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Deconstructivist Architecture: Violated Perfection

Deconstructivist Architecture today is not like the Russian Constructivism of the first quarter of the century. It certainly shares many of the forms--hence the name,--but comes from a different source, the surge of a new sensibility, a new hierarchy of values which might be summed up as Violated Perfection.

Similar to the break of Cubism in painting, Deconstructivist Architecture stands for a fragmentation against totality, almost an amorphous and disconcerting mystique as against a rational clarity. It has none of the baggage of utopian ideals and functionalist aims that the Russian movement had. It is easiest perhaps to describe the movement with images rather than with words.

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Note 1 Two books covering the same subject but with different emphases are being prepared at this writing: Deconstructivism by Joseph Giovannini, to be published by Bantam Books, and Violated Perfection, The Architectural Fragmentation Of The Modern by Aaron Betsky, to appear under the Rizzoli imprint. I am much indebted to both authors for bringing to my attention the importance of this school as well as contributing many insights into the centripetal nature of Deconstructivist Architecture.

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The two illustrations below show the shift in perception, the change of taste between the two eras separated as they are by about two generations.

- 1) The Museum of Modern Art's choice for its 1934 cover for the catalogue of the Machine Art Exhibition, a ball bearing.
- 2) The image of an 1860 deserted spring house in the desert of Nevada.

Both icons were chosen by a museum type: myself. Both are "designed" by anonymous persons for purely non-aesthetic aims. Both seem significantly beautiful to me in their respective eras. The first image fitted our ideals of machine beauty of form, unadulterated by "artistic" designers.

The photo of the spring house (given to me as a cherished icon by the sculptor Michael Heizer) strikes the same chord in my brain as the ball bearing did two generations ago. It is my receiving eye that has changed.

These two lists, showing the differences in approach are not exclusive or descriptive but merely approximate the points of contrast--better to illustrate the shift in Weltanschauung.

(Separate columns under the pictures.)

perfect sphere, circle	jumbled diagonals
composed	torn--ripped
perfection	violated perfection
measured	aleatory
machine	wood shards
pure	"messy"



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Russian Constructivism was a multi-disciplinary movement. Typography, photography, sculpture, painting, set design were more typical of the movement than architecture. The greatest painters were Malevich (Fig. 1), Tatlin (Fig. 2) and Rodchenko (Figs. 3 & 4). These painters were also the form-givers for the architecture of the time. Names like Lissitzky, Chernikov and Leonidov all appear in their wake.

The artists today are once more relevant after the separation of the last generations. I choose, almost arbitrarily, three of today's artists who most certainly influence architecture. Frank Stella (Fig. 1), Kenny Price (Fig. 2), Michael Heizer (Fig. 3). Not that these artists are conscious collaborators or that all are acquainted either with early Russian Constructivism or even with each other's work, but the parallels are too close not to represent a confluence of sensibilities and even of artistic form. Once more a multi-disciplinary movement in the arts.

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Captions

Frank Stella: Shards disturbing layering, arbitrary, diagonals, lines, curves, planes, broken frames, collage-like, references to the every day world - pantagraph, car racing circuits, drafting tools.

Michael Heizer: Untitled Rodchenko's "liniism" brought up to the present - diagonals, very long lines holding a very solid block.

Kenny Price: Cup Uncomfortable deforming of "cup". Odd curves incommensurable, discontinuous, wedges, peculiar free planes.

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The choice of architects to illustrate this architecture is narrow with the purpose of illustrating the artistic character of Deconstructivist Architecture, in no way to denigrate other architects working today who make designs just as inspired but whose buildings illustrate other currents in the present pluralistic scene. There are many whose work we admire and would like to exhibit but who would fit better in other categories. In this exhibition, we show one category of the present scene that we find especially exciting and relevant.

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Deconstructivist Architecture

An exhibition of recent projects which mark the emergence of a new sensibility in architecture. The projects continue the interrogation of structure initiated by the constructivists, but the perfection sought in the twenties is subverted. The traditional virtues of harmony, unity and clarity are displaced by disharmony, fracturing and mystery. The perfect structure is violated. By disturbing traditional thinking about structure in this way, these projects produce a sense of unease. The pleasures of perfection are <sup>therefore</sup> displaced by the pleasures of anxiety.

