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Our Chances. How Bernard Tschumi's retrospective quietly reaffirmed the case for architectural conjecture during the summer of fundamentalism

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Our Chances. How Bernard Tschumi's retrospective quietly reaffirmed the case for architectural conjecture during the summer of fundamentalism

Let me cut to the chase, for I have but two responses to Bernard Tschumi's recent retrospective at the Centre Pompidou, and these I wish to join as inseparable. First, as an experience, the exhibition was neither spectacular nor mesmerizing nor dramatic in any sense, notwithstanding the amount of volume it demanded from the museum, the number of projects exhibited, and the quantity and variety of material displayed. However, neither was it a book on the wall, the all-too-common form of sadistic exhibition intended to coerce the visitor into submitting to the significance of the subject matter and the value of the institutional expenditure. Nor did I find myself in a depot of stuff waiting on floor and walls to be shipped via camera to a catalogue, apathetic to its effect on me or the immediate presence of anyone, a style of exhibition apparently very much in vogue this summer. Tschumi's retrospective was, rather, precisely calculated as a work of social theater, *as it had to be*.

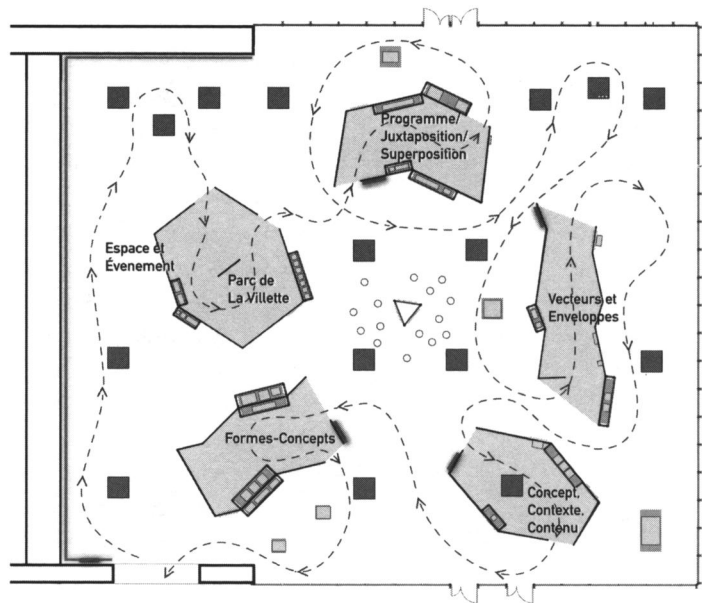
After all, every exhibition in a museum is a form of social theater with a *program and a plan*. "Social theater" here is intended as shorthand to invoke the theoretical view of any theater, traditional or not, in which the audience is understood as an active actor, whether knowingly or not. Despite the most

adamant efforts of curators and installation designers to take total control, an exhibition remains the most undisciplined, ephemeral form of social theater. Simply put, people look at what or who they want, see what they want and not what they should, ignore what they want, pay attention if they want, talk to each other whenever they want, and given half a chance, circulate any way they want. Therefore the exhibition is the one form in which unscripted events, the *sine qua non* of Tschumi's architecture theories, are most likely to occur in very short order. Exhibitions are not stand-ins for architecture, though they are related. Their event-spaces are too truncated and the level and spectrum of awareness too narrow. That architecture is another form of social theater, however, is a conjecture implicit in Tschumi's theories, which hold that the incorrigible promiscuities that give rise to spontaneous events in buildings are attributable to the very structure of the architecture.

Tschumi's exhibition design was calculated, to be sure, but to avoid delight or irritation, fascination or tedium; indeed, to avoid simple reactions, feelings, and emotions. To achieve that aim, he joined the peculiar gaze evoked by specimen cabinets to the conceptual density, layering, and undulating atonality of one of those late serialist compositions characterized by steely reserve. I should here name something by Boulez, but actually Berio's *Sinfonia* came to me in the exhibition and has remained as a persistent sense memory of it. A possible motive for so modulating his installation reinforces my second response: that with this exhibition Tschumi confirms, to my mind at least, his status as the most accomplished theoretical architect of his generation.

