Architecture: a self referential sign or a way of thought? Peter Eisenman's encounter with Jacques Derrida

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Peter Eisenman's relation with deconstruction and the work of Jacques Derrida, in particular, has been documented not solely by the architect himself but also by several other authors. However, the actual dialogue between Eisenman and Derrida that took place via the public exchange of letters has been little scrutinized. This dialogue presents an attempt to construct a bridge between philosophy and architecture that is hardly ever erected. Derrida's long letter to Eisenman questions him on the role of foundation in his work in view of the latter's espousal of an architecture beyond the human scale. By making long references to both Walter Benjamin and Daniel Libeskind, Derrida seizes the opportunity to interrogate Eisenman on the relation between architecture and poverty, homelessness, capitalism, war, the avant-garde, Jewish identity and the Holocaust. Eisenman counterargues that such questions that Derrida asks, although essential for every architect, cannot be answered in architecture which, for him, is a self referential sign. What Eisenman attempts to do in his architecture, according to himself, is to interrogate the relationship between form and function, question the Vwhich is neither of the order of sign, nor of being, in an effort to be analytic and critical of the architecitruvian preconditions of form (structure, function, beauty) and attain the condition of *presentness* tural media. I shall examine Derrida's encounter with Eisenman in order to juxtapose two notions of architecture at play in their dialogue: a broad one having to do with thought and the experience of the supreme and a narrower operating with the media, conventions and assumptions of the traditional profession.
Keywords: deconstruction, architecture, Derrida, Eisenman, Libeskind

Σύστημα και σκέψη. Έννοιες της αρχιτεκτονικής κατά την αντιπαράθεση μεταξύ Peter Eisenman και Jacques Derrida
Η σχέση του Peter Eisenman με την αποδόμηση και συγκεκριμένα με το έργο του Jacques Derrida έχει στοιχειοθετηθεί όχι μόνο από τον ίδιο τον αρχιτέκτονα αλλά και από διάφορες μελέτες του έργου του. Ωστόσο ο διάλογος μεταξύ των δύο, του Eisenman και του Derrida, ο οποίος έλαβε χώρα μέσω της δημόσιας ανταλλαγής επιστολών δεν έχει ακόμα μελετηθεί όπως θα του άξιζε. Ο διάλογος αυτός συνιστά μια απόπειρα να στηθεί μια γέφυρα ανάμεσα στην αρχιτεκτονική και στη φιλοσοφία που όμως δε στέφεται με επιτυχία. Το μακροσκελές γράμμα του Derrida προς τον Eisenman αφορά κυρίως στο πρόβλημα της θεμελίωσης στη δουλειά του τελευταίου, ιδιαίτερα ενώπιον της επίκλησης από τον Eisenman μιας αρχιτεκτονικής επέκεινα της ανθρώπινης κλίμακας. Με αναφορές στους Walter Benjamin και Daniel Libeskind, ο Derrida δράττεται της ευκαιρίας να θέσει στον Eisenman μια σειρά από ζητήματα αναφορικά με τη σχέση της αρχιτεκτονικής με τη φτώχια, την έλλειψη στέγης, τον καπιταλισμό, τον πόλεμο, την πρωτοπορία, την Εβραϊκή ταυτότητα και το Ολοκαύτωμα. Ο Eisenman αρκείται στην επισήμανση ότι ενώ τα ζητήματα αυτά είναι θεμελιώδη για κάθε αρχιτέκτονα, δεν μπορούν να διαυγαστούν μέσω της αρχιτεκτονικής η οποία είναι ένα αυτοαναφορικό σύστημα σημείων. Σύμφωνα με τον ίδιο, αυτό που επιχειρεί να κάνει στην αρχιτεκτονική είναι να αμφισβητήσει τη σχέση μεταξύ μορφής και λειτουργίας, να αποδομήσει τις Βιτρουβιανές προϋποθέσεις της μορφής (δομή, λειτουργία, ομορφιά) και να επιτύχει τη συνθήκη της *παροντότητας*, *presentness*, η οποία δεν είναι υπαρξιακής ή σημειολογικής τάξης. Με δύο λόγια η προσπάθεια του Eisenman είναι η κριτική ανάλυση των ίδιων των αρχιτεκτονικών μέσων. Θα εξετάσω την αντιπαράθεση Derrida και Eisenman με σκοπό να εκδιπλώσω δύο έννοιες της αρχιτεκτονικής που υπονοούνται στην αντιπαράθεση αυτή: μία ευρεία έννοια με βάση την οποία η αρχιτεκτονική νοείται ως σκέψη και εμπειρία του ιδεώδους και μια λιγότερη ευρεία που ορίζεται με βάση τα μέσα, τις συμβάσεις και τα προαπαιτούμενα του παραδοσιακού επαγγέλματος του αρχιτέκτονα.
Λέξεις κλειδιά: αρχιτεκτονική, αποδόμηση, Ντεριντά, Άιζενμαν, Λίμπεσκιντ

By architecture I mean not only the building of houses but the whole edifice of our everyday existence (Chipp 1968: 337).

Figure 1 shows Frank O. Gehry, *Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain*, 1991–1997, and a computer generated draft model. The shiny skin of titanium increases the play of light on the facets of the metal causing the character of the building to tranform dramatically with the shifting position of the sun and changing atmospheric conditions. One of the most popular sites for architectural pilgrimages) Written in 1937, these words by Naum Gabo reflect the constructivist exaltation of architecture as the "queen of all the arts" (Chipp 1968: 337). At the same time Gabo's words express the desire to expand the notion of architecture

