RISING OUT OF CHAOS:
EXTRICATING RELIGION FROM
AN ARCHITECTURE OF COMPLEXITY

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Bernard Tschumi's design for the *Parc de la Villette* in Paris consists of a series of fragmented constructivist follies, each painted blood red and situated on points across the site defined by a grid. Each folly is linked to the others through the arbitrary ordering power of the grid and then through a series of cinematic promenades which open and close vistas in the park obstructing spatial perceptions. Built on the site of the Parisian slaughterhouses, the *Parc de la Villette* project is emblematic of recent architecture which relies upon complexity and contradiction. Tschumi's *Parc de la Villette*, like his *Manhattan Transcripts*, consciously seeks to deconstruct the manner in which people use and experience space; violence and pleasure are the keys he claims to forming his architecture. His design strategies include the use of metaphor, metonymy and a complex interplay of building and text relying on a reading of the site and its history.[1] Significantly, *La Villette* is also the site where Georges Bataille and the Surrealist artist Andre Masson went to study and draw *l'abattoir* - the site where Bataille started to associate sacrifice with ecstasy, chaos with religion. Bataille's reading of the relationship between myth, faith and blood-letting was developed from his text in *Sacrifices: the Gods Who Die*, where he states:

> In the course of the ecstatic vision, at the limit of death on the cross and of the blindly lived *lama sabachthani*, the object is finally unveiled as catastrophe in a chaos of light and shadow, neither as God nor as nothingness, but as the object that love, incapable of liberating itself except outside of itself, demands in order to let out the scream of lacerated existence.[2]

Bataille's later works associated the chaos of *l'abattoir* with the ritualistic sacrifices made within the temple. Tschumi was familiar not only with Bataille's experiences at *La Villette* but also with a similar slaughterhouse site and a similar architectural competition in Venice - a competition on a site that was at various times abattoir, Jewish quarter and a proposed hospital designed by Le Corbusier and never completed. In the complex building and text, prepared for *La Villette*, Tschumi ensured that the origins and meaning of his work were hermetic and that even his role as author/architect was in doubt.

It is from within the ambiguity and the self-referentiality of the *Parc de la Villette* that a curious thread of theory has arisen - a thread linking Tschumi's design to both eastern and western religions. Moreover Tschumi's design is not singular, it is part of a greater architectural movement, and just as religion has been uncovered in the works of Tschumi so too has it been seen in other works of architecture which exhibit complexity and contradiction.

This paper will consider the general presence (or absence) of religion in the recent architectural movements characterised by complexity and contradiction. Associated with the claimed presence of religion in the works of deconstructivist architecture is the idea that the architecture, like Bataille's slaughterhouse, is stochastic. The paper will then outline two broad strategies being used to uncover religion in the architecture of complexity.

One common conceit used in recent times to characterise the primary forces shaping architecture throughout history is the description of architecture being governed by the 'metaphysics of presence'. This concept, as outlined by Eisenman and derived from Heidegger and Derrida, utilises Kant's three regulative controls for reflection. The three controls, or extents of the reflective condition, are God, Man and World (or alternatively deity, self, and technology). Using these three controls Eisenman, and other architectural theorists, have been able to describe the history of architecture, from Classicism to Post-modernism as a continuum punctuated by three ruptures.[3]

In the earliest period of history, up until the Renaissance, God, or mysticism, mediated between mankind and nature, establishing order and promoting a divine understanding of the world. The works of artists and architects from this period sought to represent the order inherent in divine forms. In architecture, Vitruvius' ten books, which outline the divine geometry of the human body and the manner in which architecture should be derived from this geometry, are emblematic of this period. The continuum, however, was broken in the Renaissance as works of architecture and art shifted from a theocentric to a anthropocentric orthodoxy. In architecture, the dominant metaphors were no longer inspired by God but were organicist; buildings and cities were viewed as human bodies, geometry and planning were linked to the growth in anatomical knowledge rather than the divine geometry of the human body. Eisenman suggests that the nineteenth century marks the next point of conceptual chiasmus; the moment when anthropocentricism gave way to technocentricism. In the late Victorian era the rise of scientific understanding and the growth in industrialisation lead to a new era wherein the human body's power was now transcended by the machine. This second rupture in the continuum of architectural history was caused by the focus on non-human,

non-divine objects. The architecture of the era was imbued with a machine aesthetic and an implied philosophical purity. Technology was viewed as the catalyst for achieving utopia, just as in the past faith and science seemed the most direct paths to a perfect society. Eisenman suggests that this third age disintegrated into world wars, atomic bombs and a series of social crises caused by modern architecture. Technocentricism had failed to produce an ordered society - the triadic relationship had shifted away from God and Man until the machine and modern architecture had become ends in themselves.