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Theme

Deconstructivist Architecture:

"Violated Perfection"

Description

A group exhibition on a new sensibility in contemporary architecture. A core group of projects would include work by Frank Gehry, Coop Himmelblau, Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid and Daniel Liebeskind. In addition from ten to fifteen projects by other architects would be selected. While most of the work in the exhibition is not built, the criteria for selection is that projects be real and in theory buildable. While related to the constructivist movement of the 1920s from which it has drawn considerable inspiration, the new deconstructivism is not concerned with structural logic or social and political concerns, and it is as much or more concerned with fragmenting and fracturing as with building up a whole.

The exhibition will consist of drawings, photo panels and models.

Size of Space: Medium International Council Galleries

Period: June 15 to August 30, 1988

Importance within Department's Program:

The department has in the past sought to document not just the significant work of individual architects but also significant movements in architecture. The "International Style" exhibition

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of 1932 was a key example. The Deconstructivist exhibition is in this tradition and it is significant that Philip Johnson, who curated that first landmark architectural exhibition at the Museum, is now returning to guest-curate this exhibition fifty-five years later.

Value of Accompanying Publication:

While individual works and architects have been published in various professional journals, the current deconstructivist tendencies have not been presented as a wider coherent movement. The catalog should become a standard reference text for the movement.

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The Museum of Modern Art, New York

# DECON- STRUC- TIVIST ARCHI- TECTURE

June 23-August 30, 1988

*The exhibition is part of the  
Gerald D. Hines Interests Architecture Program  
at The Museum of Modern Art.*

## The Museum of Modern Art

### DECONSTRUCTIVIST ARCHITECTURE

#### WALL TEXT

The projects in this exhibition mark the emergence of a new sensibility in architecture. They radically displace traditional ideas about the nature of the architectural object. Traditionally, the architect has sought to produce pure form based on the invariable integrity of simple geometric figures. The architect protects those figures from contamination in order to sustain the central cultural values of stability, harmony, and security, of comfort, order, and unity. In these projects, however, pure form has indeed been contaminated, transforming architecture into an agent of instability, disharmony, and insecurity, of discomfort, disorder, and conflict.

This is not a movement. It is not a single-minded stylistic vision of the future. Rather, it is a series of discrete ideological experiments about the limits of architecture, carried out over the last ten years by independent architects moving in divergent directions. Each project undermines a different aspect of conventional architectural practice. What they share is that each does so by exploiting the hidden potential of modernism.

Each project interrogates the ready-made language of modern architecture and finds repressed within its pure forms the "impure," skewed geometry—the twisted volumes, warped planes, and clashing lines—developed by the Russian avant-garde early in the twentieth century. Pure form is violated but not destroyed: this is an architecture of *discontinuity*.

## The Museum of Modern Art

### MAJOR PUBLICATION TO ACCOMPANY DECONSTRUCTIVIST ARCHITECTURE

A major publication accompanies the exhibition DECONSTRUCTIVIST ARCHITECTURE, currently on view at The Museum of Modern Art. Written by Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley, the publication presents a radical architecture as exemplified by the work of seven contemporary architects. Deconstructivist Architecture is the first monograph devoted to the emergence of this new sensibility in architecture. The exhibition and catalogue are part of the **GERALD D. HINES INTERESTS ARCHITECTURE PROGRAM** at The Museum of Modern Art.

In his preface to the catalogue, Mr. Johnson discusses the basis of the exhibition, placing it in the context of contemporary artistic phenomena. Mr. Wigley's essay explores deconstructivist architecture in depth, particularly as it relates to Russian Constructivist work of the twenties and to modernist architecture.

