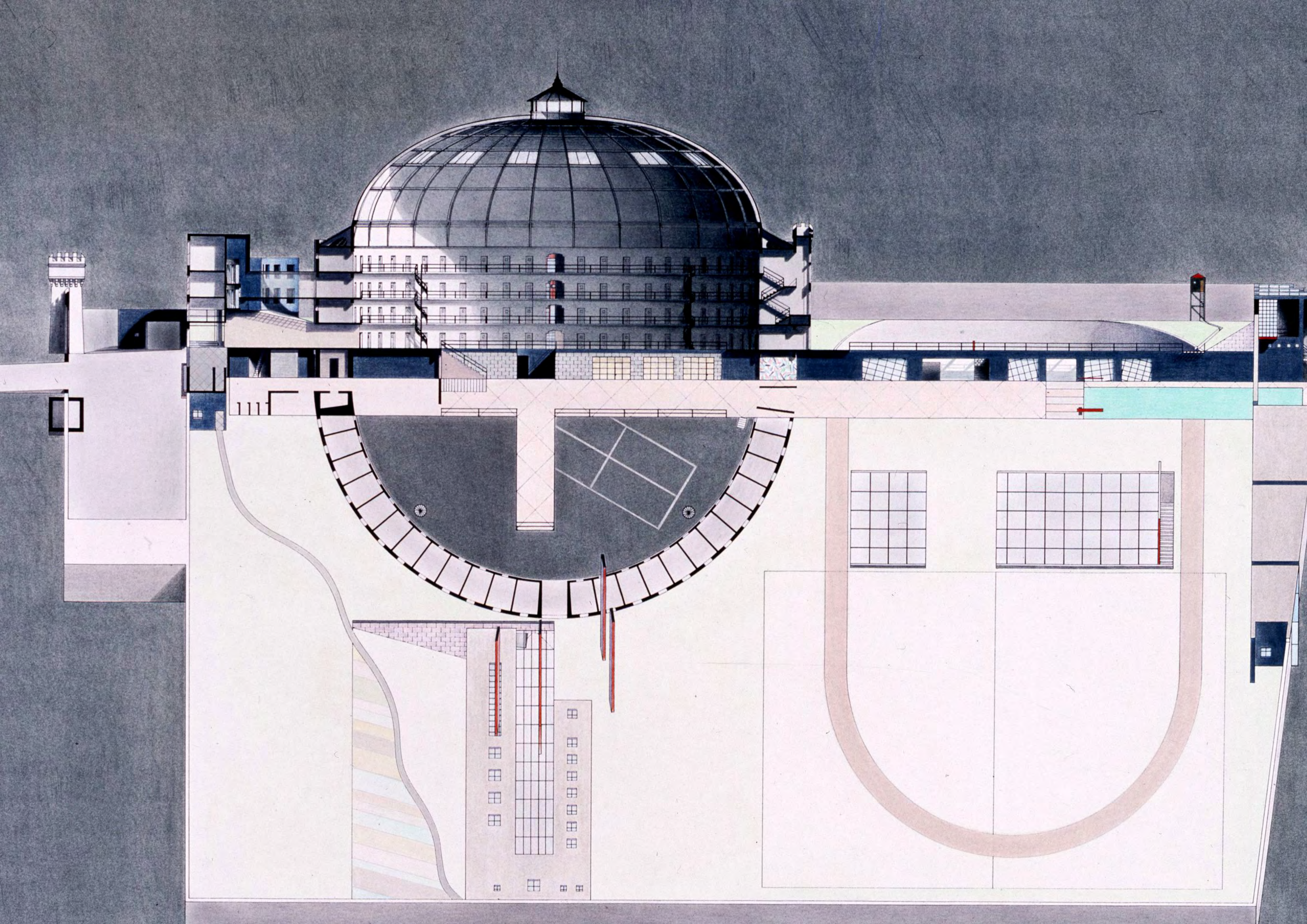

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Figure 6 [previous page]: OMA, Koepel Panopticon Prison (1979-81). (© OMA)

the authority in the centre over the subjects in the ring – has become intolerable' [37: p. 237].