beyond the confines of building, a desire frequently voiced in the course of twentieth century. The majority of buildings are still designed nowadays according to the two basic types that originate in antiquity and are described by Hugh Honour and John Fleming in their foreword to the sixth edition of their *World Art History*: the first with uprights, supporting horizontal members-post and lintel- and the other with walls, pierced with openings, sometimes arched. [1](Honour & Fleming 2002: 15) However, it is equally true that twentieth century architecture has radically departed from these systems of building, by espousing perplex geometries as a result of employing electronic media. Having said so, the question is now what and how these unprecedented twentieth century buildings mean, if they mean at all and what role and conception they entail for architecture. Nelson Goodman maintains that the excellence of an architectural work is a matter of enlightenment rather than pleasure, (Dickie, Sclafani & Roblin 1989: 555) a determination that also orients the present study. In other words we consider architecture not only as a practical science corresponding to human needs, not merely as a fine art providing with aesthetic pleasure but equally as a practice that grants insight into the world and the human condition, into everything that matters for us (Levinson 2005: 568).
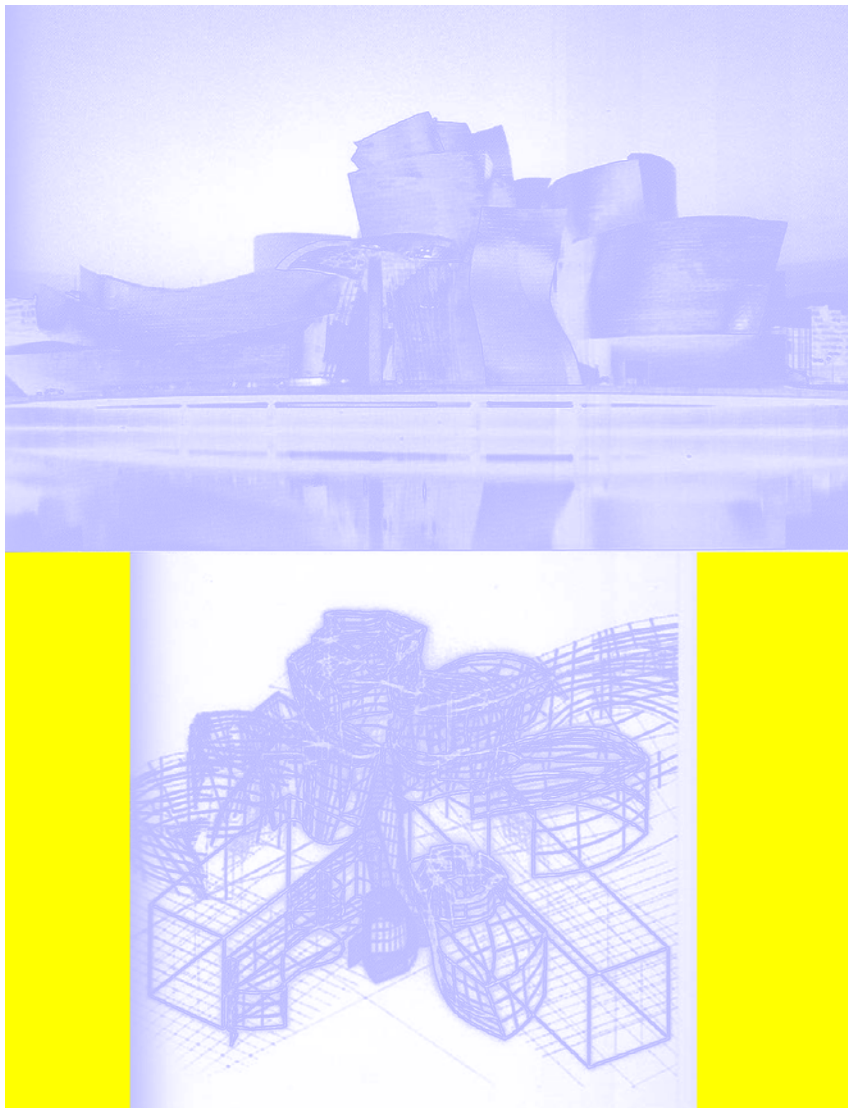
Figure 1
Frank O. Gehry, Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, 1991-1997, and computer generated draft model. The shiny skin of titanium increases the play of light on the facets of the metal causing the character of the building to tranform dramatically with the shifting position of the sun and changing atmospheric conditions. One of the most popular sites for architectural pilgrimages (source: Gössel and Leuthäuser 2005: 557).

In the interior Gehry usually has a more conventional ordering). The intensification of the tectonic aspect of contemporary architecture refers to the liberation of the architectural signifier, as this is exemplified in Frank Gehry's computer generated buildings. Such liberation opens up a wide range of possibilities for architecture as a language or as a signifying process. Architecture thus gains a broader significance than its Vitruvian denomination: it is no longer restricted by building and matches the dream of constructivists like Naum Gabo who wanted architecture an edifice of our everyday existence.

Figure 2
Interior view of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. In the interior Gehry usually has a more conventional ordering (source: Gössel and Leuthäuser 2005: 556).

Only computer technology can produce the distorted forms of the building) I have selected Peter Eisenman and Jacques Derrida, a pair comprising of an architect and a philosopher, whose collaboration under the auspices of deconstruction created a strong and seminal tendency in the contemporary state of affairs in architecture, at least in the nineteen eighties and nineties. However, I shall not focus on their joint projects but rather on their critical exchange that marked the ending of their collaboration, as I consider it more telling for two possible ways that the tectonic intensification of architecture acquires meaning. I plan to study their public exchange of letters in order to delineate two notions of architecture operative therein, a formalist one that determines architecture as a self referential sign and a philosophical one that delineates the scope of architecture in an even broader manner, matching Gabo's constructivist dream. Despite the fact that this paper was occasioned by the public, critical exchange of letters between Derrida and Eisenman and the former's letter preceded the latter's, I shall first examine Peter Eisenman's thinking and self critical architecture. Then I shall focus on Derrida's expanded notion of architecture as derived by his criticism on Eisenman and by a selection of texts and interviews.
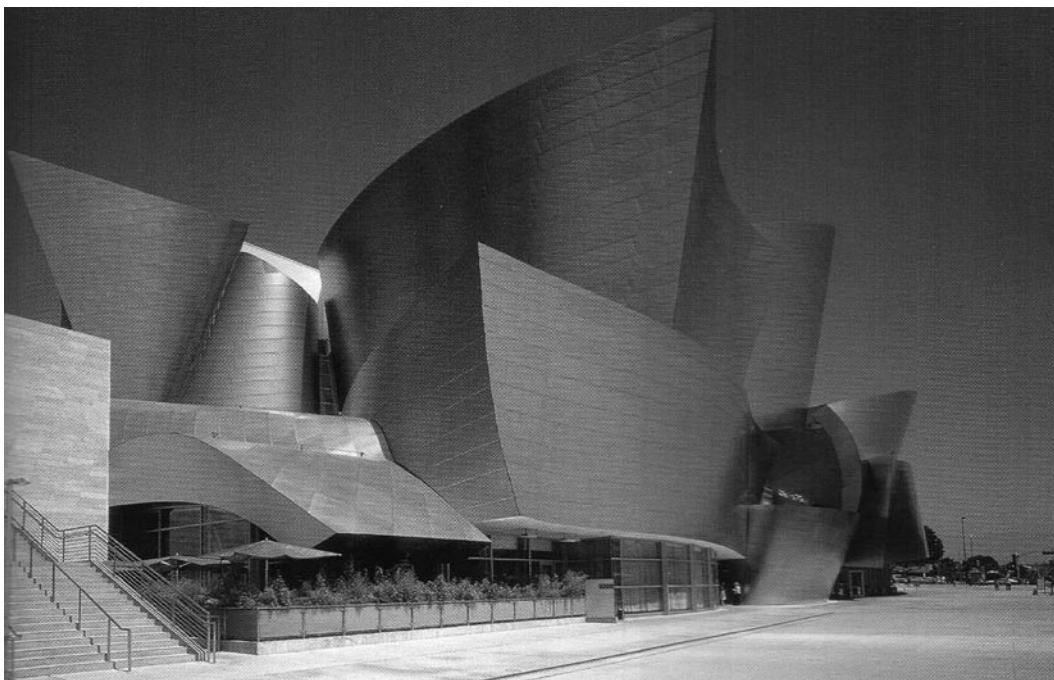

Figure 3
Disney Music Concert Hall, Los Angeles, 1987-2003 (source: Gössel and Leuthäuser 2005: 559).

