DECONSTRUCTIVE CONCEPTIONS AS METAMORPHOSES OF THE HOUSE

The deconstructive philosophy of J. Derrida arises out of a fundamental critique of humanist discourses and their conceptions of subjectivity and language. The complexity of his work results in a variety of definitions and interpretations, although Derrida himself explicitly denies any definition of his deconstructivist discourse. His own words, that he investigates "the law which governs the desire of the center in the constitution of the structure"\(^1\), were defined and interpreted from many epistemological aspects and origins, of which only one is investigated here. The deconstructive endeavour of J. Derrida is to "decentre" discourses, such as the three types of centering: "phonocentrism", "logocentrism" and "phallocentrism". These types of centering consist of binary systems or opposing pairs such as: speech-writing, culture-nature, mind-body, form-content, good-evil, presence-absence, man-woman, life-death, being-nothingness, light-dark and so on. In these traditional pairs of opposition there is no peaceful coexistence of opposing terms but a violent hierarchy. The first term dominates the other (axiologically, logically, etc), and occupies the commanding position. To deconstruct the opposition is, above all, at a particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy.\(^2\)

While structuralism is generally satisfied if it can carve up a text into binary oppositions, deconstruction, on the contrary, has sought to undo them. It is not argued here, of course, that deconstruction is limited to the undoing of binary oppositions; but that even an attempt at a reading, if not an interpretation of Deconstruction, constitutes a very complicated, and always a controversial, task. Thus my own attempt is limited to the discussion of the notion of decentering and particularly how it is perceived by Derrida's interpreters.

Under the realm of post-structuralism and specifically of Derrida's deconstruction, while philosophy, literary criticism and psychoanalysis deal with the architectonics of the text, architecture adopts philosophical, literary and psychoanalytical methods or concepts.

In his inquiry of theory and design of architecture, one of the most prominent deconstructionist architects, P. Eisenman, claims that he invents a textual architecture. Interpreting architecture as language and architectural practice as representation of ideas, he reads a building as a text. The binary oppositions presence-absence, topicos-atopos, form-content, etc., as types of centering have been analyzed in his theoretical work and design projects.

To the recent assumptions rather than debates for the possible interactions among philosophy, psychoanalysis, literature and architecture, I will not add another epistemological field but another perspective: the perspective of the theories of gender. Since one of the most historically virulent binary oppositions is between man and woman, the deconstructive theory of J. Derrida was applied to the theories of gender. "French feminism", which is represented mainly by H. Cixous, L. Ignaray, and J. Kristeva, has developed it further in philosophy, psychoanalysis and literary criticism. Instead of interlocking the boundaries between the above mentioned disciplines in their epistemological core, these theories dismantle them in an inter-disciplinary way. Their intention is not to offer a new unifying gendered theory as a response to Deidtian deconstructive discourse, but to interpret and further explore it, displacing the role of the subject.

In this paper, the discussion is focused on whether there is a meeting point, and if so where, between the deconstructive theories of gender, and architecture of the houses designed by P. Eisenman. Binary oppositions such as presence-absence, form-content and so on will be examined in terms of the theoretical arguments of deconstruction, as methods or concepts of "decentering", based on the written texts and design projects of P. Eisenman.
Eisenman’s contribution to the theory and practice of architecture must be seen within the realm of post-structuralism, which re-examines the modern project based on the notions of “reason”, “representation” and “history”. The attribution of post-structuralism to philosophy, literary criticism, psychoanalysis and architecture is to give back the qualities which had been excluded by the modern, such as "tradition" and "historicity". The starting point for Eisenman’s theoretical discourse is that he criticizes both the modern movement and postmodernism.