This seems difficult to contest, but I suppose I should still offer it as an opinion: the concept of a theoretical architect was one of the dominating motifs of the 20th century and remains lively today. For a service professional, the qualities and effects of a building in its first generation are rightly the measure of the architectural achievement. The status of the building as such for the theoretical architect is less clear, since for that genre of practice, the dissemination and influence of architectural ideas is at least as important as a resulting building. Thus, as concerns the authoring architect, all of the production – the process, presentation, and all postproduction materials, say for an exhibition, and the construction documents and building itself, of course, should it be built. But also all of the theoretical writings and other projects by the architect gather to give birth to an indissoluble theoretical manifold, one that continues to evolve under the influence of the writings, commentaries, and related designs by others.

"ARCHITECTURE: CONCEPT & NOTATION," BERNARD TSCHUMI
RETROSPECTIVE AT CENTRE GEORGES
POMPIDOU, PARIS, APRIL 30–JULY 28,
2014. EXHIBITION PLAN. ALL IMAGES
© BERNARD TSCHUMI ARCHITECTS
UNLESS NOTED.



In this formulation of theoretical architecture, publication of an architectural work, built or not, is the principal vector of its theoretical manifold. One might think of an analogy to a composer such that project is to score as building is to performance, with the intriguing difference that scores are performable many times and places, while buildings, usually only once and in one place.

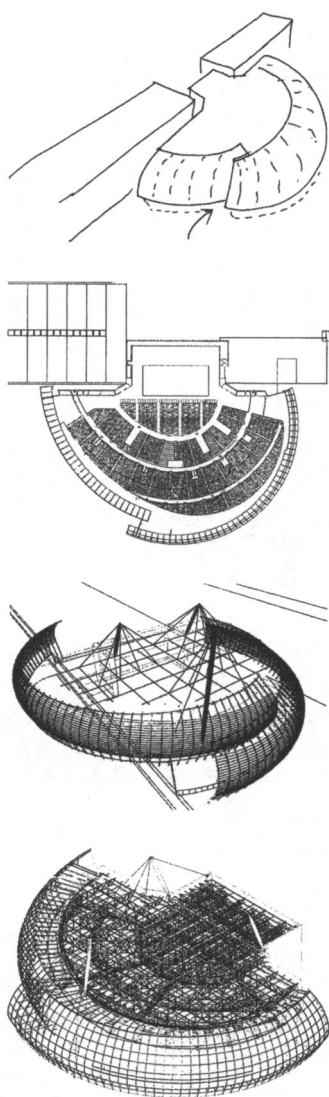
Furthermore, often an unbuilt project or even a single feature of one – one drawing or a model – spawns its own independent theoretical manifold. Examples abound, but one need think no further than the Maison Dom-ino diagram, by far the single most influential work of theoretical architecture in the 20th century, though one whose vast and various influences are entirely divorced from any relation to the original building project. It is no surprise to find it as the first diagram on the first page of “Manifestos: Space and Event” in the Exhibited Projects section of the Tschumi catalogue. It is because of this formulation as well that I stress the inestimable importance of the exhibition as such to theoretical architecture, for as central as the publication is, the exhibition often calls forth postproduction concept material, drawings, films, models, and the like that occupy center stage as theoretical material in its own right. Peter Eisenman’s axonometric projection model of House X and Rem Koolhaas’s solid/void reversal model for the Trés Grand Bibliothèque competition are cases in point, as is much of the material exhibited in the Parc de La Villette section of Tschumi’s exhibition.

More important than any postproduction material in this particular case, however, is the accelerating tendency made far more evident here in the proximity of the projects and the access to original materials of the architect's theoretical stance on an unmannered approach to a project's engineering and construction. La Villette is chock full of physical tricks and mannerisms, from the obvious dematerializing use of color on the follies to the cunning change of steel/carbon composition in the bridges to keep the members spanning different lengths at the same thickness, in service of a naïve equation of abstraction and notation with ideation. The '90s seems a period of equivocation, but by the late '90s – Le Fresnoy seems the turning point away from such hijinks – the trend was fully underway, and with the Zenith projects and buildings its maturation into a theoretical principle is heralded.