An architect examining his own assumptions

A residence from the architect's formalist phase, in search for a plan after Le Corbusier and Terragni that would not thematize function. The plan is an exploration of the abstract possibilities of rotating grids. Spaces became an effect caused by the manipulation of selected elements according to a set of rules) Standard manuals for the history of architecture reflect the ambiguity that characterizes the reception of Peter Eisenman's architectural work and thinking. Marian Moffett, Michael Fazio and Lawrence Wodehouse in the course of their *World History of Architecture* characterize Eisenman as "a genius for self promotion" and report on his

> maniacal extraction of ideas from the then current cultural milieu in fields as diverse as the linguistic investigations of Foucault and the potential geometries created by fractals. Some criticize his work as contrived and opportunistic while others see it as endlessly investigative and serious to the point of tragedy. (Moffett, Fazio & Wodehouse 2003:557)
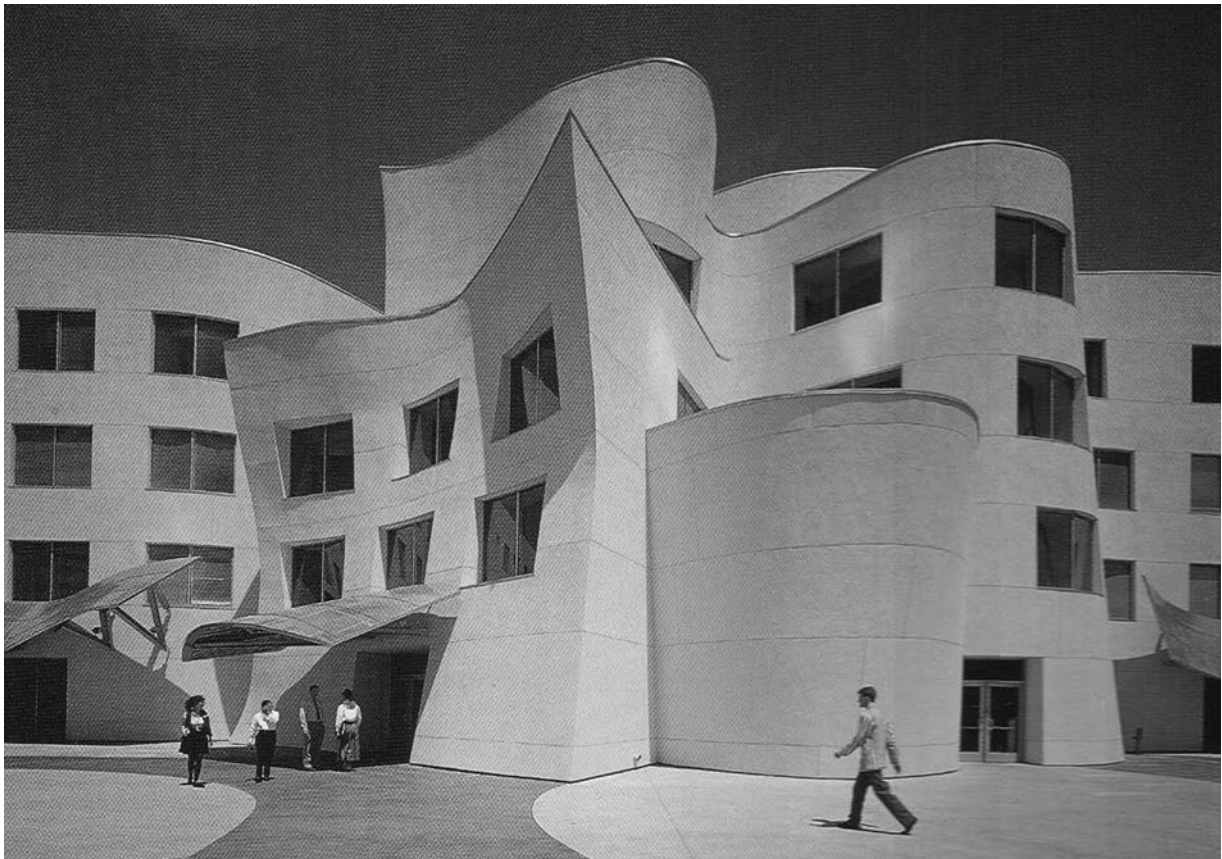
Figure 4
Team Disney Administration Building. Only computer technology can produce the distorted forms of the building (source: Moffett, Fazio and Wodehouse 2003: figure 16.43).

Figure 5
Peter Eisenman, House III, (Miller House), Lakeville, Connecticut, 1969-1971. A residence from the architect's formalist phase, in search for a plan after Le Corbusier and Terragni that would not thematize function. The plan is an exploration of the abstract possibilities of rotating grids. Spaces became an effect caused by the manipulation of selected elements according to a set of rules (source: Moffett, Fazio and Wodehouse 2003: figure 16.39).
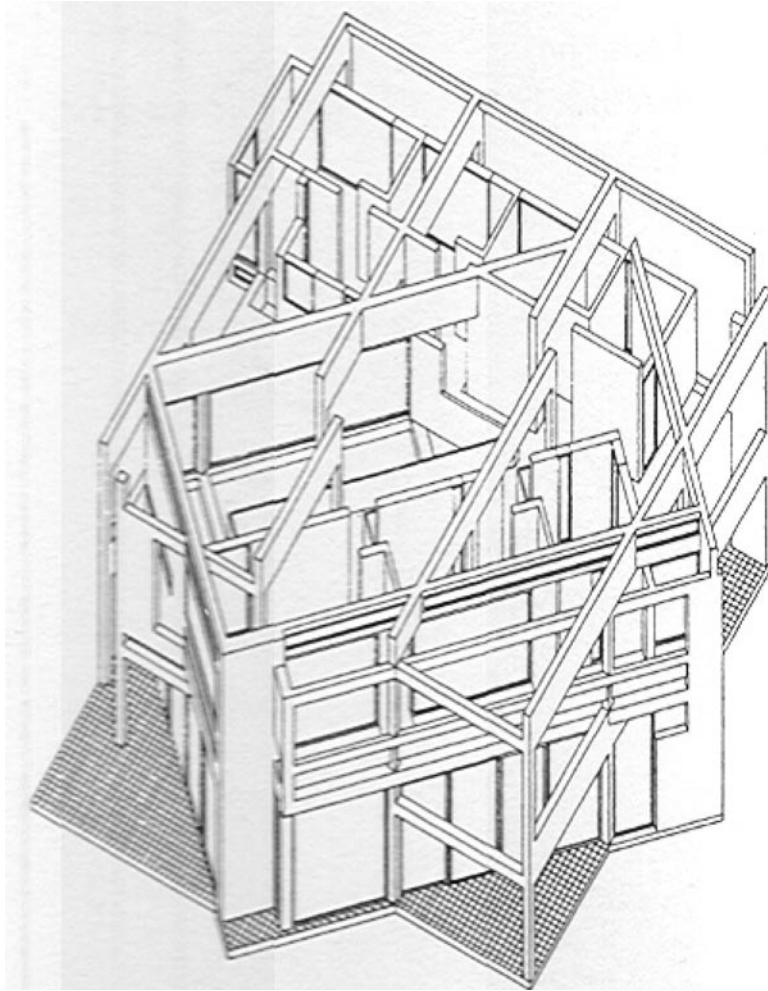
Figure 6
Axonometric view of House III (source: Gössel and Leuthäuser 2005: 415).