Utilizing M. Foucault’s notion of a new episteme which breaks with humanism and underlies the modern project, Eisenman calls for an entirely new approach to the subject of architecture that "displaces man away from the center of his world." He argues that "architecture traditionally has been related to human scale. For five centuries man’s bodily proportions have been a datum for architecture. While man is still the same physical size, he is no longer able to sustain the same centric position in his conception of himself and the universe. The grand abstraction of man as the measure of all things, as an originating agent, a whole presence, can no longer be sustained." His aim is to destabilize humanism and anthropocentrism. He generalizes the "modern" as an anti-humanist epoch which leads stylistically to a series of "nons" (non-objective, non-narrative) and philosophically to a series of "dis" (displacement, dislocation). Referring to modern architecture as an incarnation of the Hegelian dialectic between form and function, between beauty and technology, between ornament and structure, he characterizes his first projects (until Cannaregio) as Hegelian and his early houses as formalistic.5

The architectural discourse of P. Eisenman, written and designed, is a perpetual endeavor of decentering the center which governs the structure of space and form. This notion leads Eisenman to a new series of rhetorical strategies to represent the loss of center. Thus he introduces new concepts of decentering that include: Els or L-shapes, which signify incompleteness and instability; excavation, which signifies digging into the past and the unconscious; scaling, which results in decreasing or increasing an element to non-human proportion; and topological geometry, which provides an alternative to the more anthropomorphic Euclidean geometry.

This endeavor, however, has not always been conscious; it became conscious, as he admits, just after he started psychoanalysis in 1978. During this year, he was involved into two projects, House X (1976–78) and Cannaregio, neither of which was never built. These turning-point projects constitute the shift which divides his architectural work into two periods. After Cannaregio, he began to read Derrida and Nietzsche and in projects like House IIa, House El Even Odd and Fin d’Ou T Hou S, he started digging into the unconscious. One of his next projects, Guardiola House, influenced all his later designs,6 which are not included in this study.

In the meantime, some background must be given concerning the projects of Eisenman and particularly his houses. Gradually evolving and one by one transformed, these houses cannot be considered as a unified entity. Many of them are named by numbers such as House I (1966), II (1969), III (1970), IV (1971), V (1972), VI (1973), VIII (1975), X (1976), while the others are Cannaregio (1978), House Iia, House El Even Odd, Fin d’Ou T Hou S (1985), Berlin 1986 and Guardiola (1988).

Searching in architectural terms for the relationship between semantics and syntax during the decade of the 60’s, Eisenman has applied his own interpretation of the Chomskian model of linguistic transformational grammar to the theory and practice of design. The aim of his design approach is to find a general, formal rule of development, "independent of any functional interpretation, that will combine each of the partial moves or stages into continuous uninterrupted sequence explanatory of the process from simple beginning to a complex end."7 This model of language he adopts distinguishes between a deep (conceptual) structure and a surface (perceptual) structure, while in the functionalist ideal deep and surface structures do not necessarily coincide. But deep and surface structures could be considered as syntax and semantics as well. According to M. Candelonos, Eisenman suggests "an equivalence of deep structure and syntax, as a basis for a formal conception of architecture that reacts against the perpetual, relativistic realm of conventional meanings. With this approach, design is concerned with syntax, and not with semantics, which is assumed to be known, and which is seen as just the cultural conventional attribution of functions to forms. But the Chomskian notion of syntax that allows Eisenman to deny functional meanings and more generally...

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the semantic domain is in no way a purely internal notion of a complete and a self-referential structure. As opposed to the classical concept of syntax which focuses on the structure of language itself, Chomsky's model focuses on the subject's knowledge (intuition) of the structure of language and its capacity to generate infinite numbers of sentences. This argument of Chomsky seems crucial, since it signifies that Eisenman does not borrow the Chomskian linguistic model in order to apply it to a theory of syntax in architecture. He rather misinterprets it, because he removes not only the role of the subject, on which the model of Chomsky is based, but also in consequence all the properties and qualities of the subject such as intuition, genius, consciousness, desire and so on. The whole notion of beauty, which is related with the consciousness of the subject, is also removed from the theoretical corpus of architecture. The question which then arises is what, if anything, is not related to the consciousness of the subject. Although this controversial transposition of a linguistic model into a theory of syntax in architecture is not related directly to the aim of this paper, it is discussed very briefly here in order to show two things. First, the significance of the introduction of the subject into linguistic theory by Chomsky, which changes entirely the structuralist view of language. Language is no longer considered as a static lexicon but as a generative and creative ability of the speaking subject. Second, the evolution of Eisenman's thinking from a structuralist point of origin to a post-structuralist approach. But the discussion on the role of the subject, or more correctly of the absence of the subject, will continue, after a brief discrition of Eisenman's approach and method during the first period of his work.

