

Anyone

Modes of Inscription

Author(s): Bernard Tschumi

Source: *ANY: Architecture New York*, Writing in Architecture (May/June 1993), pp. 50-53

Published by: Anyone Corporation

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41845559>

Accessed: 16-06-2017 21:22 UTC

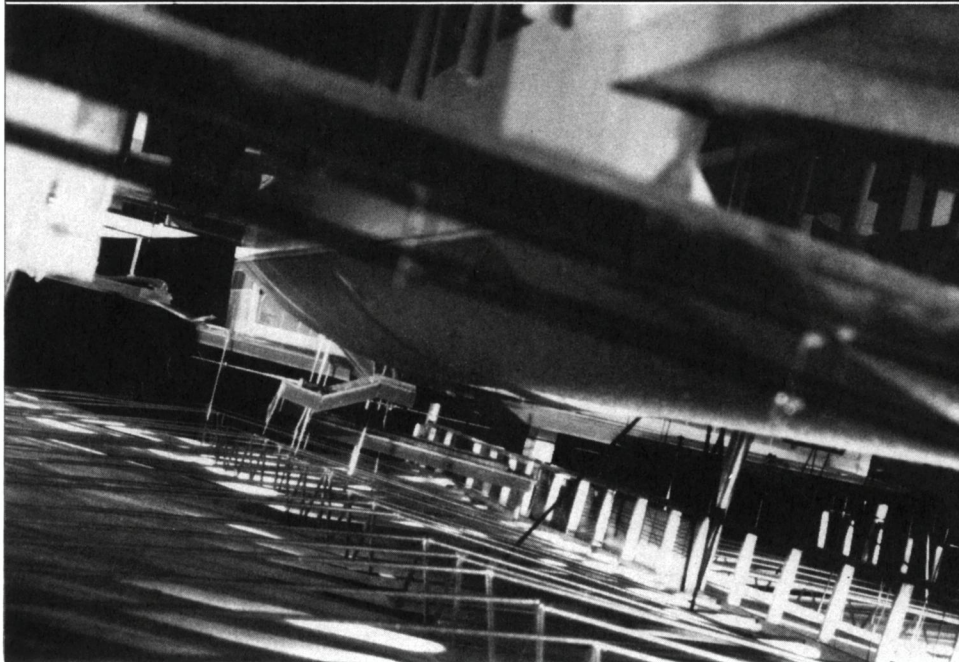
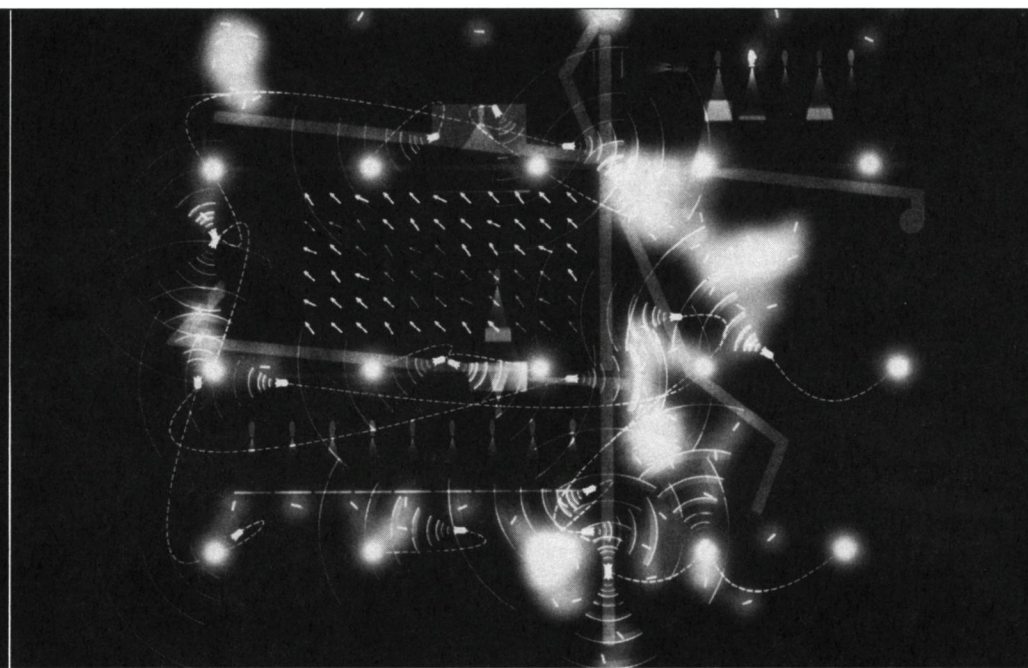
JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Anyone Corporation is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *ANY: Architecture New York*