Jeffrey Kipnis also claims that Eisenman's philosophical disposition borders on compulsion (Eisenman 2007:vii) but provides a fairly more objective, dispassionate and detailed account of Eisenman's work and position in the history of contemporary architecture. Kipnis regards Eisenman as part of the "linguistic school" along with Aldo Rossi, Charles Jencks, Michael Graves and others. Furthermore, Eisenman was one of the key figures in the 1988 Museum of Modern Art *Deconstructivist Architecture* New York exhibition which combined the ideas of Derrida and the constructivist architecture of pre-revolutionary Russia and was curated by Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley (Eisenman 2007:x). Being a prolific writer, besides an architect, we will examine a small array of Eisenman's works, along with some of his written ideas. For it is true that it is difficult to treat Eisenman's writings as philosophy because they lack systematicity and consistence and therefore can be quite a frustrating reading. However, his texts offer an index of his ideas and facilitate access to his work, provided that they are used appropriately.

Architecture for Eisenman is a language that when it reaches a certain level of self consciousness, becomes a form of writing (Eisenman 2007: viii). Building however and not ink is the medium of writing when it comes to architecture. (Eisenman 2007: xviii) Writing secures but also destabilizes meaning, according to Jacques Derrida, to whose work Eisenman has principally turned for inspiration. One of the primary concerns of architecture, as this was defined in Vitruvius's writings, has been to produce stability through structure, not solely in the building form but also in the patterns of everyday life as well as in the familial, social and political order (Eisenman 2007:xii).

Kipnis claims:

The linguistic movement arose in large part as a response to the discrediting of modern architecture's claim to produce direct functional and social benefit. Though modernism broadly materialized as corporate style, the better future for all, it promised, did not. The linguistic movement rewrote architecture's manifesto of validation, promising a more familiar, meaningful world, rather than a better one. (Eisenman 2007:xviii)

However in case of Eiseman's architecture one ought to speak of meaning retrieval, along with meaning production. For meaning is definitely there, in the architectural conventions and official presuppositions with which all architects work and design. The meaning of architectural conventions and assumptions is however forgotten precisely because in practice it is taken for granted. The stake in Eisenman's work seems to be the following: to retrieve this forgotten meaning and reawaken the process of signification in architecture. Obviously in order to pursue such an ambitious plan, Eisenman has to thematize not only the syntax and grammar of architecture but also the process through which these become active meaning generators. To go through with syntax and grammar thematization, Eisenman destabilizes the meaning of architectural conventions by collapsing the gap between signifiers and signifieds to an absolute minimum.(Eisenman 2007:xix) Equaling signifiers and signifieds destabilizes the meaning of architectural conventions and thus the quest for meaning becomes reactivated.
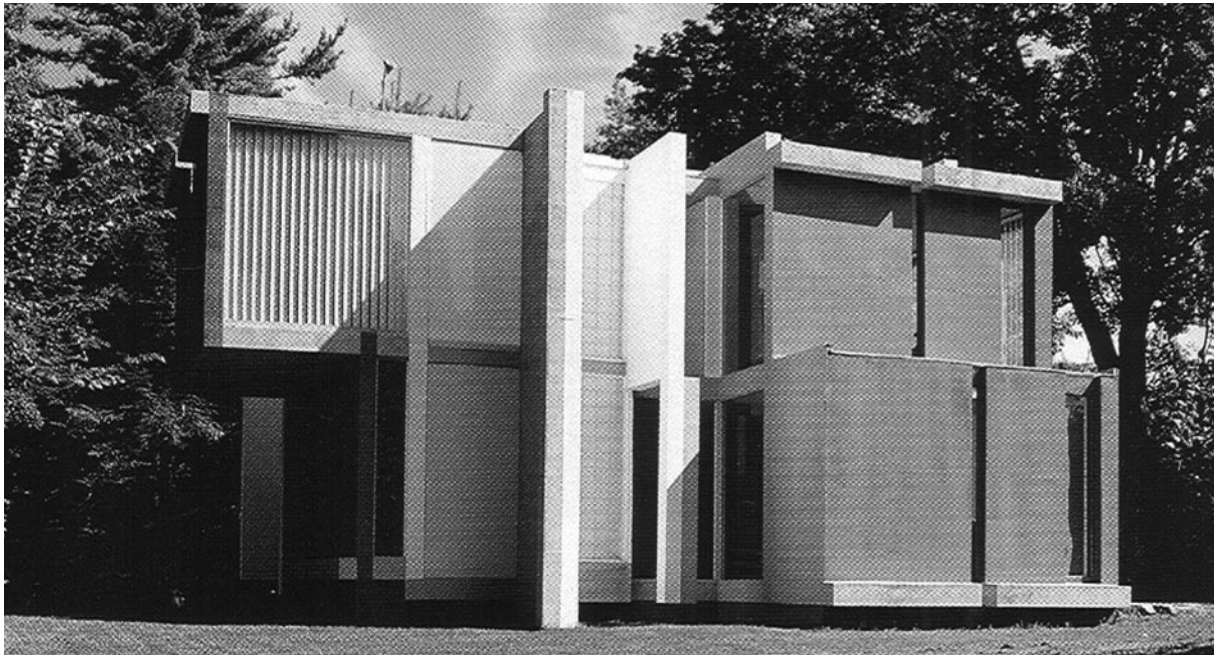

Figure 7
House VI (Frank House), Cornwall, Connecticut, 1972-3 (source: Gössel and Leuthäuser 2005: 416).

For example, in his series of houses designed and constructed since the nineteen sixties, comfort is not a primary concern as there is an explicit effort to separate form from function. Thus columns become signs of the architectural order without any static function, bearing no load whatsoever and at times may be found in the middle of a major staircase, without any concern for the disturbance caused to those using them. On the other hand, vertical elements or holes in planes distance themselves from columns and windows (Eisenman 2007: 3). In Eisenman's "Gaurdiola House" windows are on the floors and floors are unleveled.[2] Furthermore, in the Wexner Center the scaffolding remains permanent in an effort to form a situation between completion and incompletion.[3] Finally, walls are sometimes positioned merely for compositional intent rather than to demarcate useful space. In the famous House VI a green, functional stair is contrasted with a red, virtual one which is inverted overhead in an ironical and consciously contradictory effort to endorse and reject architectural convention (Moffett, Fazio and Wodehouse 2003: 558).

