Gardens of Delight and Deception

Thomas A. Márkus

In a recent issue of *Building Design,* a journal which every architect in Britain receives, a review of Glasgow's Garden Festival comments that one would expect it to be about gardens but that it turns out to be also about architecture.

A few weeks earlier the Tate Gallery organised a one-day symposium on art, architecture and Deconstruction. A piece of architecture which the philosopher Jacques Derrida, inventor of Deconstruction, claims as a rare incarnation of his ideas is the Parc de la Villette in Paris, designed by the architect Bernard Tschumi with Derrida's, and other architects', participation. One would expect such an architectural 'demonstration project' to be about buildings but in fact it turns out to be also about gardens.

And both are also about science and industry.

I want to ask some questions about this conflation of buildings, gardens and technology. My argument asks whether the technique of Deconstruction is applicable, even meaningful, in the context of architecture; it 'deconstructs' Derrida's writing about La Villette, and finally tries to answer the question about buildings, nature, art and technology in terms of power.

Deconstructing architecture

The best way to start the discussion is to start where Derrida starts—with language, and especially the written text. Much of Derrida's work questions the *logocentric* basis of Western philosophy. That is, the idea that speech, one step away from directly perceived truth, is the pure form of argument, and the written text, one further step away, is a dangerous and second-best necessary evil, brought into being by the need to give philosophy a history. He finds this in Plato, writing about Socrates' spoken teaching, in Rousseau, appealing to origins, and in Foucault—whom Derrida attacks for using the very technique of a self-validating reason which he (Foucault) attacks in Descartes. Derrida finds in these texts betrayals of the critical standpoints to which the authors pretend. His method—for it is that rather than a theory—questions the principles of reason. It has been misused, mainly by American scholars who have earned a reputation for confusing literary criticism with
340

philosophy. Philosophers have chosen Derrida for attack rather than these false disciples. But he has defended his methods as being as rigorous as those of his targets: 'Who is more faithful to reason's call, who hears it with a keener ear ... the one who offers questions in return and tries to think through the possibility of that summons, or the one who does not want to hear any questions about the principle of reason?' (1983).

Derrida's language, especially for those who read and think in English, is, like that of Sartre, Foucault and Barthes, difficult. But nevertheless these kinds of discourse are only possible and worthwhile because analysts of language—in philosophy, semiology, psychoanalysis, linguistics and deconstruction—start from a secure base. Often with great intellectual travail, they are going beneath the surface of something which makes sense as everyday experience. It is above all in Wittgenstein's work where the connection between deep analysis and everyday use is central. Meaning, according to him, is based on use; things mean what they are taken to mean.

For Derrida these apparently lucid philosophical texts work by imposing self-validating rules which are never stated. He believes that the rules of architecture, like those of reason, make buildings into 'texts' whose clarity of meaning is only apparent and needs to be questioned. But the lack of security of meaningful experience makes his analytical task impossible.

Everyday experience of buildings does not seem to make consistent sense. It is often obscure, alienating, fragmented and arbitrary in its meaning. This is equally true of the response to contemporary buildings as to those of the past. Even the experiences which are stimulating or delightful are often obscure. That is not to claim that there *is* no meaning—the very fragmentation may be of its essence. But a search for meaning is a doubly-daunting task. It has to address itself to an analysis at deeper levels at the same time as creating or re-creating such awareness as will make common experience meaningful. Changes in awareness can only come after critical debate, the results of which will be in texts. Moreover, these texts will have to be widely diffused and understood.

But now there is another problem. The debate about buildings, whether scholarly or in the popular media, is embodied in texts which many readers experience just as the objects they describe; the occasional piece with clarity of meaning has to be disentangled from a mass of texts which are obscure, mystifying, alienating or trivial.

