The Community of Deconstruction

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COLUMN A

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Alice and Fran Edgerly report on what it means to lead one of five project offices in the cooperative review process Building a Proposition for Future Activities. *Begegnungshaus Poppenbüttel*. The format is a special form of planning competition, which was developed and carried out in coordination with the Hamburg Chamber of Architects and all stakeholders in the project. The task was to explore and draw up an expert estimation on how the *Begegnunghaus* (Community Building) would be realized. The invited offices spent one week on site, the construction site of the project, and two weeks in their own offices. In the interview, Alice and Fran Edgerly discuss their immediate experiences, their working methods in the studio and in the project office as well as the basics and possibilities of the competition and the project.

ABOUT COLUMN A

Architectural production is usually a laying out or stretching and sometimes breaking of rules: of design, of statics and construction, of budget, of reason. Architects rarely work within the structural framework of their design and construction tasks. The assumption that precisely this, however, is a greater potential for facilitating urban production when architects take on a more prominent role as project managers, was one of the motifs behind the project *Begegnungshaus Poppenbüttel* and will be illuminated here with reference to Jacques Derrida's practice form of deconstruction.

Jacques Derrida developed the poststructuralist practice form of deconstruction. Deconstruction is a fixed component of teaching in many architecture programs in higher education, not least because of the MoMA exhibition, in which starchitects such as Peter Eisenman, Rem Koolhaas or Zaha Hadid were sold to a global audience as protagonists of a certain school of postmodern

architecture. For project management in urban design, the practice form seems to be of particular interest, with which it is possible to pursue a conceptual practice in a structured manner without having to return to proven patterns or lazy compromises in situations that often rely on negotiation and improvisation–for example, when it comes to the program of a building and the structural framework conditions and assumptions necessary for its realization. What does deconstruction refer to? How can we become active in project management through deconstruction?

> https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCz04zeXA-FcWIYHXK06cWlQ
> If you are not yet familiar with the work of Jacques Derrida, you may be interested in this one-hour documentary. For further reading we recommend the publications in the references of this page. Dick, Kirby and Amy Ziering Kofman. 2002. Derrida. Jane Doe Films.

The linguistic turn[1] builds on the linguist Ferdinand des Saussure and provides the foundation for the departure from classical metaphysics on which structuralists, as a philosophical direction, rely (Wetzel, 2010). In addition to de Saussure, an ideological orientation is responsible for Derrida's position and his later overcoming of structuralism. French post-war philosophy is based on the one hand on the three "masterminds" Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger and on the other on the "masters of doubt" Nietzsche, Marx and Freud. One must not understand this orientation as an absolute acceptance of their philosophy. Derrida emphasizes the relationship to the master thinkers, especially because of their questioning potential. In the "masters of doubt" he sees a dynamic potential that is realized in rejecting given opinions about the effect of a philosophical discipline or direction and promoting thinking ahead, projection.

According to Heinz Kimmerle, who wrote an introductory book on Derrida's work, Heidegger already clarified in his writing "Identität und Differenz" (Identity and Difference) that "since Plato, European philosophy has predominantly been directed towards the One, the Identical, and seeks to grasp the Many, the Different from this perspective" (Kimmerle 2008, 22). Derrida initially departs from the conviction that the tradition of European philosophy cannot simply be "negated or even transformed" (Kimmerle, 2008, 23), which is why he deals with it, changes it from within, and

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[1] In his collection of essays, The Linguistic Turn, Richard Rorty describes the new kind of questions posed by language philosophy in contrast to the old view of language, the so-called "spectatorial account of knowledge", as the beginning of a thorough rethinking of certain epistemological difficulties, which have troubled philosophers since Plato and Aristotle. These difficulties exist only if one assumes that the acquisition of knowledge presupposes the presentation of something "immediately given" to the mind, where the mind is conceived of as a sort of "immaterial eye", and where "immediately" means, at a minimum, "without the mediation of language".

deconstructs it in its linguistic form. "The thought movement of identifying thought is taken up and transcended in its linguistic form in its identifying thinking" (Kimmerle 2008, 23).

Derrida breaks with the traditional notion of difference and introduces "différance" instead; "différance" is not something static, it is not a fixed "difference", not a constant distance, but rather a game, a relationship. Derrida initially refers to "writing", to a text whose meaning can be approximated by creating more and more "differences". All further differentiation, however, always creates new "differences", so that the final meaning, the end-valid single sense, can never be grasped or fully reached. With the formation of the concept "différance", he also distinguishes his own writing from the traditional concept of "difference". If we follow Kimmerle (2008), we can see that Jacques Derrida introduces with "différance" a notion different from "difference", which looks different in written form, but sounds equally when pronounced. "The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and references which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be present in and of itself, referring only to itself. [... N]o element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces" (Derrida 1981, 26).

"For strategic reasons [...] I have generalized the concept of text [...] and described it as an institution as well as a political situation, a body, a dance, etc. [...]" (Derrida 1986, 70). "So what I call text is everything, is practically everything. [...] I believe that it would be necessary to carry out this extension, this strategic generalization of the concept of the text, in order to give deconstruction its possibility, the text is therefore not limited to what is written, to what is called writing in contrast to speech. Speech is a text, gesture is a text, reality is a text in this new sense" (Derrida & Engelmann 1987, 107). Deconstruction thus traverses all disciplines without itself being a discipline. Derrida's achievement in this context was to promote and mobilize social, artistic and architectural considerations.