Technocentricism, Eisenman argues, failed during the middle years of the twentieth century when it became clear that the machine would not lead to the promised land. In the years that followed the third rift in the 'metaphysics of presence' architectural styles fluctuated as one short-lived movement after another attempted to promote a different *locus standi.* The neologism which best described the eclectic period that followed was 'post-modernity'. The focus, briefly, was on the rejuvenation of anthropocentricism and a return to the use of the body as an architectonic generator. However this movement merely copied the visual styles of the past, it did not repeat the divine, basal symbolism of the forms and thus the architecture became self-referential; architecture referred only to other architecture. Similarly post-modern architectural ornament was derived only from ornament in the past, not from the theocentric or organocentric metaphors which originally governed its formation. In the worst excesses of the period ornament overwrites the traces of the architecture itself - entire buildings became cornices, pediments and entablatures. The continuum of architectural history, using Eisenman's triadic conceit, had become lost in the search for a new system of order. Previously, in classical architecture, the geometry of nature was assumed to be divine and therefore ordered. Correspondingly in the post-renaissance period, mankind's own observations were believed to be the key to understanding the order inherent in the world. In the third, modernist, period the power of machines and technology were supposed to enable mankind to dominate, and thus order, the world. In each of these periods, defined by the 'metaphysics of presence', the essence of the triadic relationship is expressed in the manner in which order is created from chaos. Just as in *Genesis* God created order from chaos, so too, philosophy and science attempted, prior to the late eighteenth century, to find order within the seeming chaos of nature. In each of the three periods the focus was on the manner in which order could be derived and translated into architecture. However at the same time as the search for order was occurring there was a gradual reduction in the importance of God (and religion) in the triadic conceit.

While Eisenman's description of the history of architecture (through the metaphysics of presence) is flawed in many ways it is valuable for the manner in which it situates the most recent trends in architectural design. There has arisen a series of loosely connected movements in recent architecture which have been described using a variety of titles: 'deconstructivist' architecture, the architecture of 'violated perfection' and 'free-space' architecture are three typical titles. A common device in each of these works has been a focus on chaos and indeterminacy. While certain works clearly trace their conceptual origins to the science of nonlinear dynamics, fractal geometry and superstring theory, an equal number have cited the philosophy of Heraclitus, Nietzsche and Derrida as their formative bodies of theory. Despite the divergent nature of these theoretical domains, architects have appropriated from them selectively and in a dilettante fashion, forming works which have a common focus in the themes of complexity and contradiction. In brief, if the basis of the line of reasoning is scientific, the arguments usually involve the 'butterfly effect' (sensitive dependence on starting conditions), organisational depth (usually derived from fractal geometry) and self-referentiality. The outcomes are that the architecture is designed to express the chaos and unpredictability present in the modern world. If the basis for the architectonic form generation is philosophical the designs are frequently derived from the linguistic contradictions present in Derrida's reading of *differance*; from the elements of fire and randomness in Heraclitus, or from Barthes' recognition of the death of the author.

'While the supposed lack of a spiritual agenda has been at the core of many attempts to criticise modern architecture, the rise in an architecture of complexity has seen a concomitant rise in claims that such works have a hidden spiritual and metaphysical dimension. Two architectural theorists, Charles Jencks and Mark C. Taylor, have attempted to analyse the chaos in recent architecture in an effort to uncover the spiritual and religious beliefs embodied within the works. Significantly their efforts have concentrated on different components of the architecture, have used different methodologies and have uncovered a variety of philosophies, symbols and rituals significant to different religious faiths. The remainder of this paper will consider the strategies used by each of these theorists.

The architect and critic Charles Jencks, in his 1995 text *The Architecture Of The Jumping Universe,* has focussed primarily on those works of architecture which have overt links to Chaos Theory and Nonlinear Dynamics. Freely combining the works of Benoit Mandelbrot, René Thom and James Lovelock, Jencks attempts to define a new movement in both architecture and culture.

Jencks commences his polemic by noting that there is a crisis occurring in architecture and in culture in general. He claims that western society is 'confused', that its politicians and architects, those who shape society, lack direction. Recent architecture has presented society with a myriad of images and ideas. Some of these architectural ideas, Jencks claims, are 'very exciting, many of them disturbing, but all of them marginalised'. Jencks notes that not only has architecture lost its way but also that the age 'has lost its unifying ethos, its Christian roots'.

Jencks' arguments initially support the triadic understanding of the 'metaphysics of presence' in architecture. Modernist architecture, the quintessence of mechanised order, may be represented by the absence of both God and Man. In contrast the architecture of complexity implies, for Jencks, the rise in a new spirituality which combines 'Zen Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism and Shintoism' with non-linear dynamics. Jencks argues that it is time to reclaim the spiritual high ground that architecture has abandoned for so long. He admits that there is a reluctance to speak of religion in architecture; a reluctance he calls a 'Negative Theology' which is 'most pronounced in the philosopher Wittgenstein'.