The essay is followed by commentaries by Mr. Wigley on the ten architectural projects represented in the exhibition. These include houses, commercial and institutional buildings, and urban environments designed over the past decade by Frank O. Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Peter Eisenman, Zaha M. Hadid, Bernard Tschumi, and the firm

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## The Museum of Modern Art

### DECONSTRUCTIVIST ARCHITECTURE

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Each project interrogates the ready-made language of modern architecture and finds repressed within its pure forms the "impure," skewed geometry—the twisted volumes, warped planes, and clashing lines—developed by the Russian avant-garde early in the twentieth century. Pure form is violated but not destroyed: this is an architecture of disruption and dislocation, of displacement and distortion, but not of dismantling or demolition.

This subversion of pure form pushes architecture to its limits, redefining its most basic problems: structure and function. But these projects are both structurally sound and functionally efficient. They derive their force precisely from not playing in the sanctuaries of seductive drawing, obscure theory, or uninhabitable sculpture. Instead they belong to the realm of building. Each aims at the reality of built form. Some have been built, others will be built, and some will never be built. But they are all buildable, and as such constitute strategic cultural interventions that produce a certain disquiet by displacing the conservative institution of architecture.

The exhibition is part of the  
Gerald D. Hines Interests Architecture Program  
at The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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Deconstructivist Architecture is published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and distributed by New York Graphic Society Books/Little, Brown and Company, Boston. The paperbound volume contains 104 pages and 153 black-and-white illustrations. It is available in the Museum Store for \$17.95.

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## The Museum of Modern Art

### DECONSTRUCTIVIST ARCHITECTURE SYMPOSIUM TO BE HELD AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

A symposium will be held in conjunction with the exhibition DECONSTRUCTIVIST ARCHITECTURE on Thursday, June 30, at 8:30 p.m. in The Museum of Modern Art's Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1. Moderator will be Mark Wigley, co-organizer with Philip Johnson of the exhibition and lecturer at Princeton University. Panelists include Kurt Forster, director, The Getty Center of Arts and Humanities; Michael Hays, lecturer, Princeton University; Jeffrey Kipnis, assistant professor, Ohio State University; Rosalind Krauss, professor, Hunter College, City University of New York; and Anthony Vidler, professor, Princeton University.

Tickets for the symposium are \$8 for the public, \$7 for Museum members, and \$5 for students and are available at the Museum's lobby information desk.

On view through August 30, 1988, DECONSTRUCTIVIST ARCHITECTURE is the third of five exhibitions in the GERALD D. HINES INTERESTS ARCHITECTURE PROGRAM at the Museum. Conceived to examine current developments in architecture, the program includes the publication of catalogues to accompany the exhibitions, as well as lectures and symposia.

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For further information, contact the Department of Public Information, 212/708-9750.

The exhibition is part of the  
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## The Museum of Modern Art

### PHILIP JOHNSON

Renowned architect Philip Johnson is guest curator of the exhibition DECONSTRUCTIVIST ARCHITECTURE. He is a fellow of the American Institute of Architects and of the American Institute of Arts and Letters. Since 1957 he has been a Trustee of The Museum of Modern Art.

Mr. Johnson's longtime association with the Museum began in 1932 when he co-organized, with Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the seminal MODERN ARCHITECTURE: INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION. The exhibition introduced American audiences to the controversial work of new European architects such as Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier. The same year, Mr. Johnson established the Museum's Department of Architecture (now the Department of Architecture and Design), serving as its director from 1932 to 1935 and again from 1946 to 1954.

During his tenures as director, Mr. Johnson organized several other notable exhibitions, including the controversial MACHINE ART (1934), featuring industrial designs such as ball bearings and scientific instruments; MIES VAN DER ROHE (1947); FROM LE CORBUSIER TO NIEMEYER (1949); and PAINTING AND SCULPTURE IN ARCHITECTURE (1949). He is the co-author, with Henry-Russell Hitchcock, of The International Style (1932) and author of Machine Art and Mies van der Rohe, the catalogues accompanying those exhibitions.

Mr. Johnson was the architect for three additions to The Museum of Modern Art (1951, 1954, and 1964) and in 1953 he designed its Abby

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Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden. Through the Museum's expansions in 1964 and 1984 the garden has remained in design and spirit true to his original scheme. In 1984 the Museum dedicated a gallery in Mr. Johnson's name for the permanent exhibition of architectural drawings and models.