Seeking an architecture beyond the human scale, i.e. beyond anthropomorphism and rejecting commodity, firmness and delight, Eisenman's architecture is an investigation of form in accordance with sets of rules that defy traditional norms, e.g. his rotating grids in House VI

and his use of DNA in the design of the Biocentrum, in Frankfurt. Furthermore the architect declares that he is comfortable not wanting to live in some of the houses he designs, for the issue here is not comfort.[4] In Eisenman's own words the issues of his architecture are the following:

> Only when the thought to be essential relationship of architecture to function is undermined, that is, when the traditional, dialectical, hierarchical and supplemental relationship of form to function is displaced, can the condition of presence, which problematizes any possible displacement of architecture, be addressed. (…) As long as there is a strong bond between form and function, sign and being, the excess that contains the possibility of presentness will be repressed. The need to overcome presence, the need to supplement an architecture that will always be and look like architecture, the need to break apart the strong bond between form and function is what my architecture addresses. It does not deny that architecture must function but rather suggests that architecture may also function without necessarily symbolizing that function, that the presentness of architecture is irreducible to the presence of its functions or its signs. (…) [In my work] the buildings themselves become in a way useless- lose their traditional significance of function and appropriate another aura, one of excess, of presentness and not presence. (Eisenman 2007:3,4,5).

Figure 8
Entrance of House VI (source: Gössel and Leuthäuser 2005: 416).

Always according to Eisenman, to achieve presentness, an excess is needed that is "more or less, than the traditional, hierarchical, Vitruvian preconditions of form: structure, function and beauty" (Eisenman 2007:4). Architecture may not be able to solve and at times cannot even address problems like poverty, war, capitalism, historical memory, homelessness and the like and it is an open question whether architecture could solve such problems with the collaboration of philosophy, poetry and the rest of human sciences (Eisenman 2007:2). Architects however, Eisenman continues, to the extent that they take themselves and their profession seriously, ought to answer for themselves some of these questions, for he apparently deems them as crucial for their practice. At this point Eisenman agrees with Karsten Harries who also thinks that the problems of dwelling are not architectural but ethical and despite the fact that architecture does have an ethical function it cannot, on its own, make an ethical difference, for in the final analysis "the ethical life it expresses and represents is not its own but that of the society in which it functions" (Levinson 2005:569).
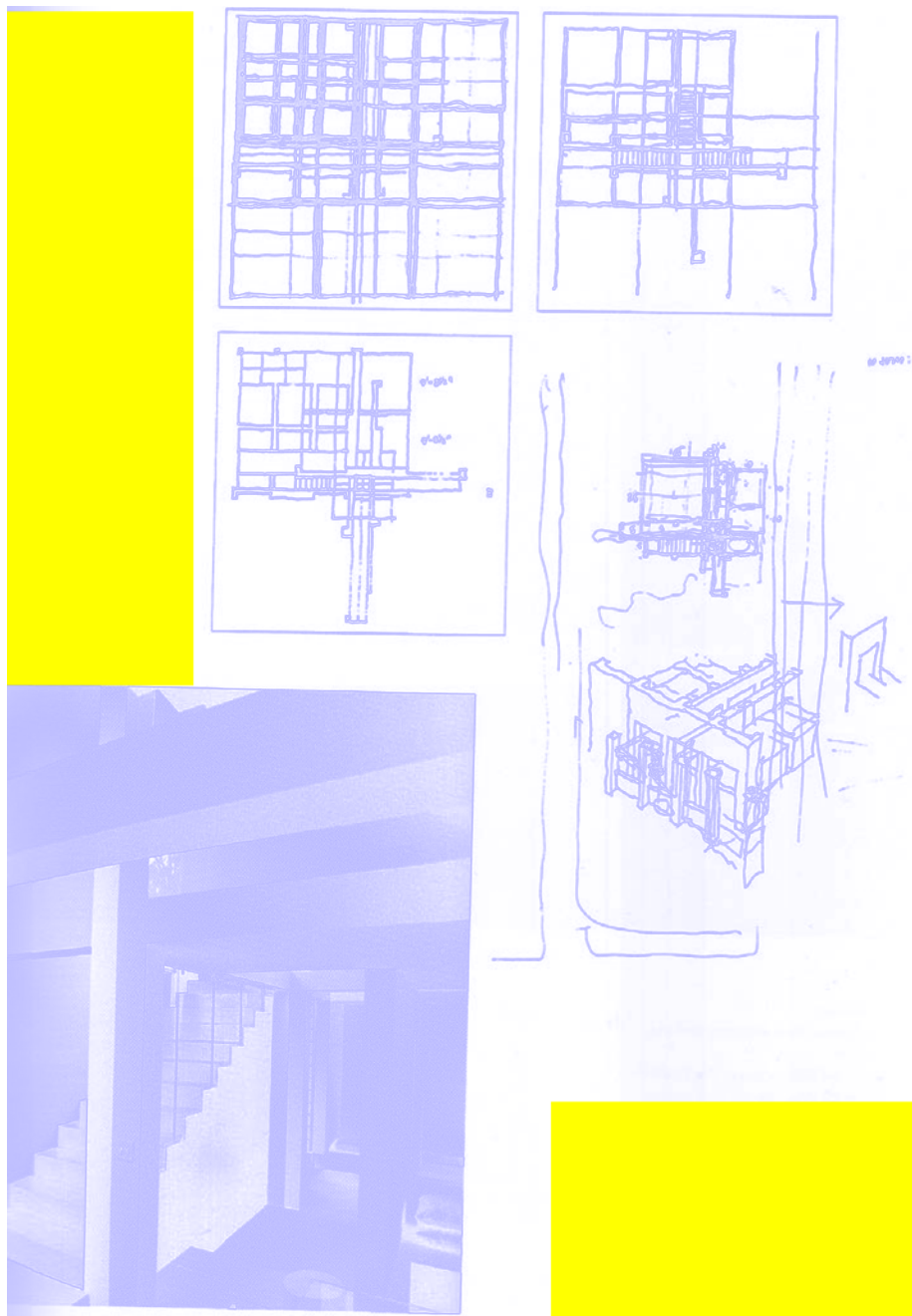
Figure 9
Interior views and plans of House VI. (Source: Gössel and Leuthäuser 2005: 416).

There are moments however when Eisenman is blatantly inconsistent, as already mentioned previously. While his whole endeavor seems to be to join efforts between philosophy and architecture, via deconstruction, he is disappointing when he uncritically finds recourse to ideas that one would rather expect from his critics, like that "one cannot do in architecture what one can do in language" (Eisenman 2007: 3) or that "it is one thing to talk theoretically and another to act on these theories" (Eisenman 2007: 5). It sounds naive for an architect who wishes to restore signification and meaning in architecture by bridging the gap between signifier and signified to rely on distinctions between theory and practice, from many points of view, a master dual opposition between signifier and signified. Likewise his view that gradually develops in his thinking and writing, namely that architecture is a form of secret writing unlike all others, both in terms of its physicality and its mysteries, "available only to a select *cognoscenti*: those inside architecture" (Eisenman 2007: xiii), borders on mystical elitism and does not fit with the ideas of an architect who radically interrogated conventional architectural assumptions with

the view to restore and reawaken meaning. From the moment there is a separation between theory and action, architecture is considered as a technique to be applied unequivocally. Such consideration however is demeaning for architecture and its long and tumultuous history.