This brings us to my second point: the assertion of Tschumi's ascension as the most accomplished theoretical architect of his generation. For nearly 45 years Tschumi has produced texts, projects, and buildings of inestimable power and influence and undoubtedly stands with Robert Venturi/Denise Scott-Brown, Aldo Rossi, Eisenman, and Koolhaas as the post-war inductees to the pantheon of theoretical architects initiated by Frank Lloyd Wright, Adolf Loos, and Le Corbusier. There are others members, of course, but these nine I would argue constitute the major arcana. So, then, how do I now arrive to nominate Tschumi from among his peers as the most accomplished? More important, why bother? Is it not mere self-indulgent folly? What purpose does it serve?

For theoretical reasons, I think the answer in the context of this review is that it is incumbent upon criticism to raise the question and attempt to answer it in argument, precisely so that a sober stocktaking in support of a continuation of theoretical work can proceed without the trepidations and anxieties that today seem to traumatize it, such as the irrational fear that architectural theory in its most provocative speculations will never be borne out. And if there is anything the retrospective makes certain as its holistic effect, it is this: more than the body of work of any of his peers, Tschumi's work to date, in its totality, clearly provides that possibility.

First and foremost, Tschumi's theoretical treatment of the *event* in and for architecture is the single most influential and longest lived topic in 20th-century architectural theory bar none, including function, collage organizations, psychogeography and *détournement*, context, formal relations, and the



BERNARD TSCHUMI ARCHITECTS,
ZENITH AND EXHIBITION COMPLEX,
ROUEN, FRANCE, 1998–2001. FROM
TOP: STUDY DRAWING, PLAN, STRUC-
TURAL DRAWINGS.

linguistic model, whether semantic or syntactic. All of these others were crucial areas of research, and all have approached closure. The work on the event, on the other hand, as conceived by Tschumi and expanded upon by later theorists and architects, continues to develop, and is pursued with as much vigor and inventiveness today as when Tschumi posited his initial, and in retrospect naïve, experimental conjectures, trans-programming, cross-programming, and dis-programming. We have scratched the surface, more than scratched it, but we are far from approaching any real understanding of a building's relation to spontaneous events, not to mention architecture's potential instrumental powers to inflect that role, though the question still fascinates.

Second, unlike his peers, Tschumi from the outset of his writings formulated an essential conjecture for the intrinsic *theoretical* role of building: "Architecture is the materialization of concepts," which is why the evolution from the early abstract/notational mode of materialization to the degree zero mode is so important to the consideration of his work. The notational period allowed him for a time to adopt the then prevailing position that all production was equally architecture: drawings, models, buildings – which at that time meant only La Villette – and thus to interpret all of his production as the materialization of concepts – too easy! This stance, however, conflicted with his work on the event. For that issue to have any teeth, materialization had to mean building, and the role of the other material had to in some sense be assigned to the presentation and clarification of the concepts.

So when I visit a Tschumi building there is no question about it, the materialization of the concepts is beyond doubt, and these concepts are by no means quotidian "solutions" to program and context. They are, rather, sophisticated socio-architectural conjectures that subtly inform every decision, from siting to space planning to construction to detailing.

For an all too brief partial account of one example, the original Zenith concert hall in Rouen appears as a straightforward, high-tech solution to a standard building type. This misdirection of expectation, encountering the familiar rather than the exotic, is a fundamental attribute of the degree zero effect, as it quickly moves the architecture from the focused attention of its audience into the middle ground of attention, the architectural parallel of the attention zone used by a soundtrack in a film – not too diminished, not too present, and never monotonous. Evidencing his loyalty to a critique of capitalist subjectivity, Tschumi does not permit the traditional celebration of



ZENITH AND EXHIBITION COMPLEX.
PHOTO © PETER MAUSS.

individuality affected by a ceremonial entry. Rather, the great torus cues well in advance the gathering nameless to the pending formation of an audience. Each person pierces the form tangentially through a fissure, as particles drawn inside by the power of an immanence. Immediately, fascination with the structural framework between the two skins, exposed by the break, further lures attention away from the entry, completing the ambition for the initial promenade to subordinate individuality to the collectivity. There, in the interstitial space between the skins the form transforms into a vortex of circulation, modulating the attention and physical proximity into the gradual condensation of an ad hoc collective. When they arrive inside, they see that all of the seats are uncolored and transparent, a last erasure of any trace of identity and a first step in the mutation of the close, critical attention of a political congress into the transported affective attention of a musical audience. Truly brilliant, really, and to my knowledge, not nearly as appreciated as it deserves to have been.