Eisenman had already applied the idea that there was no center and everything was outside, even in House X and Fin d'Ou 1 Hou S, although he considered them as structuralist projects. In a very interesting dialogue between two hypothetical voices, Eisenman explains step by step all the stages of transformations he follows during the design process of House X. The dialogue occurs between the architect of this house (who can be read also as the house itself) and the critic (who can be read also as the architect of the previous houses). The process of design for House X, he argues, is not a manipulation of a set of linear and planar elements or a sequential, linear progression through a readily reconstructible series of transformations. His argument is that: "the traditional design process begins with an image already preconceived and thus at each stage has an almost unlimited number of alternatives, since it does not follow logically from the step before but rather from the initial image. This initial image describes and limits the actual choice from the range of narrowing at each step in the process, and in fact widens the range of possibilities because it does not move toward any preconceived image." Eisenman defines the whole notion of this design process as "decomposition." At this stage of his work, he preferred this term to the term "deconstruction," which according to him, is more critical and analytical as opposed to synthetic activity. Rather than working toward a predictable end, decomposition starts with the end to find its inherent limits.

Referring to the house projects of Eisenman of this period, A. Vidal summarizes all their unified main characteristics, regarding them as: "an exercise in the rational exploration of certain preestablished formal constructs - a self-conscious, logical sequence with a beginning and an end. This is, after all, what appears to be implied by the numbering, by the chronology, by the internal formal transformations from one scheme to another, and by the possibility of relating a first design to a last, a first house to a Fin(sal) house. These schemes, tightly related in scale, vocabulary and syntax, also seem to comprise a biographical unity. Nearly, they appear to sum up an era, a period of style...Certainly their ostensible, and often repeated intention to destabilize their apparent object - the house, nucleus and origin of architecture - by attacking all its elements of structure and signification systematically, from the roof to the basement, leaving no functional or mental assumptions untouched and stripping, finally, the house of houseness and nostalgia, would seem to propose an unassailable unity of purpose." Based on G. Bachelard's notion of the classical imagery of "houselessness", Eisenman seems to rely on the essentially unchangeable purpose of the house. "Nothing in the plan or section of the so called "post-modern" house suggests that any cultural or institutional change animates it. Thus, in spite of what is superficially a "new" imagery of the ruin and the fragment in this architecture, the result turns out to be no more than decorative, literal, or nostalgic. Applied because the house ultimately retains its basic conceptual unity: that is, in its relation to man, the house remains a mimetic, symbolic, and functional entity, as it always has been." Stemming from his position that he denies the role of the subject, Eisenman does not introduce it during the design process. His own approach of the design process deals with the analysis of its spatial object. Thus he considers the house as a shell without any reference at all to its own social content and structure,
familial or not. In doing so, his statement that “the so-called post-modern house remains a mimetic, symbolic and functional entity as it always has been” is under discussion since all the changes and transformations of the house which occurred historically were intrinsically related with the societal changes and transformations of the family structure.

While others describe his second period as Deconstructionism, he is reluctant to do so. He does not reject this term for himself, but he opposes the possibility of it becoming a style: “If there was a Deconstructionist style, I would be certainly the first one to turn against it.” His achievement during this period of his work is that each step he follows and each concept he uses during the design process becomes conscious. He analyzes theoretically his main questions about history, representation, function, etc. His concern, for instance, about history is not what it is, but what it covers up, what it keeps from us: “History can be used to find out what it represses.” For Postmodern “simulation” of ruins, Eisenman proposes a “dissimulation” of ruins, that is counterfeit excavations and false foundations that either pretend to be real ones, or represent in some phoney material the fact that they are false. While he does not reject Postmodern “nostalgia” for the past, he tries to find out why he is against it.