Figure 10
Wexner Center for Visual Arts, Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, 1982-1989, a complex comprising galleries, a theater, a library and permanent scaffolding (source: Gössel and Leuthäuser 2005: 479).

There is another interesting take in Eisenman's architecture offered by Hilde Heinen (Heinen 1999:20-2) when she comments on the debate between Eisenman and Christopher Alexander in the pages of the periodical *Lotus International*. Heinen explains Eisenman's architecture and thinking in terms of his commitment to modernity and negativity. Alexander claims that architecture ought to appeal to feeling and thus procure an experience of harmony. Eisenman, on the other hand, argues that architecture cannot ignore the fundamental disharmony of the modern world and risks to become irrelevant when it only seeks to please people. Whereas Alexander advocates harmony and bases his conviction on a certain reading of the history of architecture and a critical stance on the chapter of modernity, Eisenman claims that harmony

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is not as close to us, as imperfection, fragmentation, incompletion and vulnerability. An architecture that positively espouses the latter feelings may be truer to us, late moderns and may be an architecture to which we can relate more easily. Architecture must confront modernity in its own terms, without ignoring the modern experience of Western humans based on anxiety, negativity and silence. Yet, as Heinen argues, anxiety, negativity and silence can be more easily tolerated in other art forms than in architecture. It is not so easy for architecture to be critical and negative as the rest of art forms because of its omnipresence and its effects on everyday life. Furthermore, Eisenman ignores the utopian promise of modernity for a better society and an emancipated world. Of course Heine's criticism of Alexander is even more drastic because for her, he ends up sounding like a mysticist. Furthermore, as in Alexander's views there is hardly any room for heterogeneity and difference, his theory is easy to slip into totalitarianism. (Heinen 1999:20-22).
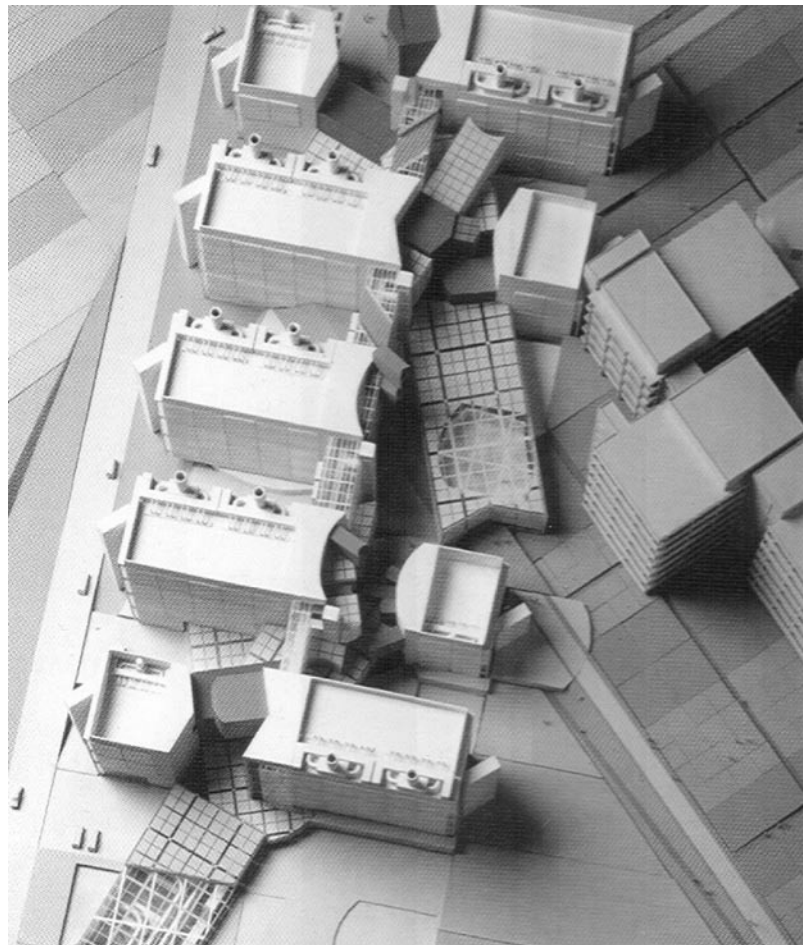

Figure 11:
Model of Biocentrum, Frankfurt am Main, 1987. DNA is used here as a model of logical sequence, allowing infinite possibilities for expansion (source: Moffett, Fazio and Wodehouse 2003: figure 16.40).

Architecture as a way of thought conveyed by the dimension of the supreme

Jacques Derrida is a philosopher whose writings and thought have interested architects because they rightly saw in his project, termed *deconstruction,* an operative architectural metaphor. No doubt Derrida himself espoused this reception and indeed, in his own words, confirmed that "the concept of deconstruction itself resembles an architectural metaphor" (Nesbitt 1996: 146). Of course architecture, in practice, constructs rather than deconstructs. But, as Derrida himself explains, deconstruction is a way of thinking, a way of questioning of the foundations

that necessarily precedes all construction (Brunette & Wills 1994: 27). For architectural invention presupposes a certain questioning of the history and philosophy of architecture, of the foundations and conventions of architectural practice. Deconstruction furnishes precisely such questioning.

Another way in which architecture is embedded in deconstruction as a philosophical practice, is successfully described by Mark Wigley's book *The Architecture of Deconstruction. Derrida's Haunt* (Wigley 2002). Wigley ventures to show that before even Derrida started to speak about architecture, architecture had already been embedded in his deconstruction discourse (Wigley 2002: xv). Wigley is right, for, in philosophy where the term deconstruction originated, it named the attempt to question and free oneself from the restrictions imposed by dual oppositions and conceptual pairs, introduced in the history of philosophy as self evident and natural and therefore to be taken for granted (Nesbitt 1996: 146). Going beyond such founding distinctions, the deconstructionist is often obliged to redefine the system or plan anew the rational organization of the area in which she/he is working. Derrida himself has often resorted to such a redefinition, made most explicitly apparent in his early seventies period when he wrote books like *Glas*, *Dissemination* and *Truth in Painting,* among others, that were outwardly performative, on the level of the written sign or signifier. Surely that period of radical writing experimentation did not last long but, in my view, is indicative of Derrida's entire approach to writing. In his own words:

> And since you are asking about my texts, I would say that what they have, in the final analysis, that is most analogous to spatial, architectural and theatrical works is their acoustics and their voices. I have written many texts with several voices, and in them spacing is visible. There are several people speaking, and this necessarily implies a dispersion of voices, of tones that space themselves, that automatically spatialize themselves.(Brunette & Wills 1994: 22).