> One can see that so much spirituality turned into spiritualism and New Age mumbo-jumbo. One can see that the word 'spiritual' is contaminated, hijacked by the media and often used as an excuse not to think. All of this is true, but still not enough to justify the suppression of what was discovered: the idea that artists and architects, by continuously creating and basing their content on discoveries of science and cosmology, were engaged in a spiritual search.[4]

Jencks blames the soul-less qualities of the built environment on both modernist architects and on the presumed authority of western religious beliefs. Modernist architects saw their pursuit as superior to other architectural styles. Similarly, Jencks claims, Christianity has elevated itself above other religions. The result of the breakdown of these hegemonies is that:

> In short, the Post-Modern, holistic view of the universe has turned Modern and Christian reductivisms on their head and upgraded the rest of nature with a new view. ... The implications are that everything has a sacred component ...[5]

Jencks contrasts his two starting conditions, the simultaneous loss of religion and failed modernist attempts to attain utopia, with the architecture which results from complexity. The inherent contradictions and instabilities present in the architecture of complexity present Jencks with a wealth of opportunities to extrapolate a mystical or sacred significance from the works.

Notably Jencks, having already derided 'spiritualism and New Age mumbo-jumbo', proceeds to work with the most popular new age and pseudo-scientific versions of eastern religions and ecological cabbalism.

The primary method Jencks uses to identify or to create religion from the chaos of architecture is no less than a personal model of the cosmos. Freely combining aspects of Catastrophic Theory and Chaos theory (two very different, unconnected ideas) with Lovelock's controversial theory of Gaia, Jencks has created a view of the cosmos as God. *'Cosmogenesis'* is the new *Genesis*, he claims. While Jencks is not unique in proposing such a universal model his view is more eclectic than its predecessors proposed by Paul Davies, Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers.[6] Viewed through such a cosmic lens the architecture of complexity is rich with spiritual meaning, religious symbolism, multi-cultural references and ecological sensibilities.

The manner in which Jencks discards all western religions (under the banner of Christianity) and insists on referring to all eastern religions as if they were identical and had common articles of faith suggests that his cosmic view is flawed. Mark Taylor's recent attempts to uncover the hidden religious symbolism in the self-same architecture, through philosophical means, have relied upon his deep understanding of Christian and Hebraic religions. Using a thorough knowledge of religion and an appreciation of art, architecture and philosophy, Taylor has made a comprehensive study of the architecture of complexity. Taylor's motives, however, are less universal and more personal than Jencks'. Taylor states in *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*:

> My interest in art and architecture, however, is not simply analytic. The larger purpose of this book is constructive or, perhaps more accurately, reconstructive... I am convinced that certain developments in contemporary art and architecture provide untapped resources for religious reflection. The result of a reconsideration of the interplay between religion and art is not a return to conclusions reached during the last century. To the contrary, a thoughtful exploration of some of the most provocative art of our time opens an alternative space for the a/theological imagination.[7]

Rather than searching for holistic signs of religion in deconstructivist architecture Taylor produced a series of close readings of architectural works which possessed some apparent links to religion. This is quite contrary to Jencks' approach which was not concerned with whether or not the designers themselves had intended any religious message in their works.

Taylor's analysis of Tschumi's *Parc de la Villette* concentrates on Tschumi's theoretical position and on the works of Georges Bataille. The linkage between the two is the *La Villette* site and the sacrificial violence which was enacted there. Taylor recounts Tschumi's seminal essay *'Questions of Space: The Pyramid*

and the Labyrinth' in which modern architecture and the architecture of complexity are opposed to each other in the manner of the Pyramid and the Labyrinth; the Modernists' sterile and ordered approach to design is contrasted with the Deconstructivists' paradoxical and chaotic works. Taylor links this to Bataille's works on architecture and religion, drawing comparisons between Tschumi's claim that the creation of architecture is an act of violence and eroticism with Bataille's claims that sacred acts are both bloody and erotic. Taylor further recounts and develops the links between the *La Villette* competition and the Venice competition, dwelling on a scheme by Peter Eisenman, who was later, with Jacques Derrida, to design a section of the La Villette project. In the deliberate evasions of Authorship and authority in the overlaying of design works Taylor is able to call into question the presence of the Author, the Architect and God.

In calling for a theoaesthetics Taylor recognises that there is a rich capacity for religious reflection in the architecture of complexity. Furthermore Taylor admits that such reflection may, like the lens of a broken mirror, distort and fragment the viewers glance. It is this realisation that separates Taylor from Jencks. Jencks has looked into the mirror and in reflecting on Deconstructivist architecture he has seen the particular distortion that he was seeking. Taylor has looked into the mirror and seen the distortions, the fragments, the reflections, the false images and the value in these. The two strategies for liberating religion from the architecture of complexity (or deconstructivist architecture) rely upon searching for meaning that may or may not be there - the main difference being that Taylor understands that his search may be flawed while Jencks apparently does not.

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