

Art/Architecture/Concept

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In January 1975, a two-day symposium titled *Conceptual Architecture* was held at Art Net, a gallery and event space founded by Peter Cook in London.¹ Its proceedings survive in the form of a series of videos, shot by Dennis Crompton and accessible—on account of the standard videotape format of the time—as a sequence of one-hour long episodes that are viewable on the website of the Architectural Association and also on the school’s YouTube channel.² Seen through the optic of the videos the event unfolds within a putrid yellowish-green miasma, its audience slouched in deck-chairs while listening to speakers who deliver their presentations from behind what looks unnervingly like a front-loading washing machine surrounded by tropical pot plants. Toward the close of the first session, proceedings are interrupted by the appearance of three people in gorilla costumes, who wander around the room, growling. One of them begins to groom the hair of Charles Jencks, who is taking questions at the time. Oh it’s easy to protest, Peter Eisenman is heard to protest, when you are in disguise.

1. It operated between 1973 and 1979. See ‘97. ART NET, NO. 1, LONDON’, in *Clip, Stamp, Fold: The Radical Architecture of Little Magazines, 196X to 197X*, ed. Beatriz Colomina and Craig Buckley (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2006), p. 139.

2. www.aaschool.ac.uk/VIDEO/lecture.php?ID=2342 etc. and www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqCg1WLUMac etc. (both last accessed on 2 May 2018).

The symposium was chaired by Robert Maxwell, although I gather that it was Peter Cook who convened the event and invited the speakers. At the outset, in his introductory remarks, Maxwell makes clear that this is a symposium to do with thinking about the relations—or the possibility of a new kind of relation—between art and architecture. The explicit context for this—marked in the event’s title—was Conceptual Art, whose ‘organized onset’, as it has been described,³ had taken place seven years earlier, although its characteristic tendencies and preoccupations had been visible from at least the beginning of the 1960s—and before, from Duchamp. Reflecting this, the advertised list of speakers included the curator Roselee Goldberg and the artists John Stezaker and Victor Burgin, although the latter did not in the end attend. On the side of architecture, besides Jencks, Cook and Eisenman, there was Will Alsop, Cedric Price, Colin Rowe, Dalibor Vesely, Joseph Rykwert, and Bernard Tschumi. Watching the recordings, we at times see James Stirling in the audience, as well as the former compatriots from the Institute of Contemporary Art’s Independent Group, Richard Hamilton and Reyner Banham, to whom I will shortly return.

This 1975 happening was certainly not the first time that the idea of conceptual architecture had been explicitly addressed. Five years earlier, in 1970, the critic and curator John Margolis had, on the invitation of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, guest-edited a double-issue of *Design Quarterly* on the topic. Focusing on—as Margolis put it in his letter to contributors that was reproduced in edited form at the start of the issue—‘the communications environment; the psychological environment; the entertainment environment,’ the special issue included contributions from, amongst others, Ant Farm, Archizoom, François Dallegret,

Haus-Rucker-Company, and Ed Ruscha.⁴ It was opened by Eisenman’s ‘Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition’, which consisted of four almost blank pages—almost blank because they were patterned by constellations of footnote references, presumably positioned in relation to an invisible article that ran below them. As it was published, the only continuous and legible text was that of the footnotes themselves at the bottom of each page and Eisenman’s own biography at the end.

My aim here, then, is to use the 1975 symposium as a case study in order to test an argument about the relations between art and architecture, recognizing that this is a thought experiment which may appear overly speculative and schematic to many—perhaps most—readers. It begins with the bald generalization that architecture has characteristically described what it is—that is, what makes it architecture—through an appeal to some idea of ‘art.’ This is not the only way that architecture has narrated how it comes to be itself, but it is an important one and persistent enough to remark upon. How would we historicize this? Evasively, I would say it occurs within the ‘modern period’, by which I mean from the eighteenth century onward—but it is difficult to draw very clear boundaries here. The idea is that architecture is building that surpasses building by virtue of the addition of art in some way. This has various expressions, such as architecture as ‘building with art’ or ‘the art of building’ (and these are not necessarily the same thing, although at times they might be). A perhaps overly-familiar example is Nikolaus Pevsner’s declaration at the beginning of his 1943 *Outline of European Architecture* that:

A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture. Nearly everything that encloses space on

a scale sufficient for a human being to move in is a building; the term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal.⁵

Here, it is the presence of art as it is actualized in the aesthetic status of the construction that makes architecture architecture. This is a longstanding and still current idea.