"a mode of spacing
that gives its
place to events"



BERNARD TSCHUMI MODES OF INSCRIPTION

Cynthia Davidson: I would like to talk with you about the different ideas that "writing in architecture" could mean. To begin, let's consider Derrida's definition of writing. He says, "We say 'writing' for all that gives rise to inscription in general" and speaks of several kinds of writing, including cinematography, choreography, sculpture, even athletics. Can we consider this notion of inscription applicable to architecture as well?

Bernard Tschumi: Let's keep the question but let's leave Derrida out, otherwise we will have to match his insights. Inscription takes different forms, and whether it is done through writing or through drawing or through any other mode of communication, our reading of the architecture that results is altered. I believe that writing is only one of the different modes of apprehension of architecture. Drawing, model making, building, even filming are others. Each time, the mode of apprehension changes the architecture. In other words, yes, writing is a form of inscription, and it is one of the various forms of inscription applicable to architecture — but only one. There is no way to consider that writing takes a precedence over other modes of inscription.

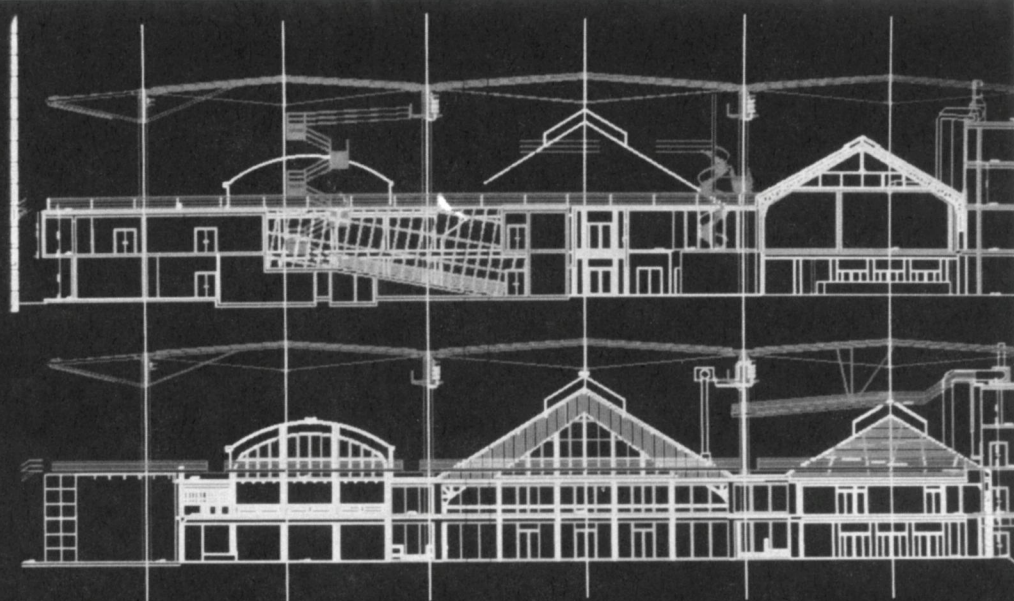
Is there any mode that has precedence?

No, but there are times in history where one mode of inscription becomes more potent or more capable of exploring one area of architecture than other modes. Certainly in the 18th century drawing was a more important tool than writing. And it's not an accident that you are interested in doing an issue about writing because in the recent past, writing has been a very important tool to our exploration of architecture. At least as powerful as drawing. But it could also be something else: film, computer-generated simulations.

