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Derrida: An Ally et un Ami

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Derrida: An Ally et un Ami

Much has been said about the relationship between architecture and deconstruction. Yet Jacques Derrida's untimely death in October 2004 may provide the occasion to discuss a few things more – or one thing, really. Perhaps the encounter between architecture and deconstruction was a way for a few architects to look for allies in other disciplines. To those disturbed by simplistic dogma and compelled to question the unexamined beliefs held within architecture, the philosopher and his intricate thought offered the assistance of an intellectual ally and friend.

When I first met Derrida in 1983 or 1984 I had just won the commission for the Parc de la Villette, and amidst attacks from die-hard modernists and born-again historicists I found media attention but little conceptual support among the architectural ideologues of the time. Not only did I feel like a stranger in their land of dogmatic assertions, but I was convinced that the questions raised by the La Villette project were at the core of some of the issues then confronting architecture. As it happened, the project called for a number of gardens, and so I thought of putting together small teams of artists, architects, musicians, mathematicians, and writers or philosophers to design them, and in the process, to investigate some of the key cultural questions of the day. I approached Derrida (whom I had never met in person before), Jean Baudrillard, and Jean-Francois Lyotard, among others. Derrida's boundless curiosity and unceasing thirst for exchange made him accept a meeting almost immediately. On arrival at my small office near the Gare du Nord in Paris, however, he expressed his puzzlement over my proposal, asking, "Why would you architects be interested in deconstruction, when deconstruction is antiform, antistructure, antihierarchy?" "Precisely for that reason," I responded.

From that day on, we met at irregular intervals at conferences, film openings, parties, or simply by chance. The garden that he and Peter Eisenman designed at my request was never built. Was it due to budget constraints, as the client suggested, or because it took the form of a *différance*: different in space, *différent* in time? Had their garden been differed or deferred? Around that time, on the occasion of a

book initiated by Alvin Boyarsky at the Architectural Association in London, Derrida wrote a long text about my La Villette project. He was fascinated by the inherence of architectural metaphors in philosophical thought. His trenchant and deeply irreverent analysis reassured me in my endeavors, but I was most moved by the fact that he had found the time in his busy schedule to write the text, and had done so, above all, as a gesture of friendship.

This generosity struck me repeatedly over the years. Not only would Derrida go out of his way to respond to friends' requests, he would also use these occasions skillfully to pacify their most entrenched detractors. Once I invited him to lecture at Columbia. After the lecture, Geoff Bennington and I remarked on the precision and gentleness with which Derrida had responded to questions, including obtuse ones by antagonistic faculty members and visitors from conservative architectural firms. Rather than "confusing" or "unintelligible," his analysis impressed the listener with its clarity and logic. What he said naturally went against the grain of conventional wisdom and received ideas, against blind belief in absolute values. Working in the margins, in the precarious interstices of culture, inevitably put people off-balance, especially those who believed in the primary object of Derrida's assault – the permanent or ineradicable truth.

With an inventiveness that he could apply equally to poetry, psychoanalysis, theater, and law, Derrida happily put his intelligence at the service of others. When I received the Grand Prix d'Architecture in France in 1996, the Ministry of Culture organized a celebration in the form of a public conversation between Derrida and myself. With his typical graciousness, Derrida, who had never been awarded a prestigious position in the French university system, generously rearranged his schedule to return early from a trip to India. I was thrilled at the idea of seeing him again, but less so at the thought of debating with him in front of a thousand French architects who generally opposed the interference of other cultural domains in architecture. "Architecture is architecture, philosophy is philosophy, art is art," they would say, expressing dogmatic belief in the autonomous specificity of disciplines that was still shared by many at the time. As Derrida and I began to talk, however, it seemed as if he and I were in his living room or my corner office, engaged in a private conversation or colloquial exchange, clarifying views by opening new doors onto existing territory. The restless crowd became very quiet, listening attentively to a philosopher gently expanding on an architect's intuitions or cor-

recting the architect's evident imprecisions. We talked about use, function, program, and events. As I occasionally used one term for the other, he tactfully clarified: programs, he observed, were about repetition and habit, or established patterns of use, while events were about the unpredictable, the out-of-the-ordinary. Not surprisingly, we ended the evening asking ourselves whether rearranging architecture and programs could unleash a potential for events.

Derrida's remarkable precision of thought serves as an example. The much-heralded relationship between deconstruction and architecture was never about translating a "theory" into "practice," or transposing deconstruction into the performative field of architecture. Above all, deconstruction was never about form. As Derrida relentlessly reminded us, deconstruction itself was neither system nor method: it was a strategy for interpreting our world, for clarifying it by peeling back layers of repression and accumulated habits of thought. It also was about exchanging thoughts with allies or friends from other disciplines or times, so as to use the idiosyncrasies of individual fields to clarify concepts and to refine understanding, uncovering contradictions and dislocating certainties along the way. The endeavor implicated in this relationship was not specifically architectural. It was – and is – part of a larger search that touches on different areas of society, questioning blind dogma and rigid beliefs. As one who disagreed with the centuries-old statements of architectural ideologies about good or bad form, I found in Derrida an ally who could help in my quest for a "different" reading of architecture. Together with Sergei Eisenstein, Marcel Duchamp, Jean-Luc Godard, and Roland Barthes, among others, Jacques Derrida was a friend in a long journey toward understanding architecture, culture, and society. As opposed to historical figures, he was and remains a living and vital force, an ally in the daily pursuit of thought.

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