Derrida on La Villette
The Parc de la Villette, on the site of Paris's nineteenth-century abattoirs, will become a major and typically Parisian *centre*. The old cattle sheds will become performance halls; there are, or will be, theatres, a huge new *cité* of science and industry, a *cité* of music, a 6000-seater

341

rock music hall, a 36-metre diameter *Geode* dome—covered in stainless steel—in which the spectator 'is totally immersed in sound and images', a park with formal and wild zones, and children's play, activity and learning spaces.

Tschumi has placed in the Parc a series of small, bright red pavilions at the intersections of an invisible grid on a terrain which has both highly geometrical avenues and routes (partly aligned with the grid) and free-flowing paths and landscaping. The pavilions (*'folies'*) have no specific function. It is these *folies* which have been the subject of writing by Derrida and much debate at the Tate and elsewhere. Derrida (1986) explains this a-functionality:

> The route through the *folies* is undoubtedly prescribed to the extent that the point-grid counts as a *programme* of possible experiences and new experiments (cinema, botanical garden, video workshop, library, skating rink, gymnasium). But the structure of the grid and of each cube—for these points are cubes—leaves opportunity for chance, formal invention, combinatory transformation, wandering. Such opportunity is not given to the inhabitant or the believer, the user or the architectural theorist, but to whoever engages, in turn, in architectural writing: without reservation, which implies an inventive reading, the restlessness of a whole culture and the body's signature. (Derrida's emphases).

Here 'writing' is a metaphor for creative use, and 'reading' for understanding meaning. The building itself is the 'text', awaiting its completion. Derrida's analysis of the meaning of these red *points* makes difficult reading. Almost any quotation looks like an attempt at caricature. But that is not my intention. The outstanding feature of his text is the emphasis on the *forms* of the cubes and of the grid as denials (deconstructions) of the 'archi-hieratical order' of architecture. This order represents 'ethico-political finality, religious duty, utilitarian or functional ends ... architecture *in service* or *at service* (and) this order ultimately depends on the fine arts' (emphases in the original text). Derrida sees these rules, this order of forms and defined functions, as the self-validating 'truth' of architecture which must be challenged—through the use of an alternative language of *forms*.

He seems to have misread the state of modern architecture. Both he and Tschumi assume that its formal language has the apparent coherence of meaning which the texts of literature and philosophy possess. But this is far from being the case and hence any Deconstructionist challenge to the supposedly established and self-validating rules merely adds another set of difficult-to-interpret signs to the obscure vocabularies with which people have had to struggle in the last half-century. These include mainstream modernism, post-modernism, hi-tech, neo-classical and
342

pseudo-vernacular. Nobody will read the red cubes and their invisible grid as a significant question over all these.

But it is more serious than that. For in the suppression of function as the core element in meaningful experience one further set of certainties is removed. For Tschumi and Derrida to collude in the 'architecture-as-art' definition merely demonstrates their inability to break the bonds of this most restrictive of all constraints on modern design and criticism. As long as the creation of buildings is equated with the creation of large public sculpture, and criticism, even of the most apparently radical kind, unquestioningly accepts this, there is no hope of a fruitful start to the doubly-daunting task.

For buildings to be meaningful several sets of experiences have to be brought within a framework. First and foremost, the fact that buildings have a function—of containing people and their activities, and structuring, in microcosm, society—is a fact of daily experience. We see this in the activities actually occurring and in the rules which govern expected, accepted and forbidden behaviour. These rules are evident in labels in and on the building, and in the way furniture, equipment, location and images act as functional signs. Signifying words describe entire buildings—'gymnasium'—or parts of the building—'entrance hall', 'corridor' or 'cafeteria'. When these words are parts of a selective vocabulary, accompanied by silence over selected issues, structured into a written prescriptive text, we have the brief (Derrida's 'programme'). This is a directive which, no matter how elaborate the attempt to give it a neutral, technical or objective look, is a piece of value-laden writing as incapable as any human utterance is of being innocent.