You say "recent." Do you believe that the time in which the mode of writing was more dominant has passed? Or is it with us?

No, I think it is with us, and whether we are witnessing the end of the period or not, I don't know. But it has certainly been happening for about 15 or 20 years. What is very important is to distinguish two types of writing: one that I would call writing about architecture and one that I would call writing of architecture. Writing about architecture is the most common. For example, at Columbia University we are currently preparing an anthology of architectural writings from 1943 to 1968. It is interesting to notice that the texts are generally descriptive. They analyze a situation and suggest

architecture
of the
event



Ateliers
Nietzsche's
umbrella

remedies or solutions. They are very seriously done, but in themselves they are not architecture. In the period that followed, since 1968, a number of texts were written that are architecture. Some people may say they are substitutes for architecture, which is actually probably the same thing, that is, that architectural concepts were expressed through the mode of writing. They are not writing *about* architecture. They are architecture in themselves. In other words, they propose forms of architectural strategies, literally in the form of a substitute. But isn't an architectural model also a substitute for the actual building reality? Peter Eisenman once made the argument that the building reality was the substitute for the model. So this interchangeability between the different modes of inscription is totally real in architecture. Once again, the reason I am saying that maybe we are coming out of the writing mode is that at the moment there are other modes of inscription available and, therefore, writing is only one tool among others.

Why has writing been important to you?

Because there are certain ideas that can be explored best with that mode of fabrication. The logic of words allows you to apprehend certain concepts better than, let's say, the logic of materials. There is an abstraction, there is a conceptual dimension to architecture that is inevitably part of architecture and that, not surprisingly, can be mastered more precisely

through the conceptual means of words. The fascinating thing about architecture is that we are constantly in a tension between the conceptual and the material; thus we can never reduce architecture to a single mode of inscription. Architecture is never just the building. It is also the discourse about the building. It is also the representation of the building, the "mediatization" of the building.

How does the relationship between writing and mathematics bear on architecture?

You can always make a correspondence or try to find a mediation or an intermediary between the architecture and an other. A famous example is Terragni's Danteum, where the architect reaches for a go-between to link Dante's writing with architecture. What does he use as the mediator? He uses mathematics. He uses numbers. The interesting thing about math for me, however, is something else, is its procedure, its devices, the montage of math — that is, the hypothesis and its demonstration. I find the notion of the theorem absolutely fascinating because it is so close to the notion of the architectural concept. Architects can propose a concept and then demonstrate it in the same way in which a mathematician can demonstrate a theorem. One must demonstrate that it is applicable. And

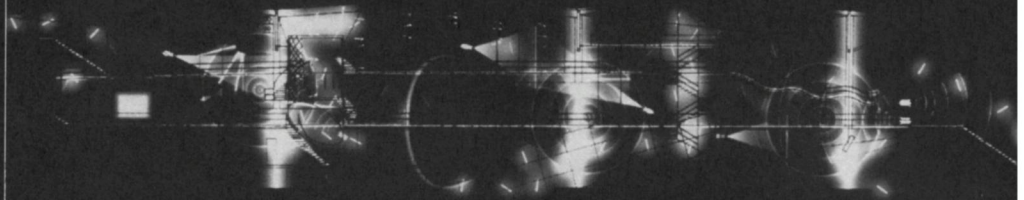
the more general the theorem, the more influential it becomes. For example, certain architectural typologies were the equivalent of certain basic theorems of architecture. When an architect invents a new theorem, or an architectural culture invents a new theorem, it is a very important moment in architecture. Again I make the parallel about procedures and strategies, not directly about numbers. I'm personally not interested in number games and the sorts of things you can do with number games. I'm much more interested in some of the devices that mathematicians use, their way of thinking. That's probably because of my interest in those mechanisms or those devices. For example, I'm more interested in the mechanisms of film than in the movie itself.

Let's go back to the word. What is the relationship of the word to the image? Since you believe different modes take precedence at different times, do you feel, as Derrida has said, that the word now has supremacy?