It comes therefore as no surprise that Derrida became eventually interested in architecture and ventured in joint projects with architects like Peter Eisenman and Bernard Tschumi. It is my contention that it is not so much in his joint projects with these architects that he reveals the way he sees architecture as it is in his disagreement and criticism to their works and projects. From this point of view, his letter to Peter Eisenman is very suggestive of Derrida's views. Derrida's critique to Eisenman strikes the reader as relentless, for the architect is basically interrogated on a great number of issues, which again are indicative of Derrida's interest in and conception of architecture. Summing up Derrida's questions we could come up with the following:

a. Derrida questions Eisenman on religion, namely whether his frequent appeal to absence and the void has any religious overtones or any Judeotranscendental ramifications or implications. Furthermore, Derrida shows an interest in the religious space of the temple or the synagogue and asks Eisenman what distinguishes his space from that of the temple or the synagogue (Eisenman 2007: 162). b. A second series of questions is how the new technologies affect or transform our conception of space, on the one hand, for example, traditional modern architectural materials like glass and steel whose use has now been generalized, but also telephones, computers and aeronautics which have at first sight nothing to do with architecture but still entail modifications in our conceptions of it (Eisenman 2007: 162-164, 167). c. Finally, Derrida questions Eisenman on the relation that architecture has with perennial problems like war, starvation, poverty, homelessness, historical memory, capitalism and the Holocaust. Such questions stress the fact that architecture is part of culture, share with it the same fate and like culture must be questioned in its foundations (Eisenman 2007: 164-165).

Such questions that Eisenman does not really answer, demonstrate Derrida's interest in architecture as a way and a possibility of thought (Nesbitt 1996: 144-145). The architectural way of thinking is guided by the question of place, "of the taking place in space," of "establishing of a place which didn't exist until then" (Nesbitt 1996: 145). "The setting up of a habitable place

is an event" whose origin remains unknown and whose beginning remains sealed in a secret (Nesbitt 1996: 146). This very fact of the unknown origin of place is in fact extremely important for Derrida because it means that:

> the construction of architecture will always remain labyrinthine [in terms of its origins and ends]. The issue is not to give up one's point of view for the sake of another which would be the only one and absolute, but to see a diversity of possible points of view. (Nesbitt 1996:148).
>
> Derrida couples these remarks with the biblical story of the Babel tower whose very failure, thanks to God's intervention, secures that there is architecture, as there are languages and not one single meta-language, neither a single tower that dominates all from its insurmountable heights (Nesbitt 1996:147). Derrida insists a lot on the unknown origin of place, an issue that he has also worked upon in the essay *Khora* concerning Plato's *Timaeus* and the famous cosmological narration of the universe birth. Despite the fact that *khora* "receives so as to give place to them, all the determinations, she/it does not possess any of them as her/its own." (Wolfreys 1998:239) Because *khora* is "deprived of a real referent" and as the names that refer to her/it "do not designate an essence, the stable being of an eidos" neither "images of the eidos which come to imprint themselves in it" *khora* "does not belong to the two known or recognized genera of being" (Wolfreys 1998:236-237). Thus the most important narration of cosmogony is founded on an empty concept, that of *khora*. Surely, Plato must have had his reasons to leave the concept of *khora* empty of signification, Derrida thinks. Like Plato, Derrida refuses to ontologize *khora* and together with it, absence and void, that Eisenman along with another famous architect Daniel Libeskind, like to ontologize in quasi-theological ways (Brunette & Wills 1994: 27). Both Eisenman and Libeskind treat absence and the void as if they were determinate and affirmative concepts and thus negate them as such, for absence and void, like *khora*, are neither full, nor empty.
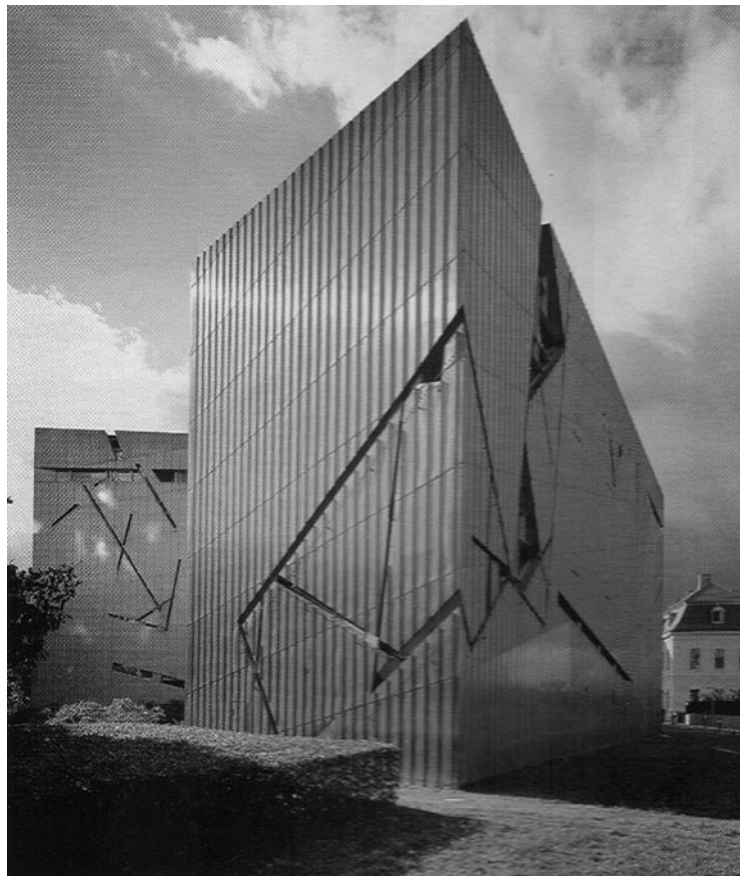

Figure 12
Daniel Libeskind, Jewish Museum in Berlin, 1989-1999, exterior view (source: Gössel and Leuthäuser 2005: Page 527).

Derrida is more specific on this point of the absence and the void when it comes to his criticism of Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin. This museum is an architectural memorial in itself to the exiled and exterminated Jews of Berlin by the Nazis, before and in the course of the Second World War. Libeskind employs absence and void in a positive, affirmative manner that detracts from the undecidable and immaterial character of both absence and the void, making them master signifiers of the Holocaust. As a result void and absence are no longer what they are, non