Our experience of function works at two levels. The first is that of overt functions with which briefs and descriptions in the media deal—such as looking after the needs of the body in a gymnasium. But where the obscurity of experience comes in is that we are dimly aware of a second programme, which seems to be for the fulfilment, not of our, clearly-felt, needs, but of others' much less clearly visible desires. These are the covert functions—which are the silent, hidden agendas of briefs. It may be the disciplining of the human body as a way of disciplining society—which does not need to be imposed through military square-bashing but can be self-imposed through the health club.

The freedom and humanity for which Derrida is searching is not to be achieved by 'deconstructing' function, or trivialising it as the focus of architecture. This is human experience at the deepest level, specifically of human relationships—that is, of society—in space. The text which needs 'deconstructing' is not the metaphorical one of the building but the real one which designs the building as soon as it is written, without the presence of designer. Its opening up, its writing by free and fully enfranchised groups, and, subsequently, the continuous redefinition ('re-

343

writing' if Derrida wants it so) of function by a free, resourced and responsible body of users, is what it is about.

Perhaps the fault lies in making so much of what are really large public sculptures (not unlike Russian Constructivist objects), of a fairly conventional kind for parks. It is true they contain small, enclosed spaces—some already used for a cafe, a lookout, an information centre and a children's play/art workshop. To hang a serious argument about the nature of architecture on such objects, it was essential to displace function as a key element since it is indeed trivial here. Children can do and play in any open or covered space. But, on a larger scale, a city street of disused buildings can also have any function 'inscribed'; it is what urban renewal is about.

At the large scale the same issues about function arise, now inescapably, which arise in the *folies*. Who is to define the functions of the red cubes; whose resources for conversions or re-use will be available? How will decisions be made—by whom, for whom, in the real political world of Paris? What functions will be excluded by built-in constraints of size, sub-divisions or sub-divisibility, structural or environmental properties? Is the 'inventive reading' of function not a myth?

For Tschumi and Derrida form and image *is* the language of architecture. But its reality is equally obscure. Are the classical forms of the restored veterinary rotunda (dedicated to telling the history of the abattoirs and La Villette) signs of totalitarian power, humanistic learning, republican citizenship or post-modern paradox? Are the hi-tech shining, intestinal forms of the science museum to be taken as honesty to technical function, celebration of modern technology, materialisations of a ruthless Durand-esque mechanical grid, or as evidence of luxurious environmental comfort? Are the red cubical *folies* frames (for what?), or bits of machines, or stages or sculpture? Are they an object lesson in meaningful imagery?

There is a further experience as we enter and use a building. The spaces are related to each other and to the public space outside in their 'nextness'. These spatial structures are independent of forms (styles and geometries) and functions. They can be represented as topological and abstract diagrams like planar graphs. These may look like branching trees, of very great depth—that is with many spaces to go through before arriving, by a single route, at the innermost depth. Or they may be ringy and shallow—that is with many alternative routes to inner spaces, which are only a few spatial steps away from the entrance. Each such structure has specific social connotations in terms of the structuring of individuals and groups in space, that is, the amount of control exercised by each space over access to others. The structure is one of power relationships. On this experience Derrida, like all modern architectural texts, is silent.
344

Corridors of Power

In the Parc what do the connections between the edges of the site, the cubes and the large buildings signify? What internal spatial structures can each cube be given? Who is next to whom? (The available drawings, models and photographs are useless as evidence to answer these questions.)

Each of these three experiences of form, function and space, in its own specific way, tells us something about relationships—human relationships. And they do so in three different ways. They tell us something about ourselves. They tell us something about other people. And they tell us something about some universal principle; this may be specifically religious, or it may be in terms of Nature, Reason, History or any other force of a cosmic kind. The three relationships are self-to-self, self-to-others and self-to-Other. For Marx alienation from self, others and Nature (his 'Other') was the consequence of the loss of responsibility over the means of production.