The fascination with the media image has become another form of reference. We are witnessing that there are no more so-called supremacies, or hierarchies. I cannot say that the word is stronger than the image. I think that they all participate in different modes that define reality. And they play

Bernard Tschumi, Le Fresnoy National Center for Contemporary Arts, Tourcoing, France, 1991–92, study models, computer-generated section and lighting diagrams. In this project, a new roof is constructed like an umbrella over the leaky tile roofs of the existing 1920s structure. The new roof, supported by steel catwalks, serves as a common denominator for the various structures underneath, including two film theaters, exhibition space, film and sound studios, and a media library. The center will open in 1994.

residue
leftover
gap
margin



Dissonated,
disjuncted,
disfracted

against one another, each with its own logic. One should take advantage of the differences between those modes of inscription. In other words, a building is ultimately defined through a multiplicity of media, not by a single one: from drawings, models, exhibitions, fabricated media, simulations on computer, as well as from the actual built object. All of these are modes of inscription, each with its respective logic. Those different modes don't necessarily coincide. They often play against one another. Then the final building is built, it has again its own mode of inscription, its own misunderstanding of the building, for buildings are perceived differently from one architectural culture to another. I find it fascinating, for example, that La Villette is read differently by French architectural culture and, let's say, Anglo-Saxon architectural culture. They read it differently; they perceive different things. "Plurality" or heterogeneity of discourses means that there is no precedence; it means that there is no such thing as a dominant discourse. And I find that quite fascinating. Perhaps writing has had an effect, in the best sense, in undermining a dominant discourse about the interpretation of or the making of architecture.

Do you mean to suggest that writing has undermined the power of the image of the building?

No, writing has undermined the idea that there was only one mode of interpretation for a building. In other words, the image itself already depends on its context. How you juxtapose it with another image can change its meaning or people's perceptions of what the building is about. In this sense, writing has to challenge architectural history when it tries to give a unitary or globalizing interpretation of what architecture was. Architectural history is linear and hierarchical and wants to emphasize dominant structures. These are now discredited forms of architectural analysis.

If we were to go back in time, for example, how would you term the writing of Vitruvius?

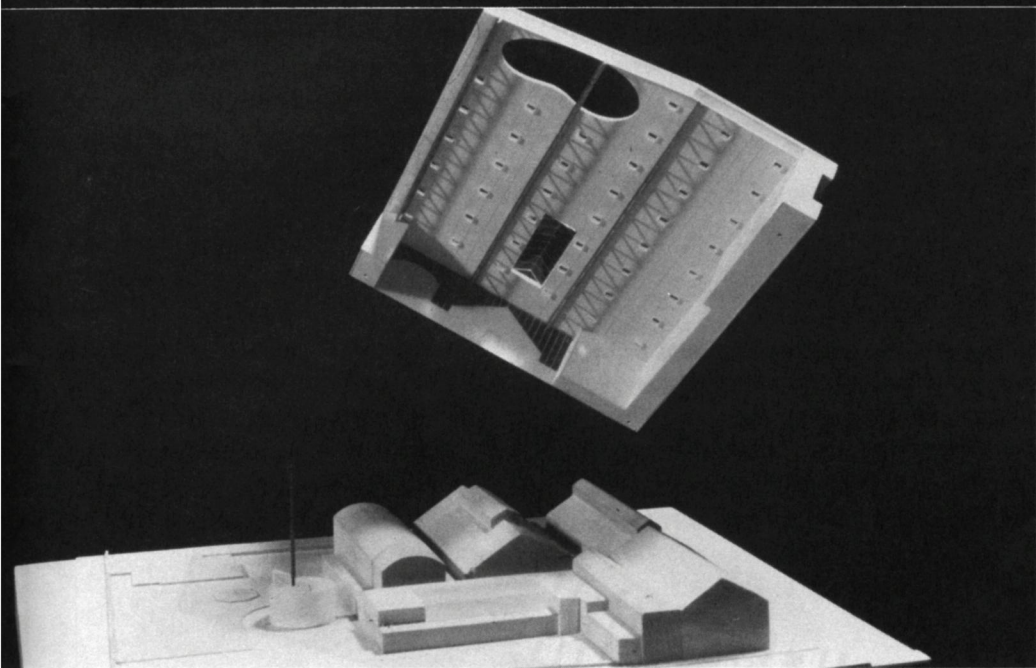
Oh, that's a good example. That's a writing that is *of* architecture because it is prescriptive. It is a manifesto, in a sense. It is trying to set up series of articulations complementary to the architecture itself. In other words . . .