Over the past forty years, Mr. Johnson has designed important buildings in every major city in this country. He has received numerous prestigious design awards, including the American Institute of Architects' Gold Medal (1978) and the Pritzker Architecture Prize (1979). His celebrated Glass House (1949) in New Canaan, Connecticut, is a landmark of the International Style. Since 1967 he has worked in association with the architect John Burgee; among their recent principal works are Pennzoil Place, Houston (1978); AT&T Corporate Headquarters, New York (1984); PPG Building, Pittsburgh (1984); and Fifty-third at Third, New York (1985), where the firm is currently based.

Philip Cortelyou Johnson was born in 1906 in Cleveland, Ohio. He received a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Harvard University in 1930 and a Bachelor of Architecture in 1943 from Harvard's Graduate School of Design. A prominent art collector, he has donated or provided purchase funds for more than 350 works in the Museum's collection.

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## The Museum of Modern Art

### DECONSTRUCTIVIST ARCHITECTURE

June 23 - August 23, 1988

MARK WIGLEY

Mark Wigley is co-organizer with Philip Johnson of DECONSTRUCTIVIST ARCHITECTURE and author of the catalogue essay accompanying the exhibition. He is a practicing architect and a lecturer in the School of Architecture at Princeton University.

Born in 1956 in Palmerston North, New Zealand, Mr. Wigley received his Bachelor of Architecture degree (1979) and his Ph.D. (1986) from the University of Auckland, New Zealand. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on "The Deconstructive Possibilities of Architectural Discourse."

Mr. Wigley has published articles in various architectural journals, including Perspecta and Assemblage. He was the author and narrator of a series of television programs about architecture that aired on T.V. New Zealand in 1986 and 1987.

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**The Museum of Modern Art**

For Immediate Release  
June 1988

DECONSTRUCTIVIST ARCHITECTURE

June 23 - August 30, 1988

A radical architecture exemplified by the recent work of seven architects is the subject of an exhibition opening at The Museum of Modern Art on June 23, 1988. DECONSTRUCTIVIST ARCHITECTURE features ten international projects designed over the past decade, as well as a selection of Russian Constructivist paintings and sculptures from the Museum's collection. On view through August 30, the exhibition has been organized by Philip Johnson, architect and founding director of the Museum's Department of Architecture and Design, and Mark Wigley, architect and lecturer at Princeton University, with the assistance of Frederieke Taylor.

This is the third of five exhibitions in the GERALD D. HINES INTERESTS ARCHITECTURE PROGRAM at The Museum of Modern Art. Conceived to examine current developments in architecture, the program includes the publication of catalogues to accompany the exhibitions, as well as lectures and symposia.

The exhibition includes drawings and models by Peter Eisenman, Frank O. Gehry, Zaha M. Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind, Bernard Tschumi, and the firm of Coop Himmelblau (list of projects attached). Though working independently, the architects share striking formal similarities. Using twisted volumes, warped planes, and clashed lines, they intentionally violate the cubes and right angles of modernism. By challenging traditional ideals of order and rationality, their projects undermine basic assumptions about building.

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The exhibition is part of the  
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In the catalogue essay accompanying the exhibition, Mark Wigley writes, "Architecture has always been a central cultural institution valued above all for its provision of stability and order. These qualities are seen to arise from the geometric purity of its formal composition. . . . The projects in this exhibition mark a different sensibility, one in which the dream of pure form has been disturbed. Form has become contaminated. The dream has become a kind of nightmare."

A selection from the Museum's holdings of Russian avant-garde art from 1913 to 1933 introduces the architectural projects in the exhibition. Included are paintings, sculptures, photographs, and books by El Lissitzky, Kasimir Malevich, Liubov Popova, Alexander Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin, and others. The term "deconstructivist" applies to a contemporary artistic phenomenon that derives its forms from Constructivism and yet deviates from it. Deconstructivist architecture explores the relationship between the instability of the Russian avant-garde and the stability of high modernism. While the precarious, experimental designs of the Russian artists were never conceived as a structural possibility, all of the projects in this exhibition were designed to be built.