In Derrida's "The Towers of Babel" the image of the tower stands for the interface of translation, philosophy, architecture and deconstruction (Wigley, 1994). "The necessity of philosophy is founded not in the project of building the tower, but in its failure" (Wigley 1994, 36). The tower functions as a metaphor for philosophy, whose dream is translatability. The desire for translation that has resulted from the tower's incompletion is never finally satisfied or disappointed, any more than the philosophical building can ever be completely realized or destroyed. "The problem of translation is at the same time that of the transition to philosophy" (Derrida 1981a, 61). There is no ideal image that is to be achieved during the building project of philosophy, and it remains a

constant transformation. The tower is equally a metaphor of and an image for deconstruction. "The deconstruction of the Tower of Babel gives us a good idea of what deconstruction is: an unfinished building whose semi-finished structures are visible and allow us to make conclusions about the former scaffolding" (Derrida 1994, 101). Derrida goes even further by suggesting that the unfinished tower of Babel is not only an image for philosophy and deconstruction, but also for architecture itself. "If the tower had been completed, there would be no architecture. Only its incompleteness gives architecture, such as the multitude of languages, history" (Derrida 1994). The possibilities of architecture are only found in relation to the unfinished, never-ending philosophy.

Neither is deconstruction a method or analytical procedure in relation to architecture; it is not a strategy, it has no conscious goal without being free of goals. It neither wants to apply something nor add anything. "Deconstruction is a strange structural condition, it is a continuous structural event, a continuous change of structure that cannot be grasped in traditional terms because it frustrates these very terms. Deconstruction is that which is necessary for structure, but eludes structural analysis" (Wigley 1994, 41). Deconstruction thus does not create a new description in architecture either, but rather emphasizes the existing. Translating deconstruction into architecture thus cannot consist of "[...] transforming the conditions of the material architectural object" (Wigley 1994). Deconstruction first questions the previous functions of architecture. The translation of deconstruction into architecture thus does not lead to a creative renewal of an architectural object or to a reconfiguration of architectural theory. "The object of the translation process are theoretical objects, i.e. objects whose theoretical status and objectivity are problematic, delicate objects that address the theoretical condition of the object and the objectivity of theory" (Wigley 1994, 42). Yet the concept of deconstruction according to Derrida is already architecturally proven in its interpretability, for it means "not destruction, but exposing the structural layers in the system" (Derrida 1994, 86). This passage points to the important relation between architecture in terms of buildings or built structures and the architecture of political institutions within which architecture takes place.

Questioning of the notion of (the) building invokes questions of institutional authority. The rethinking of architecture determines deconstructive politics (Wigley 1994, 55). The collaborative review process was designed as a format including all materials, the program, the leading offices and invited participants in such a way that it would enable the problematization of the concept and object of the community building. Both what it should be and how it should be realized is conceived as part of the project. Encounter as a relational form re-problematizes the concept of

community building and introduces the difference between the discursive claim of "the community" and its performative staging. Bonacker (2002, 278) states that "community from the perspective of deconstructivist practice refers to the actions of tying and untying the social fabric to something without a common understanding that something is ever implied as a point of reference". To give an example: While the discursive relationship remains contingent, a performative relationship takes place on the basis of physical desires and needs, i.e. food, sleeping, hanging out. For Project Management in Urban Design, this term provokes the need to problematize contingency through a didactic environment.

In the interview with Fran and Alice Edgerly from Assemble we learn about the attempt to deconstruct encounters in the format of the planning competition. We can assume that this approach is due to the translation of the format into a cooperative expert procedure. The five leading project offices received the tender for the planning competition in advance. It includes the task of the planning competition and data on the project genesis. On the first day of the planning competition, the tender was presented to all participants. The participants were guided through the accommodation by three employees of the contractors responsible for the construction site of the project 'Accommodation with the perspective of dwelling'. Subsequently, the members of each project office were teamed up in a lottery procedure. They five project offices set up their studios in the large tent on the construction site, which was open to the public. All offices brought their specific approaches with them to work on the task. At this point it turned out that working in competition may not produce the best possible architecture. As early as on day 2 of the planning competition, the offices decided that it made sense for everyone to strive for further cooperation between the five offices and the employees. Corresponding comments substantiating this motion were found in 2 out of 5 submitted reports and were passed on to the awarding authority via the procedure management. This way, the performance of actually staging the project offices directly addressed the model character of the project. The project is promoted by Hamburg's council under the title Integration through work and help to self-help. In the end, this approach failed on the one hand because of the motivation to process the tender criteria for the performance profile of the project architect in such a way that a cooperation of individual or all five offices would have been possible. On the other, it failed due to the willingness of the project initiators to work with one or more offices that are not located in Hamburg. Whichever explanation one follows, both the results of the competition and the sustained interest in the format 'project days' and 'cooperative review process' point to the social complexity of the performative problematization of architectural production. From the perspective of project management in Urban Design, this understanding appears as a potential, since it makes urban and knowledge production processes accessible in

the way they actually take place. Even the failure thus turns into a productive development from which specific insights can be drawn.

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