However, a close reading of 'Revision' reveals serious omissions of Foucault's (and Bentham's) account(s), as well as a series of other elements that are either secondary or even non-existent in the philosophers' writings. On the one hand, the most obvious lapse occurs in the panopticon's portrayal in terms of an efficient centralised surveillance system [37: p. 237] , while making no reference whatsoever to how the threat of constant surveillance leads prisoners to self-surveillance – in other words the actual panoptical principle, Bentham's main point and Foucault's main issue of contention. On the other hand, Koolhaas brings in multiple other sources besides *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault, or philosophy, such as when deeming solitary confinement as determinative for the Koepel as centralised monitoring [37: pp. 237-239]. This interpretation is unlike Foucault or Bentham's, but similar to Robin Evans' 'Bentham's Panopticon: An incident in the social history of architecture' (1971) published in the *Architectural Association Quarterly,* which Koolhaas was known to read [42: pp. 24, 26, 34]. One may even speculate as to how much of the apparent overlap between Koolhaas and Foucault actually results from shared ideas of common intellectual milieus which, for instance, brought them together in Cornell.

The second example lies in the outline of the conceptual guidelines to intervene upon the philosophical-architectural object. Koolhaas chose to address the ever-changing prison typologies devised throughout the years – outputs of equally ever-changing ideological stances – by proposing not simply the next typology but rather a design that highlighted and embraced the fact that these continuous revolutions occur. The name of this strategy will sound familiar to someone acquainted with Foucault's writings:

> *If prison architecture today can no longer pretend to embody an 'ideal', it could regain credibility by introducing the theme of revision as raison d'être. A 'modern' prison architecture would consist of a prospective archaeology, constantly projecting new layers of 'civilization' on old systems of supervision.* [37: p. 241]

In this quote, Koolhaas apparently alludes to Foucault's 'archaeology', his primary methodology employed in earlier works like *The Birth of the Clinic* [*Naissance de la clinique*] (1963) [43] and *Archaeology of Knowledge* [*L'archéologie du savoir*] (1969) [44]. However, the architect does not merely replicate it. After all the philosopher's approach is geared towards analysis, not actual intervention, very much like *Discipline and Punish* critically studies the panopticon but does not propose an alternative to (this kind of) incarceration. Koolhaas' role as an architect forces him to go further. So while on the one hand 'prospective archaeology' shares the rejection of a trans-historical and trans-cultural absolute social and, consequentially, architectural model, to instead accept the continuous change of 'civilisations' and their reflex on architecture, on the other hand Koolhaas then converted the Foucauldian analytical tool of the present into a generative design principle which projects into the future.

Ultimately, any assertion of Foucauldian influence upon Koolhaas' work can only go so far, albeit far enough not to be discarded. It turns out that the persistent ambiguity of Koolhaas' links with Foucault does not so much compromise the determination of whether this is a case study or not, but more importantly constitutes one of its essential characteristics, and indeed of Koolhaas' relationship with external sources to his work overall. The Koepel Panopticon Prison renovation was not primarily intended as a literal architectural formulation, expression, or translation of philosophical principles, discussions, and ideas into built form, but first and foremost as an architectural project – a seemingly banal yet rare assertion in the broader history of the two fields. Here, philosophy is instrumentalised and, along with other tools, employed precisely at the right time and in the right measure and no more, at the service of architecture rather than the other way around. Thus if at first glance Koolhaas' non-committal use of unmentioned sources – not simply informative or inspirational ones, but those affecting the design's theoretical bedrock – may come across as an arrogant affirmation of independent authorship, self-generating and immune to external influences, in the end it might actually be a rather honest attitude, upfront about rejecting any intention of accurately reproducing the appropriated philosophical contributions, and much less to keep them under that guise by deceptively invoking their original authors' names. Notwithstanding the merits of this approach, it is not beyond reproach. One may wonder if adopting a semi-disinterested engagement with philosophy does not throw the baby out with the bathwater, which is to say that amongst the

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problems avoided lie missed opportunities too: for example, Frampton's faithful study of the original meaning of particular concepts and his openness to their transformative power seems improbable in Koolhaas' process, which stifles what could or even should indeed be gained from these insights. Additionally, while Koolhaas' thinking may reject the authority of external references, his personal aura discreetly embraces it: his frequent claims against the direct impact of certain philosophers often come coupled with remarks about his personal acquaintance with them, which simultaneously preserve the architect's apparent autonomy while also surreptitiously elevating his work and himself *qua* intellectual figure.