ontological spaces and become sites with fixed meanings, easy to consume and therefore easy to forget. Libeskind of course objects to this interpretation of his work by Derrida and Hilde Heinen also agrees with him. She specifically gives two arguments in defense of Libeskind's employment of the void against Derrida. First, that the building altogether is deliberately intended to be ambiguous, i.e. not subject to a single interpretation and second, that the voids of the building have an overdetermined character that escape simple definitions (Heinen 1999: 207-208).[5] Yet Derrida's point is neither the ambiguity of the building, nor its capacity to defy simple definitions but rather Libeskind's tendency to make the void and absence stand for what they are not and, thus, compromise their disturbing effects. To this argument both Libeskind and Heinen fail to respond.
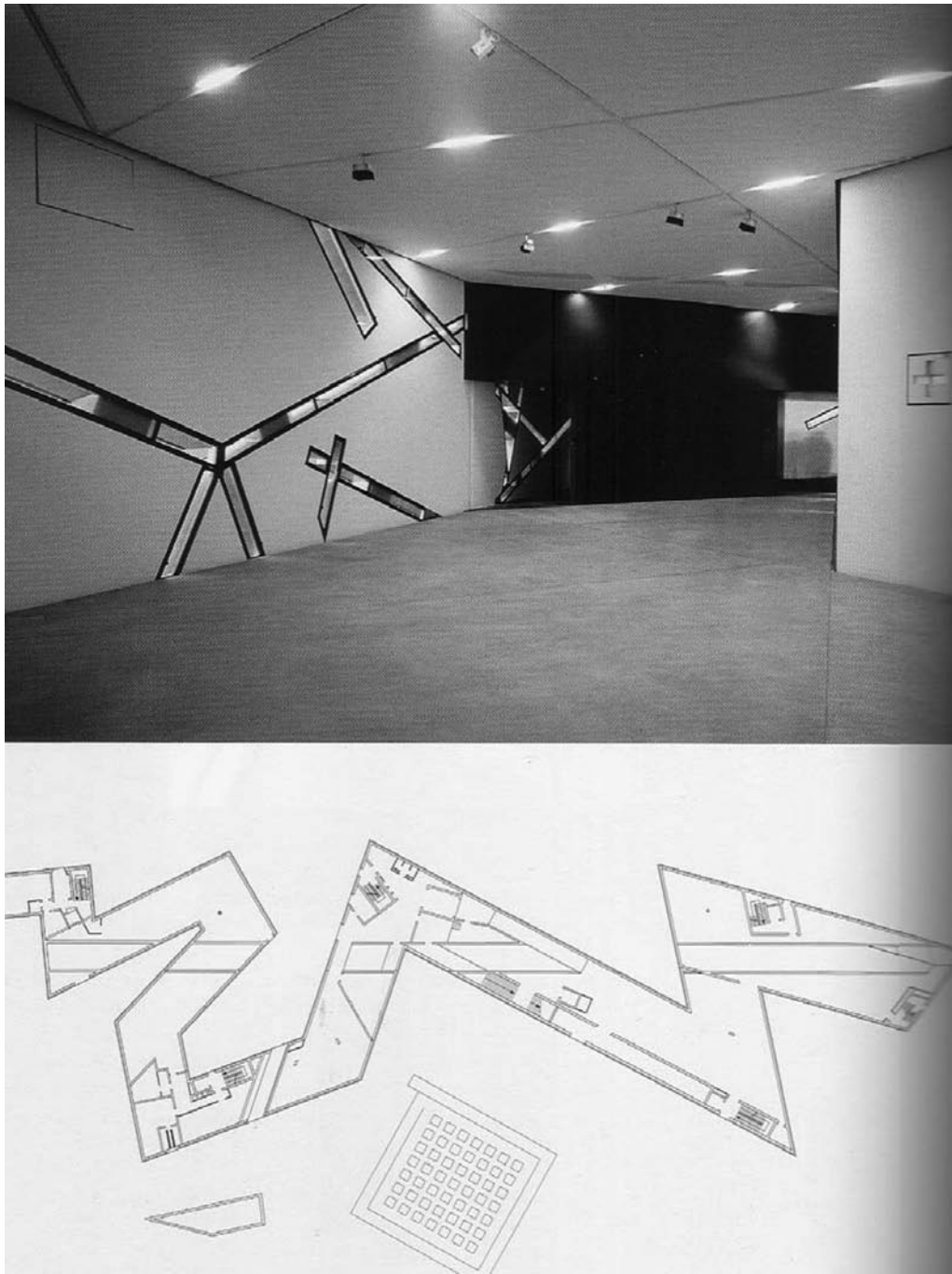

Figure 13
Exhibition room, interior view and a draft for the ground plan of the Jewish Museum (source: Gössel and Leuthäuser 2005: 526).

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Figure 14
Interior corridor, indicative of the Jewish Museum's atmosphere
(source: Gössel and Leuthäuser 2005: Page 529).

Finally, architecture for Derrida, seems to have an immanent relationship to religion and theology. This is also the reason why Derrida questions Eisenman on the relation of his work to the space of the synagogue or of the temple. In Derrida's own words:

> Should there be such [architectural] thinking then it could only be conveyed by the dimension of the High, the Supreme, the Sublime. Viewed as such, architecture is not a matter of space but an experience of the Supreme which is not higher but in a sense more ancient than space and therefore is a spatialization of time[6] (Nesbitt 1996:148).

The experience of the supreme is apparently conveyed by the temple and the synagogue. If the place once occupied by the temple and the synagogue were to be reoccupied, then architecture would have a future, Karsten Harries claims corroborating Derrida's argument (Levinson 2005: 569). Harries further contends that:

Monument, theatre and the shopping mall, each of these building tasks hold some promise [for reoccupation of the place once occupied by the temple and the synagogue] but not one of them, nor all together can take the place of temple or church (Levinson 2005:569).

Having said that, Derrida would have never signed Harries's and Eisenman's self-defeatist argument about the limited ethical role that architecture plays, being simply a reflection of society's morality. For he would not have had an expanded notion of architecture if he did not believe, along with Le Corbusier before the Second World War, that architecture can really make a difference.

Thus, for Derrida, architecture is a way of thinking that matches an experience of the supreme. Ironically it is the philosopher who is closer to Gabo's modernist dream for architecture as an edifice of our everyday existence rather than the architect Eisenman who thinks of architecture more in formalist terms, as a self referential sign. Derrida's call for an expanded notion of architecture perhaps comes from an accrued sense of cultural impoverishment in the course of twentieth century. Philosophers seem to understand poverty better than architects. We quote Walter Benjamin as he is quoted by Derrida:

> We have become impoverished. Of the heritage of humanity we have abandoned one part after another and we have pawned it at the mount of piety of one hundredth of its value, in order to receive as an advance a few coins of the present. In the door stands economic crisis, beyond that a shadow of approaching war (Eisenman 2007:164).

Notes

1. Ancient Egyptian, Greek and all ancient Chinese temples are typical examples of the first type, Roman buildings are examples of the second. Of course in many cases we have combinations of both types or the coexistence of both types of building as in the Gothic Middle Ages or in the early Christian period.

2. David Goldblatt, http://www.sjsu.edu/upload/course/ course_1336/Goldblattx_David.doc, JAAC 49:4.

3. Ibid.

4. Goldblatt, op. cit.

5. See also Michael Beehler's discussion of the subject in his unpublished essay "On the Circumcisions of Architecture: Libeskind/Derrida" which he kindly made available to me. An excerpt of this essay may be found at: http://www.hichumanities.org/ AHProceedings/Michael%20Beehler.pdf.

6. A typical example of time spatialization is that of the monument. Consider, for instance, how the Egyptian pyramids spatialize eternity.

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