Compared to, say, Sigfried Giedion.

Sigfried Giedion provides an ideological framework that is extraordinary, but it is an ideological discourse that reinforces a dominant position. We have to be careful because Giedion is quite diverse. *Space, Time, and Architecture*



"event =
disparate
multiplicity"



heterotopia.

tends very often to try to master and to articulate its own discourse, while another book, *Mechanization Takes Command*, on the other hand, acts ultimately as quite an inventive form of architecture. There Giedion articulates a mode of architectural thinking in a very direct way, and so the boundaries between history and the most positive invention are not so clear. Probably the strength of the Giedion text is that he actually tries to develop an architectural theory. He is not a scholar; he does not try to be descriptive. He is actually prescriptive, and probably all writing of architecture is prescriptive.

We have to come up with, maybe, Spiro Kostof, to be about. I am trying to think of a good example of about.

Yes, Kostof is about.

Let's talk about the cultural differences you mentioned earlier. What do you perceive as the cultural differences in the last 20 years regarding this idea of writing in architecture, or writing of architecture?

Your question could be either chronological in time or in space. Let's take it in space. I find it fascinating that the architecture culture in America uses words, language, and literature and is fascinated by them. The architectural culture in France dismisses this completely. There is a complete split between architects and writers in France. Think of that paradox; it is probably due to the importance of the

university and the architectural discourse here in America. Nearly everyone has a level of familiarity with Foucault, Derrida, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and so on, and is able to articulate certain parallels, rightly, wrongly, misleadingly, it doesn't matter. Well, it does matter, but this adds a certain dimension.

What is the dominant mode in France today?

The supremacy of the image. Absolutely. What is called the concept in France is an image concept. It is not a thought concept. I am not being critical or negative, I am being purely analytical. Quite often the advantage of being concerned with the immediacy of the image is that you don't have to waste all of this time having anxieties about the world. Right?

You mean perhaps we are doing the wrong thing in the States by worrying about thoughts and words?

Well, it's good to worry about thoughts and words. I guess I used to spend more time in America with the word and more time in France with the image.

If the word is waning in architecture in America, is the mode of the image rising in American architectural culture? Or is it something else

entirely? You said earlier that you weren't sure whether it was ending.

It is something else. It is a question of degree. I think something very important has happened in terms of the American architectural discourse. It is incredibly sophisticated and is actually reasonably well-informed and able to deal with a variety of conceptual dimensions. Going back to the notion of the mode of inscription, the current architectural discourse can deal with modes of inscription that have to do with writing or drawing or with computer-generated images or with, of course, actual building, but without considering that one mode has a superiority over the other. I find it reassuring that others are exploring conceptual devices that are at the same time direct images. I think of people like Hani Rashid, whose work is not about art, not about writing, but is of architecture. It is not *of* art, it is not *of* writing, it is *of* architecture. Yet it participates in what has been quiet through all of these other discourses — writing, film, and so on. I think in reality a whole era has dealt with that.

This is why I asked you about mathematics, because it, too, conceptually seems to be in play, if only for its abstract qualities.

This is also an incredibly abstract talk, but it is very reflective of a contemporary architectural reality,

which is extremely abstract, far more abstract than it has been ever, I think. I don't know of any period in architecture that has been as abstract, as nonrepresentative, as nonillustrative as this one. The abstraction of the modern movement was a tale for children compared to now. The fascinating thing is, the current abstraction allows a whole variety of architectural attitudes including the ability to transform things that are not abstract at all, such as everyday life. I would imagine that many of the people you have included in this issue have an architectural practice that is far more abstract than anything that has preceded it in history.

That is what the abstraction of ANY, the word itself, symbolizes.

Bernard Tschumi is dean of Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation. He is the architect of several award-winning projects including the Parc de la Villette in Paris and the master plan for Chartres, France.