The result may be compared to a melting pot into which a panoply of different ingredients is thrown, battered, and mixed to create something new. The unique properties of each individual element become diluted in Koolhaas' thinking. Nevertheless, even if diffusely, one can sense, as Vidler did, a Foucauldian taste in Arnhem's recipe.

Eisenman's choral wordplay

In 1982, one year prior to Frampton's 'Towards a critical regionalism', and one year after the Koepel Panopticon Prison project was handed to the Dutch government, Koolhaas entered the Parc de la Villette competition, the conversion of a large plot of land on the northeast edge of Paris into an urban park. OMA was the favorite to win, but in a shock result the jury selected Bernard Tschumi instead. The Swiss-French architect's proposal, a paradigmatic example of deconstruction's application to architectural, urban, and landscape design, combined three principal elements: an axis of two perpendicular avenues traversing the site; a grid marked by dozens of unique folies, the iconic bright-red pavilions spread across the grounds; and the Garden Promenade or Cinematic Promenade, a film-reel-like undulating path along a series of small gardens devised by other architects and non-architects alike. The design for one such garden motivated a historic collaboration between Jacques Derrida, philosopher of deconstruction, and Peter Eisenman, founder and director of the IAUS from 1967 until, curiously enough, the year of the la Villette competition.

Eisenman and Derrida's highly anticipated partnership still stands out as the most famous case of an intersection between architecture and philosophy. For the first time, two major high-profile figures of each domain came together not just to talk or write but to design an actual project. Ultimately, its most enduring contribution was a book, and its underlying motivation was perhaps the fantasy of turning a usually one-sided engagement of either discipline with the other into a reciprocal real-life dialogue that led to a concrete output. The kind and sheer amount of

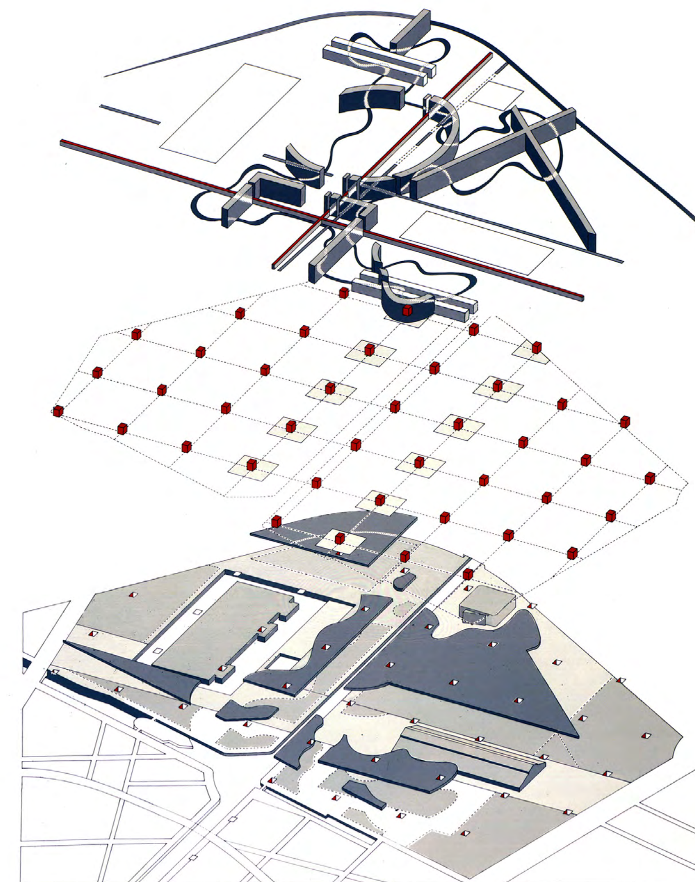

Figure 7: Bernard Tschumi, Parc de la Villette, Paris, France (1998). (© Bernard Tschumi Architects)

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material produced was unprecedented: Eisenman and Derrida's six meetings, between 1985 and 1987, were recorded, transcribed, and published along with sketches, correspondence, supporting material, and even retrospective reflections in the book *Chora L Works* of 1997 [45]. Furthermore, their endeavour triggered numerous other events about, around, and beyond it. Some were engendered by the protagonists themselves, in the form of lectures, conferences, interviews, book contributions, open letters, and publications, while many were promoted by others, the most famous of which was Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley's exhibition at MoMA, *Deconstructivist Architecture* (1988), [46] that included designs by Eisenman, but also Koolhaas, Tschumi, and others.