Whatever view is taken of such relationships—whether they are entirely circumscribed by history or whether they have 'essential' and universal features which become incarnate in the material history of the building as well as the history of the observer—in practice two quite different kinds of relationship are signified. The first is of power. It is of the 'zero sum' type, so favoured in games theory. It presumes a finite amount of resource, which can be divided in an infinite number of ways among participants (or within society). The more is given here, the less is given there. It is a cake-slicing operation. The critique of this operation is justice.

There are many ways in which this power relationship can be seen in buildings. It determines the relative amount of space each person or group has and the quality of each space in terms of its furnishings, fittings and physical environment. It can be seen in the distribution of information about the building, and especially in the way decisions about its initial design, and, later, about its use and continuous re-design are taken. It is also evident in the choice of formal imagery; whose favoured imagery dominates? Power is evident in the spatial structure—how equal are various participants in their spatial location with respect to the outside, entrances, each other, central functions etc.? How is control of space distributed? All these questions hinge on issues of roles, authority, hierarchy, and resource ownership and control.

The other type of relationship is of a *bond* kind. It is the opposite of the first relationship in many ways. It presumes unlimited resources, for it has the strange property that the stronger the bond between two individuals or within a group, the more there is to share and give away. In personal relationships this is called love, or friendship. Poets and theologians speak of it. In politics it is called solidarity. The form,

345

function and spatial structure of a building can each encourage, express, give room for, sustain, or deny and frustrate these bond relationships. Images can symbolise it; functions can be based on open-ended, easy-to-redefine, activities which are chosen as the spirit moves the inhabitants, without organisational constraint. Spaces can have such links that communication, and hence solidarity and friendship, is possible across many classes, groups and between many people. A building which placed *no* barriers in the way of bonds would be a 'heavenly mansion'.

Is it asking too much that a public project like La Villette, or a fun event like the Garden Festival, should carry all these messages? No—that is probably the wrong question. It is not a question of putting meaning into them—they cannot help saying something. In the end it is not possible to create a totally meaningless environment, only one whose meanings are so hidden and obscure that a great deal of analysis ('deconstruction'?) is needed to find out what they are. And when they do emerge, they may turn out to be far from benign.

Deconstructing a Garden Festival
If Derrida were to write a similar piece about the Glasgow Garden Festival—a product which has none of Tschumi's overt objectives—would he see how similar it is to La Villette? Would he ask first, 'Why have a Garden Festival at all?'

The first was held in Liverpool in 1984. The next in Stoke on Trent in 1986; now Glasgow, and the final two will be in Gateshead (1990) and Ebbw Vale (1992). A rank order of British towns in order of deprivation—as measured by unemployment, poverty, drug problems, housing conditions and poor health—would almost certainly have these five at the top. So one way of interpreting the Festivals is in line with the overt rhetoric of government propaganda and local authority jingoism—urban rejuvenation, bringing temporary and then permanent new jobs, re-creating the city's image with an eye to attracting investment and celebrating the entrepreneurial spirit. The covert programme might be, to put it crudely, bread and circuses for the people. Glasgow's housing problem is not the 'inner city' one, so favoured by the politicians; it is the huge peripheral estates of Easterhouse, Drumchapel, Castlemilk, Possil and Darnley. Their cold, damp, mouldy houses in poor repair and with few amenities are amongst Europe's worst. It would take massive investment over many years to tackle this. Instead, with the reduction of finance for local authority capital works, and its diversion to festivals, the stock is sinking even further. But the residents of these areas will enjoy the fun if they can afford it (£25 for a season ticket—the Festival is open until 26 September—or £5.00 per head, £4.00 for the unwaged and handicapped). Life really will, for today, feel better. But tomorrow it will continue as before—except for the lucky few who can

346

obtain mortgages on the speculative housing which developers will put up on part of the site acquired for a song.