Again and again, not just in Rouen, but in New York, Athens, Le Fresnoy, Miami, Paris, Cincinnati, wherever I have gone, the compelling presence in architectural matter of such architectural ideas cannot be mistaken.

More often than not, however, that presence has posed a serious problem for me. I understand the concepts and admire them, but they are so present, so adamant, they come perilously close to rendering the building inert, to freezing rather than mobilizing any potential to encourage events. There is no doubt that Tschumi has acquitted his theoretical responsibility in his buildings as an experimentalist with courage, rigor, and integrity. But for me personally, while they are in general great theoretical achievements, they are not in general great buildings; they are, rather, quite hit and miss.

As a theorist, however, I wrestle with this issue; it matters a great deal. What is the problem? Maybe there is none at all, since my notion of great building is clearly uncritical. Or perhaps I am the wrong evaluator, even *precisely* the wrong evaluator. On the other hand, should there not be some manifestation, some consequence of the concepts other than their legibility to close reading? Is this not the very essence of the tension between his work and the American formalist school?

What minimum duration or circumstance is required for the likelihood of a quotidian event space augmented by architecture to become manifest? What would its evidence be? Or if, as I have suggested, the event effect depends on a calculated misdirection of attention, much as a soundtrack does in a film, perhaps my expert relationship to the concepts negates my susceptibility to their event effects. Tschumi does not address these questions, though they have been raised and addressed to some extent by other theorists.

For many years now, I have thought that the solution to the problem relates to the question of representation and translation. Tschumi often notes that the idea of space is not a space. Would it not be true as well that there is no reason to believe that the literal materialization of a concept, such that one reads the concept in the form, would retain any performative relation to that concept other than to indicate its legacy?

Another issue that I and others have considered derives from Deleuze and Guattari's early discussion of art's effects in terms of percepts, concepts, and affects, in precisely the same passages in which they begin to consider the event. Perhaps the fault in the relation between Tschumi's theories and buildings, if indeed there is one, lies somehow in his strict commitment to the direct materialization of concepts rather than a pursuit of the production of affects. While I remain committed to a discussion of affect in the discourse of architecture, I have never been persuaded by any argument relating it to event theory, primarily because the work on affect is still in general not very rigorous.

I much prefer the later arguments of Deleuze himself after 1981, where he radically distinguishes the sciences, philosophy, and art and their internally coherent but incongruent mappings of reality. At this point and afterward in his writing, concepts belong exclusively to philosophy, percepts and affects to the arts, and functives to the sciences. Which would mean, assuming you are not one of those who thinks architecture is a science, that Tschumi has always been working exclusively with percepts and affects (both of which include plenty of room for thinking on the artist's part, in Deleuze's view) regardless of the language he uses to describe his own work. At the exhibition, the degree zero construction issue reminded me of a passage from Deleuze's study of Francis Bacon, in which he argues that there are no feelings or emotions produced by a Bacon painting, only pure affect. For the first time it occurred to me that I might have underestimated Tschumi's work for decades.

I have long known that pure affect, a *sensation without meaning or feeling or emotion that sets these into motion as indeterminate, though structured inevitabilities*, is what the architect has had in mind when he says "red is not a color" with reference to La Villette. But when it came to event theory, I have for all these years remained unthinkingly under the sway of the early naïve formulations without realizing it. That is, still looking for silly occurrences in the architecture like a dumb child, as if just the right architectural gesture or material might spontaneously give rise to slam dancing, and as if that would be a good thing for every possible institution, or anyone, for that matter. Now I believe that Tschumi's work might be best understood as suggesting that architecture is capable of injecting doses of pure affect, a sensational disturbance beyond quotidian building that operates beneath intellection as its event mechanism. This would then unfold in various social ways as much over time as sense memories might in the moment as an action.

Whether this line of thinking proves fruitful or not, one thing is clear. I have yet again found an independent line of inquiry of general interest to the discipline stimulated by Tschumi's work. As a theoretical architect, Bernard Tschumi has laid the infrastructure for both theorization and experimentation with such rigor, clarity, and courage that every result counts as a contribution, positive and null, and generations of architects continue to derive impetus, direction, and purpose for their own inquiries and tendencies. He does not produce followers or epigones, he produces architectural knowledge. *QED.*

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