Consider, for example, Steven Holl's short text from 2013, 'What is Architecture? (Art?)'. Organized under four headings—'Abstract', 'Use', 'Space', and 'Idea'—the article constantly asserts, sometimes explicitly and sometimes by implication, the centrality and necessity of art to architecture while at the same time taking care to distance and differentiate it. So, architecture has to deal with 'constraints of engineering safety, function, climate, responsibility, and economy', yet these it 'transcends to inspire us with ideas in space and light—qualities achieved in the abstract'. Architecture might be useful, but mere function is surpassed in what Holl calls 'its highest "use"', which is 'to deeply move us'; again, 'Drawing us from one location to the next, architecture is the art of space'.⁶

This tension, which is compulsively played out in the various formulations of architecture's self-definition via the appeal to art, suggests that art has played the role of a supplement—in its Rousseau-esque/Derridean sense—to architecture: that is, the understanding of the supplement as the external, alien, thing that is required to be added, in this case to architecture, in order to complete it and confer its full identity and meaning. The logic of the supplement is characterized by precisely this kind of tension—that between, on one hand, appeal and deferral, and on the other, refusal and disavowal. And typically the latter has, at least since the eighteenth century, been enacted on the grounds of utility as the

basis for the differentiation of architecture from art. From the point of view of the theory of the supplement, the answer to the inside/outside question⁷ is therefore that the outside (art) is the inside (architecture), insofar as it is the foreign, non-identical presence whose addition constitutes the identity of the thing that it is differentiated from.

Going on from this, what I want to suggest is that this relation begins to be restructured in the years prior to the *Conceptual Architecture* event, and that this has as much to do with transformations in discourses of art as it does with architecture — and moreover, that this maps on to, and indeed perhaps impels, what we have learned to call architecture's turn toward theory from the late 1960s on. On the side of art, the factors that seem important to emphasize because they are consequential to this shift include: Conceptual Art's interrogation of the relations between art and language; its exploration of the institutional conditions of production and related exposure of the repressions necessary to secure claims of autonomy; and the dis-identification of the artwork with its material realization.

As one might expect, at the 1975 symposium there are various positions in evidence in relation to the notion of conceptual architecture. The presentations fall broadly into two types—those concerned to assert that architecture has always been conceptual and that therefore what we might mean by conceptual architecture can be illustrated by historical examples; and those that argue that conceptual architecture, by implicit or explicit comparison with Conceptual Art, should mean something quite different from historical forms of architecture understood to be driven by concepts. What is striking about all this, in relation to what we have just observed, is that although—as Maxwell noted in his introduction—the symposium was concerned with the relations between art and

⁵ Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1948 [1943]), xix.

⁶ Steven Holl, 'What is Architecture? (Art?)', *The Brooklyn Rail: Critical Perspectives on Arts, Politics, and Culture*, 4 September 2013 (<https://brooklynrail.org/2013/09/criticspage/what-is-architecture-art>, last accessed on 2 May 2018).

⁷ The title of the symposium on which the current volume is based, and for which this paper was first prepared, was *Inside/Outside: Trading Between Art and Architecture*.

8 As a caveat here, we need to acknowledge that some notion of the concept as being essential to architecture was not necessarily new. Thus the whole Platonic tradition, where architecture embodies a higher idea through its proportional relations—but this is metaphysical and aesthetic, in the sense that it is to do with beauty as the reflection of the divine in the sensible world and is obviously quite different from conceptual art's 'concept'.

9 Iman Ansari, 'Interview: Peter Eisenman', *The Architectural Review*, 26 April 2013 (www.architectural-review.com/rethink/interview-peter-eisenman/8646893.article, last accessed on 2 May 2018).

architecture, art or the aesthetic are rarely explicitly mentioned or appealed to. Instead what happens in this discourse is that architecture now is understood to become determined—to become possible—to the extent that it has a concept, and this in turn allows it to merge into art, the art of conceptualism, without declaring that it is doing so. In short, the reconfiguration of the practices of art and architecture under the impetus of the conceptual turn—with the foregrounding of the concept—makes them newly porous to one another and maybe even indistinguishable. In his presentation, John Stezaker went so far as to enumerate six ideas or concerns related to conceptual art and then illustrated how they could be worked through in architecture.

The new emphasis on the centrality of the concept to the definition of architecture is very clear in Bernard Tschumi's presentation, which is developed around Étienne-Louis Boullée's insistence that architecture is a product of the mind.⁸ What gives architecture its status is its ideational content, and this means that architecture can exist as much in the form of a drawing or text as in a physical construction. Indeed, returning to our architecture/building opposition, we could say that—from this point of view—what turns out to ultimately differentiate the two is the non-necessity of realizing architecture in constructed form. Compare this with a much later comment of Eisenman's, from 2013, in which he is responding to a question about his early houses: "The "real architecture" only exists in the drawings. The "real building" exists outside the drawings. The difference here is that "architecture" and "building" are not the same."⁹ This, while sharing the same logic, escalates it to the point where architecture is now understood to be negated by the act of building.