Deconstruction might also ask questions about the buildings. They consist of a mixture of honest caricature (the 'High Street', in imitation of Glasgow's medieval main street); endless reproductions of and references to Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Glasgow's art hero and unwitting founder of a profitable industry; 1930s Art Deco; through Frank Lloyd Wright and Gaudi to Buckminster Fuller. This might have been good fun, for after all nobody wants to be too po-faced about a temporary exhibition; sham is in order. But the fun will be dulled by a nagging doubt; much of what is seen will look like what is going on all over Glasgow. So what is real and what is sham?

Finally, to return to the first question—why, in both cases, a garden, or park; why nature so strongly invoked for art and technology? The Crystal Palace of 1851 might help to provide an answer. After the first seventy years of the Industrial Revolution, with its devastating accompaniment of urban squalor, disease, maimed children and prematurely aged adults, it was time to celebrate the machine. In the Crystal Palace, a house of purity and light, the machines were polished up and placed next to so-called works of art. The whole ensemble was located in Hyde Park. The presence of light, art and nature—all subjects of innocence—was to rub off on the machines.

In the *Cité* of science and industry there is an apparent openness to questions about what is called the third industrial revolution: ecology (the history of the forest); robotisation ('The great owl and the robot'); landscape, agriculture, atomic energy and human genetics. But key issues are invisible: for instance, the connection between fearful weaponry and computers, the debate about genetic experiments, the destruction of the world's forests, France's dependence on atomic energy for electricity generation, and the re-creation of great asymmetries and concentrations of power not, now, through the steam engine and mechanical systems but through the computer and information systems.

In the Garden Festival some computers and lasers are in their own miniature crystal palaces. The setting in a riverside garden speaks the same message and employs the same silences—even in the exhibits of the Scottish universities.

There is a connection between this presentation of technology and the way architecture is treated in all debates. Almost all discourse now treats buildings as art objects. Occasionally they are seen as technical or investment objects. The idea of products as social objects is more alien to architectural critique than it is even in the arts, where one can see much useful historical and theoretical work on literature, painting and film as products of society, as well as shapers of society. The casting of architects into the role of artists serves an important purpose. It absorbs

347

all their energy, as well as that of critics, scholars and educators. If they wish they can kill each other, metaphorically, in this debate. When a radically new approach such as Deconstruction turns up, it is quickly defused, with the collusion of its leaders, into a formalistic, stylisitic discourse. It is not an accident that it should have been an art gallery which organised the symposium, coupling architecture with art, nor that it is the Museum of Modern *Art* in New York which will stage the first exhibition on Deconstruction and architecture.

The media, classification systems in libraries, exhibitions of drawings framed and exhibited at the Royal Academy—now even those produced by computers—form part of a social contract. The overt and covert functional programmes can be excised from critical debate by creating the myth of the neutral brief. The social relationships encapsulated in spatial structures are produced and reproduced through a code so powerful that silence is enough. Explicit control of function and implicit control of spatial relationships, accompanied by the promise of artistic autonomy and opportunities for technical and economic innovation, prevents even the questions being asked—questions about power, technology and people. When a philosopher who can ask questions about the power of reason fails to see this then the contract has become firmly sealed indeed.

It is not surprising that people cannot read their everyday experience as meaningful. Each component of this experience has its own fragmented obscurity. Taken together there is a mixture of 'gibberish' and 'lies'. How, on that basis, can one hope to construct a valid analysis which goes deeper—deeper than what? How can one tackle the education of architects as other than artists or technologists—the two streams created at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the Ecole des Beaux Arts and the Ecole Polytechnique?

Deconstruction will not, it seems, provide the answers to these questions or even raise them. Its practitioners add confusion; its theoreticians, amnesia.

References

Jacques Derrida (1983), 'The Principle of Reason: the University in the Eyes of its Pupils', *Diacritics,* vol. XIX, pp.3—20.

Jacques Derrida (1986), 'Point de Folie—Maintenant l'Architecture; *Bernard Tschumi: La Case Vide—La Villette, 1985', AA Files* Number 12, Summer 1986, pp. 65—75.