In terms of the concept of function, he signifies that he is not antifunctional but against the symbolism of function. “Not making function thematic against the concept of occupation as given. If you rely on function to make architecture, then you are falling back into the old notion that it is natural that architecture symbolizes function.” It is interesting to note some particular transformations of the syntactic elements of House VI which imply as a consequence some functional transformations. For instance: first, the “absent” column in the bedroom divides the marital bed in two; second, the “present” column in the dining room of the same house descends elegantly through one side of the dining table dividing up the family meal. Even though he denies the symbolism of function, even though his design approach concerns only with the syntax of form and not with the semantics of use, which is supposed to be known, he attempts to enclose all meaning within form, so that the meaning becomes intransitive. But as M. Gendelson argues, “where the semantics of use are denied, forms are no longer a ‘means toward an end’ a representation of something, but an end in themselves.”

In Eisenman’s discourse the subject is absent, since he introduces “the displacement of man away from the center of his world. He is no longer viewed as an originating agent.” In these two sentences, he uses only the male pronoun, personal and possessive, and not the female one, despite the fact that both pronouns have been in common use in American English, specially since the 70’s and in everyday talk. Deliberately or accidentally, he omits one of the genders, the female. In the displacement of man away from the center of his world, Eisenman uses just the male gender his as the possessive (pronoun) of “man”. Thus in Eisenman’s written text, the only gender which is present is the male. The displacement of man from the center of his world implies the absence of the man, the absence of the subject. At this point, Eisenman could have applied his own statement about the decentering of the opposing pair “presence of absence” if he was concerned about the unequal presence of the two genders in his discourse. But he did not apply it, although he actually did in cases like the “present” and “absent” column of the house VI.
It must be, however, applied in order to find out the meaning of the unequal presence of the two genders in Eisenman’s discourse. The binary opposition presence-absence should be reexamined not as a simple reversal of the terms but rather as a reevaluation of their hierarchy. The notion behind this attempt is to signify equally the importance of both terms and specifically the less privileged term "absence", not negatively as a lack, but positively as a "presence of absence". In this case, the absence of man in the architectural discourse of Eisenman could be translated as the "presence of the absence" of man. But in Eisenman’s own words, he displaces "man away from the center of his world". As a consequence, Eisenman refers to the "presence of absence" of the man away from the center of his world. In doing so, he declares the presence of the absence of the male man, of male people. His written text represents only one gender and not the other. The use of only one of the genders on a written text is not at all a simple quantitative issue: it is simply the omission of the representation of the other. By using just one gender instead of two, he not only represents and reproduces the division of society by gender, the way it is, but more importantly, its hidden dimension that genders are socially and culturally constructed. He not only represents and reproduces the historical repression of the female gender, but he suppresses its entire existence. Despite his own inquiry to "find out what history represses" (I repeat exactly his own words) he covers up what history keeps from us, through the omission of the female gender in his text.

He represents history then, since history represents mainly the male gender. He represents history then, although he denies representation "as long as representation covers what the natural language of architecture represses." But "the natural language of architecture is a text." Derrida argues and Eisenman seems not to disagree. Both of them also agree that "there is nothing outside of the text." As a logical consequence then, the two previous sentences would become: "there is nothing outside of the natural language of architecture." Except probably the gender omitted by Eisenman. But the gender omitted by Eisenman, as any other gender, at least as the gender to which Eisenman is referring, is or may be a subject. In a final analysis, he represents history, since the subject of history not only has a male pronoun but is by definition male. In short, desiring with the object of architecture, Eisenman writes history, dealing with the subject of architecture, he repeats history.

References

14. The emphasis is mine.