These considerations bring us to a situation in which it appears that art and architecture are at the point of collapsing

into one another. Art, post-conceptual art, is no longer in the position of a supplement as there is no longer any disavowal based on the criterion of utility, for this has been displaced by the new insistence on the conceptual basis of architecture. Utility is no longer what it was when architecture can be a drawing or a text. However, what is interesting is the way in which it comes to return. My claim here is that utility, which hitherto had been fully interior to architecture, shifts to take up the position of supplementarity that had previously been occupied by art, and that this comes to motivate contemporary architectural discourse's particular regard for pavilions, follies, and ruins, insofar as they are understood as constructions of contingent, indeterminate or suspended use.

Let's then briefly consider utility and look at how it was discussed at the 1975 symposium. Following Cedric Price's talk, there was an interesting intervention from the floor by Reyner Banham that, it seems to me, illustrates the transformation we have just described. Banham recalls that the phrase 'conceptual architecture' was used in England in the mid-1950s by Jim Richards and Robert Furneaux Jordan to characterize work that they saw as putting '... the expression and idea over and above, or as more important than, the service to the expressed needs of the client, etc. etc. etc.'¹⁰ Examples of this impulse he cites are the Smithsons' school at Hunstanton in Norfolk and the early housing projects of Stirling and Gowan. Banham observes that much he has heard at the symposium repeats this, but that the polarity has changed. What was for Richards and Furneaux Jordan 'extremely naughty, naughty and suspect' is now, 20 years later, 'regarded as something of "potential value"'.¹⁰ And while it was clearly far from the case that utility had become a non-determinant for all the speakers—Price himself being a case in point—watching the talks again, it does look like a kind of

10 www.aaschool.ac.uk/VIDEO/lecture.php?ID=2346, 4:22–6:44.

11 Peter Eisenman, 'Misreading', in *Houses of Card*, Peter Eisenman et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 167–186, p. 167.

12 Peter Eisenman, 'Post-functionalism' (1976), in *Oppositions Reader: Selected Essays 1973–1984*, ed. K. Michael Hays (New York: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 9–12.

generational shift, with both Tschumi and Eisenman speaking for an architecture released from service to functional concerns.

By the lights of the usual understandings, it becomes hard to tell architecture and art apart. But now, as I have already indicated, it is very striking how, as this discourse played out, use—which had been expelled—returned as supplement in order to permit a secondary, perhaps weaker, differentiation to take place between art and architecture. This is very evident in Eisenman's work, because it was thematized in it, but it is also there in the red follies of Tschumi's Parc de la Villette, objects whose accompanying rhetoric regarding the free play of form met a limit with their need to accommodate programme. In Eisenman's case, by the time of the 1987 essay 'Misreading' he had come to define architecture as 'the investigation of new possibilities of occupiable form'.¹¹ Here use, having been estranged, now re-entered as supplement in order to make possible and secure architecture. Certainly this was no longer function, if we mean by that culturally prescribed or ideologically determined use (Eisenman had railed against functionalism as a late form of anthropocentrism in his well-known 'Post-Functionalism' editorial for *Oppositions*).¹² Instead, the condition for use's reappearance as a determinant for architecture was that it should be emptied of all determinations—that is to say, defunctionalized—in order to be posited as an open field of possibilities. And this, insofar as it was a way of maintaining or guaranteeing architecture at its point of disappearance, might be understood as a conservative gesture. Robin Evans seems to say as much in his skeptical review of Eisenman's exhibition held at the Architectural Association in Spring 1985, in which he noted a compulsive and strategic limitation of the effects of the processes and allusions that Eisenman repeatedly

introduced into his architecture in order to 'disrupt' it. The verdict delivered by Evans was that 'Eisenman is in fact a jealous guardian of the stable and fundamental features of architecture'.¹³ Comparing the mathematical understanding of the term 'transformation' with Eisenman's enactment of it, Evans found only one example in the work that matched the total shifting of relations implied in the mathematical idea—and this is in the unoccupiable transformation of House X, as depicted in the well-known pseudo-anamorphic model. Evans again: 'If these foreign mathematical terms had been allowed to invade the work they would almost certainly have destroyed its quintessential architectural properties. They may just possibly have replaced them eventually... their permanent corruption and obliteration. A dangerous business.'¹⁴

Ultimately, here, use-as-supplement—which is to say occupiability as distinct from functionality—turns out to be protective and prophylactic. Expelled from architecture, now 'outside' it, use returns in order to produce a distancing effect that maintains and guarantees architecture by warding off the threat of its collapse, dissolution, disappearance, death. And this ultimately returns us in a striking way to Jacques Derrida's theorization of the supplement, closely tied as it was to Rousseau's confessions of onanism:

But one stroke must still be added to this system, to this strange economy of the supplement. In a certain way, it was already legible. A terrifying menace, the supplement is also the first and surest protection; against that very menace. This is why it cannot be given up.¹⁵

13 Robin Evans, 'NOT TO BE USED FOR WRAPPING PURPOSES: Peter Eisenman: Fin D'Ou T Hou S', *AA Files* no. 10 (1985), pp. 68–78, p. 70.

14 Evans, 'NOT TO BE USED FOR WRAPPING PURPOSES...', p. 70.

15 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 154.