Figure 8: Peter Eisenman, Jacques Derrida, 'Sketch Plans of the garden' (1985-86). (Peter Eisenmann fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture)

The Eisenman-Derrida collaboration also challenged the architect's approach to philosophy much more extensively than his early projects' embrace of Noam Chomsky's linguistic theories, and beyond what most other architects had up until then faced. The first meeting took place on the architect's turf: in his office in New York, among handpicked friends and collaborators, speaking his language (English, and 'architectural'), surrounded by his drawings, models, books, pictures, sketches, all gathered there to do architecture. Eisenman, a charismatic and overpowering figure, spoke frequently and at length on a broad variety of topics, in a constant declarative and resolute tone, seldom seeking justifications or explanations to support his strong assertions. He stated how things were – in architecture, philosophy, or even in Derrida's own work – and decreed what ought to be done. His energetic abundance of confidence and control often permeated even his moments of self-critique and doubt, as if they were less of a true crisis and more like part of a productive process. Derrida, aware of how foreign a world he had stepped into, and overly wary of his limitations in it, restrained himself to a few short, hesitant, timid words, although always with purpose, in a structured, consistent, explicative manner, into a core issue which he did not lose track of. The philosopher asked tentative questions, which the architect tended to interpret less as Socratic provocations and more as his interlocutor's architectural shortcomings – usually rightly so – which called for a fix with a plain decisive answer. Eventually, Eisenman's exploratory orations, friendly efforts at taking the new arrival by the hand, and the natural comforting charm that made him a warm and welcoming host, put Derrida at ease and lured out what would become a pivotal idea in their work together:

> *When Tschumi asked me to participate in this project, I was excited but at the same time, I was totally, totally empty. I mean, I had no ideas at all. I was in the midst of writing a text in homage to the philosophy of Jean-Pierre Vernant, which had to do with something I taught twelve years ago concerning a very enigmatic passage in the Timaeus, a passage which has amazed generations of philosophers. In it, Plato discusses a certain place. The name for this singularly unique place is* [khôra]*.*
> [45: p. 9]

For Derrida, this concept presented a fierce and radical challenge for both fields that could perhaps help push each one beyond their typical boundaries. *Khôra*

[*χώρα*] is an odd one-time reference to an area between Forms and their particulars wherein the latter come to be and perish, an awkward and compromising third element in Plato's dualistic metaphysical scheme which thinkers have since struggled to make sense of. It also poses an intriguing conundrum for architecture. On the one hand, the concept emerges from a spatial need, specifically Plato's claim that everything must exist somewhere, including these things that become [47: 52b]. On the other hand, this space, potentially informed by architecture qua discipline that deals with space, is impossible to grasp determinately through architecture's traditional tools, for it is neither Form nor particular, immutable or becoming, intelligible or sensible, and even Plato's efforts to define it come through blurry metaphorical allusions and 'a kind of bastard reasoning' [47: 52b].

For Eisenman, however, *khôra* was to turn into something very different: *chora*. The architect frequently brought up the concept, and even celebrated its impact upon the way he thought of and performed his own work [45: p. 93]. And yet he never really seemed to truly grasp it, as abundantly revealed by his questions and comments in literally every single meeting and afterwards. In the retrospective text 'Separate Tricks' (1987) his claims about *khôra* constantly trample over mischaracterisations Derrida had emphatically warned against all of which – adding insult to injury – are introduced with the statement that '[f]or Derrida, chora is …' [48: p. 134]. Nevertheless, Eisenman's misinterpretations cannot be simply dismissed as mistakes, but rather closely (and critically) understood as part of an approach which ultimately drove the design. As he admitted in their last meeting, with a spot-on self-critique:

> *[Jeffrey Kipnis] always says I read these books, but I misread them. He said this morning that I'm not a Derridean – I do not apply your work to architecture. My work has nothing to do with deconstruction* per se. *Your work is like a stimulus for me, but not a doctrine for application. If anything, I misinterpret your work as an unconscious protection.*
> [45: p. 92]

Derrida, hardly a direct contributor and much less a guide for the architectural work, functioned as a stimulus for Eisenman's thinking. Often this meant using philosophical insights as a source of inspiration to trigger new ideas, which could either build on the original or run along apparently arbitrary associations towards

