



Architecture as the last fortress

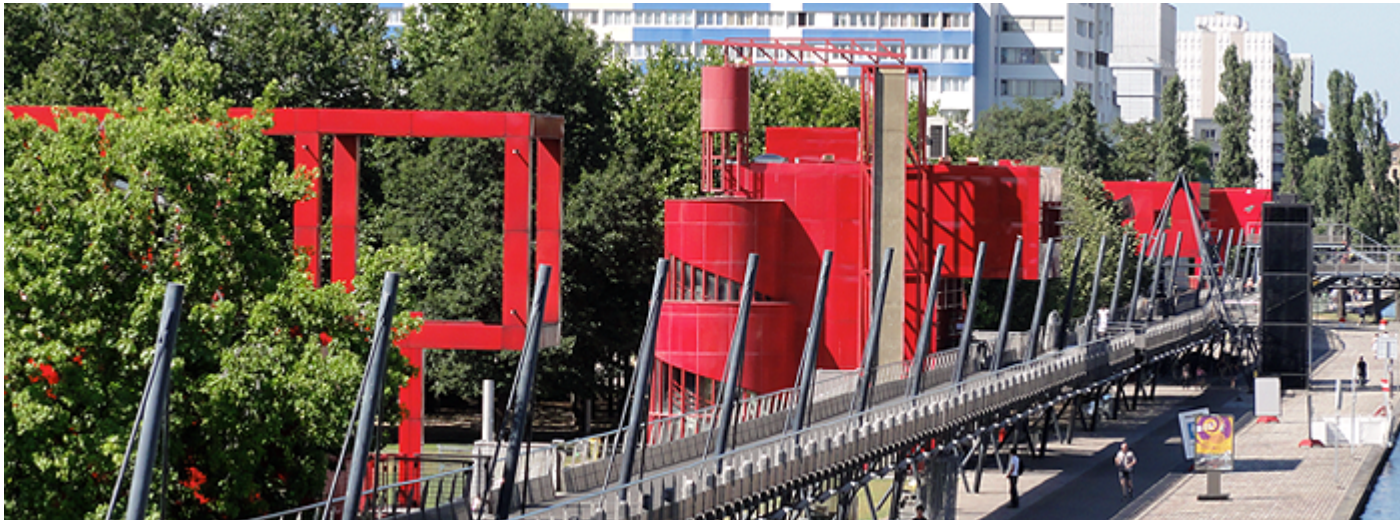
Description

In an essay about architecture, the philosopher Jacques Derrida focuses on the importance accorded by architects to concepts of home, dwelling and hearth, the nostalgia within modern architecture for a centre, an origin, a set of primary principles, an ordering, including belief in the sacred origins of architecture. He also notes how architecture aims for social betterment and the service of humankind, as well as the pursuit of beauty, harmony and completeness. For Derrida these are the uncertain foundations of architecture, a precarious grounding of the discipline, and they contribute to the sense that architecture is metaphysical. Architecture deals in absolutes. At the pen of Derrida this claim to grounding is inevitable, but Derrida's assessment of architecture is also an accusation and a challenge to anyone who would claim of architecture that it can ever be a radical art or practice.



Blackness Castle, near Edinburgh, 15th-19th century

Derrida produced several essays about architecture, one of which was entitled 'Point de Folie: Maintenant l'Architecture'. In this essay Derrida challenges the claim of Bernard Tschumi, the architect of the Parc de la Villette, that the red buildings (follies) in the Parc on the site are without purpose, ie follies and somehow connected with madness. Derrida's essay is approving, and engages with the features of the park and with what Tschumi had written about it.



Parc de la Villette, Paris, by Bernard Tschumi

In the process Derrida articulates what he would expect from a radical approach to architecture, ie its deconstruction, an architecture of deconstruction. Taking his cue from the arrangement of the red buildings across the site, the regular grid pattern, Derrida outlines four main 'grid points' for architecture, each of which has to be unsettled in any deconstructive treatment of architecture. In other words, so much supposed deconstruction in architecture is ineffective as deconstruction unless it tackles these four assumed foundations of architecture. Elaborating on the introduction above, these are

1. the primary importance accorded in the architectural tradition to home, dwelling and hearth (Think of Frank Lloyd Wright and the importance of the fireplace as the centre of home life.)
2. the nostalgia within modern architecture for an origin, a set of primary principles, an ordering, including deference to the sacred origins of architecture (eg deference to the myth of the primitive hut.)
3. architecture is heading somewhere, to betterment, improvement and the service of humankind (eg the public housing projects of the 1960s)
4. an adherence to concepts of the fine arts, i.e. the pursuit of beauty, harmony and completeness

These foundations are not exclusive to architecture, but architecture gives them the most obvious and tangible expression, through its monumental materiality and the fact that buildings last for a very long time. Architecture seems to preserve and transfer these cultural foundations, and thereby to resist deconstruction. For Derrida these tangible factors conspire to render 'architecture as the last fortress of metaphysics': Any consequent deconstruction would be negligible if it did not take account of this resistance and this transference (Derrida, 1986, p. 328).

It seems at first that Tschumi's follies in the Parc de la Villette succeed in destabilising meaning: They put in question, dislocate, destabilize or deconstruct the edifice of this configuration, and there is a madness in this move. But the follies simply maintain, renew and reinscribe architecture (Derrida, 1986, p. 328). They are anything but anarchic chaos (Derrida, 1986, p. 329). The best that the park offered in terms of deconstruction was in anticipation of an architecture yet to come. The red follies are like dice, and the dice have been cast.

References

- Derrida, Jacques. 1986. Point de Folie: Maintenant lâ??architecture. In N. Leach (ed) (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*: 305-317. London: Routledge.
- Kipnis, Jeffrey, and Thomas Leiser (eds). 1997. *Chora L Works: Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman*. New York: Monacelli Press.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. architecture
2. Bernard Tschumi
3. certainty
4. deconstruction
5. Derrida
6. foundations
7. language
8. madness
9. metaphysics
10. Parc de la Villette
11. Peter Eisenman

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