Philip Johnson writes in the catalogue preface, "The changes that shock the eye of an old modernist like myself are the contrasts between the 'warped' images of deconstructivist architecture and the 'pure' images of the old International Style." Daniel Libeskind's competition-winning entry for West Berlin's City Edge (1987), for example, employs an obvious Constructivist motif repeated by each of the architects: the diagonal overlapping of rectangular bars. This office/apartment complex is composed of a colossal bar that angles up from the ground and looks over the Berlin Wall, subverting the logic of that

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wall. The bar itself is an outwardly smooth, "pure" surface actually composed of internal chaos: a jumble of folded planes, counter-reliefs, and twisted forms that relate to the disorder of the city below.

The hallmark of deconstructivist architecture is its apparent instability. Though structurally sound, the projects seem to be in states of explosion or collapse. "Towers are turned over on their sides; bridges are tilted up to become towers; underground elements erupt from the earth and float above the surface; commonplace materials become suddenly exotic," writes Mr. Wigley. Deconstructivist architecture, however, is not an architecture of decay or demolition. On the contrary, it gains all of its force by challenging the very values of harmony, unity, and stability, proposing instead that flaws are intrinsic to the structure.

Despite their radical appearance, the projects in this exhibition are essentially traditional forms that have been subverted or displaced. The power of deconstructivist architecture to shock and disorient is exemplified by Frank Gehry's Santa Monica beach house (1978-88), an ordinary bungalow bursting with warped and twisted shapes. The unconventional use of such benign building materials as wooden planks, sheet metal, and chain link heighten this effect. The original house thus becomes a strange artifact, trapped and distorted by forms that have emerged from within it.

Mr. Johnson writes, "In art as well as architecture. . . there are many--and contradictory--trends in our quick-change generation. In architecture, strict-classicism, strict-modernism, and all sorts of shades in between, are equally valid. No generally persuasive "-ism" has appeared. It may be none will arise unless there is a worldwide, new religion or set of beliefs out of which an aesthetic could be formed. Meanwhile pluralism reigns,

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perhaps a soil in which poetic, original artists. . . can develop." He concludes, "The confluence [of these seven architects] may indeed be temporary; but its reality, its vitality, its originality can hardly be denied."

In conjunction with the exhibition, a symposium moderated by Mark Wigley will be held on Thursday, June 30, at 8:30 p.m. in the Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1. Panelists include Kurt Forster, director, The Getty Center of Arts and Humanities; Michael Hays, lecturer, Princeton University; Jeffrey Kipnis, assistant professor, Ohio State University; Rosalind Krauss, professor, Hunter College; and Anthony Vidler, professor, Princeton University. Tickets are \$8 for the public, \$7 for Museum members, and \$5 for students and are available at the information desk in the lobby of the Museum.

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\*PUBLICATION Deconstructivist Architecture by Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley. 104 pages. 153 black-and-white illustrations. Published by The Museum of Modern Art. Paperbound, \$17.95.

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DECONSTRUCTIVIST ARCHITECTURE

List of Architects and Projects in the Exhibition

Coop Himmelblau, Vienna  
Wolf D. Prix (b. 1942, Vienna)  
Helmut Swiczinsky (b. 1944, Poznan, Poland)

Rooftop Remodeling, Vienna, 1985

Apartment Building, Vienna, 1986

Skyline, Hamburg, 1985

Peter Eisenman (b. 1932, Newark, New Jersey; resides New York)

Biocenter for the University of Frankfurt, Frankfurt am Main, 1987

Frank O. Gehry (b. 1929, Toronto, Canada; resides Venice, California)

Gehry House, Santa Monica, 1978-88

Familian House, Santa Monica, 1978

Zaha M. Hadid (b. 1950, Baghdad, Iraq; resides London)

The Peak, Hong Kong, 1982

Rem Koolhaas (b. 1944, Rotterdam, The Netherlands)

Building and Tower, Rotterdam, 1982

Daniel Libeskind (b. 1946, Lodz, Poland; resides Milan)

City Edge, Berlin, 1987

Bernard Tschumi (b. 1944, Lausanne, Switzerland; resides New York)

Parc de La Villette, Paris, 1982-85