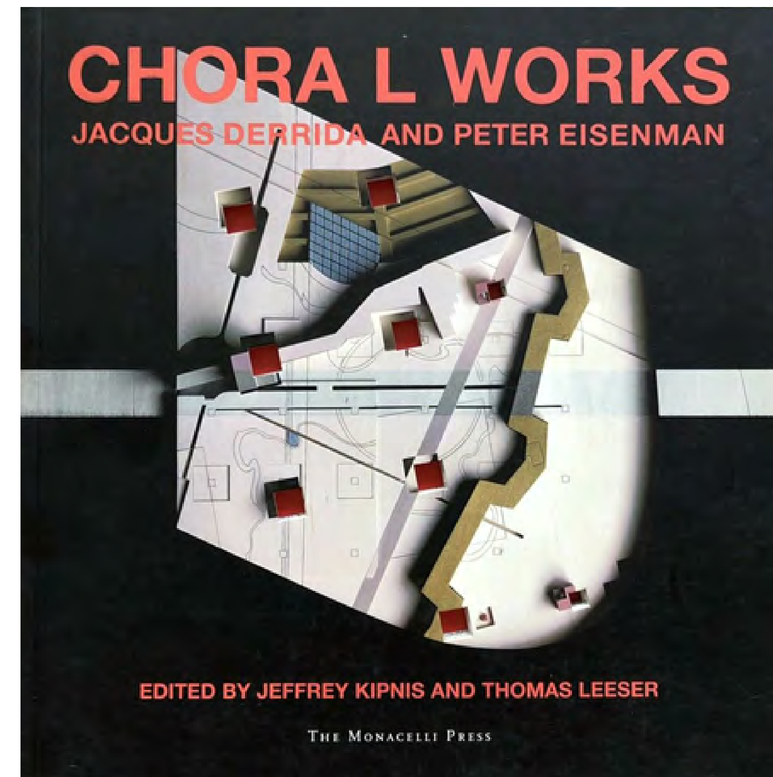

Figure 9: Jacques Derrida, Peter Eisenman, ***Chora L Works*** (1997)

something loosely (if at all) related, but nevertheless of consequence – a chaotic but deliberate creative manoeuvre that Eisenman managed masterfully. Otherwise, philosophy also provided terminology and arguments that helped crystalise his thought into concretion, although generally by emptying them from their authentic significations and making them stand for his. In both cases Eisenman's approach relied on a strategy adopted from literary theory, 'misreading', which in his work meant allowing for an objectively inaccurate interpretation of things, instrumentally utilised as a positive generative resource rather than a problem needing solving. This mindset liberated Eisenman from the burdens of the kind of reflexive precision that would counterproductively present more constraints than contributions to the design process, setting him free to play with a richer range of rapidly changeable notions and connections so typical of architectural

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thought and so different from the firm consistency expected from the philosopher, historian, or theorist. Nonetheless, one may wonder how many times Eisenman's reliance on the protective veil of misinterpretation led him to dodge the real effort required to understand ideas beyond his own. Furthermore, misreading stands delicately on the line between an intentionally abusive reinterpretation and simply getting things wrong. While Eisenman's architectural practice warrants some leeway for misreading as a conceptual design tactic, one may argue that this turns problematic when employed in his theoretical discourse, as its factual basis becomes unreliable, its conclusions unsubstantiated, and its warped vocabulary incomprehensible.

This aspect of Eisenman's approach to philosophy is exquisitely well-represented by *khôra*. On the one hand, the word inspired the collaboration's name: the 'Choral Works', a wordplay between the phonetic resemblance of '*khôra*' and 'choral', alludes to the idea of a choir where the architect and the philosopher's different voices sing together in a common composition. On the other hand, it becomes little more than an inspiration, the original challenging concept consumed by an unaltered pre-existing routine, in this case Eisenman's cleverly assembled titles which accumulate multiple layers of meaning. The concept's own meaning, however, is gone.

Eisenman and Derrida's collaboration, seen as a spectacular culmination of the fiery relationship between architecture and philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century, fell short of the high hopes around it. The project was never built and quickly forgotten; the book *Chora L Works* was published a decade later when interest in the event and deconstruction had waned. The defrauded expectations were perhaps not so much Eisenman and Derrida's fault for what they did, but that of their audience who set untenable aims for the interaction between architecture and philosophy in general. After all, for those who still take the time to discover it, *Chora L Works* magnificently tears down generalised illusory and perhaps infantile conceptions of how both disciplines ought to converse by attempting them, failing at them, and making sense of that failure – from transferring architectural concepts into architecture, to asking a philosopher to draw part of the project [45: pp. 35, 80, 52]. This very real effort of working together forcefully opened unexpected potentials for philosophy to affect design though, as when a section of the project was ingeniously redesigned due to a *derridéan* philosophical objection against a simple handrail [45: pp. 90-91].

The collaboration also marked a turning point. Despite – or perhaps precisely because of – its disappointing conclusion, the relationship between architecture and philosophy was not only practised but also thought of as an issue. The collaboration on the Choral Works project was both the architectural-philosophical relationship at its prime, and an early conscious questioning of it as a fact in itself.

Beyond three case studies

Why do architects resort to philosophy, and how do they do so? The preceding case studies present three instances which, despite emerging from a restricted circle of acquaintances, in a common historical period and geographical setting, responding to similar challenges in architecture, nevertheless led to very different answers, in their approaches, aims, and outputs. Kenneth Frampton's 'On reading Heidegger', and especially 'Towards a critical regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance' and 'Rappel à l'ordre: The case for the tectonic' select specific insights from thinkers like Martin Heidegger and import them with their original meaning carefully preserved. He uses them like building blocks to construct his own arguments, inseparable from but in control of rather than subservient to these contributions. Rem Koolhaas' Koepel Panoticon Prison with its text 'Revision' draws from Michel Foucault to inform fundamental aspects of the design, from site analysis to design strategy and their underlying theoretical foundations, while diluting his ideas in a melting pot of multiple, barely discernible, sources to produce a new architectural substance. Peter Eisenman's collaboration with Jacques Derrida in the 'Choral Works', as recorded in *Chora L Works*, explicitly identifies its references but transforms them radically through strategic misreading, which both helps pin down the architect's pre-existing notions with determinate jargon and stimulates a creative search for new ideas.

Placed side-by-side, these case studies reveal a variety of distinct characteristics: a close reading of key concepts adopted with precision, a limited influence among many others strategically deployed, and a stimulating misreading, deliberate or not; a text, a design, and the discussion of a design process published in a book; known, somewhat obscure, and famous; by an architectural theorist who occasionally practised, a practising architect with a major body of theoretical work, and a practitioner, theorist, and educator; reading a philosopher's work, using a philosopher's work, and collaborating with a philosopher to produce work together; explicitly, implicitly, and quasi-thematically; in the early-1970s, in the turn from the 1970s to the 1980s, and in the mid- to late-1980s.

Yet, across these contrasting case studies lies a common thread: all three architects were attracted to philosophy. Regardless of what it looked like, why they sought it out, and how they employed it, philosophy promised and delivered something necessary to architectural thinking and designing which could not be found within architecture alone. Heidegger's phenomenology offered Frampton a lexicon with which to critique the architecture of his time, using loaded terms like 'building' and 'place'; Foucault's studies on the interconnections between knowledge, power, and space applied to the particular case of the panopticon provided Koolhaas with a fundamental social and historical understanding of the object upon which he was to intervene; and Derrida nourished Eisenman's theories and designs, not only through his deconstructive questioning of the very core of architecture, but also as an engaging partner with whom to bounce ideas off, playfully but productively.

Many other architects, theoreticians, and historians acted on a similar urge, in their own way, including fellow members of the IAUS. Bernard Tschumi, for one, was interested in authors like Roland Barthes, while Mario Gandelsonas and Diana Agrest were immersed in structuralism and particularly semiotics. Outside of the New York penthouse, one finds Massimo Tafuri and his associations with Massimo Cacciari at Venice's IUAV, Claude Parent's collaboration with Paul Virilio in France, the Scandinavians Christian Norberg-Schulz and Juhani Pallasmaa's pursuit of phenomenology, an interest shared by Joseph Rykwert at Essex University in the UK where he taught with Dalibor Vesely who had studied under Jan Patočka in former Czechoslovakia, etc. These are but a few examples from a long list of rich, complex, interwoven interactions with philosophy that shaped late twentieth-century architecture and established the influential precedents that continue to echo within – and are also questioned, understood, and reinvented by – both architecture and philosophy today.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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