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Deconstruction: Between Icon and Architectural Landmark, Two Spanish Examples

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Abstract. The 20th century was a period in the history of humanity that was marked by numerous technological advances, many discoveries and achievements in terms of knowledge, science and the arts, as well as numerous changes and political restructuring. In the Human Sciences, especially in Philosophy, new concepts and thoughts that marked and conquered the opinions of the intellectuals of that time emerged. One of these new concepts was the “Deconstruction” around the 60s of that century. The term “Deconstruction” was used for the first time by the philosopher Jacques Derrida in his work “De Grammatologie” in 1967. Deconstructivist Architecture emerged in the 80s of the 20th century. Deconstruction had as the main intention the rediscovery of new values, through the contrast of concepts, and the suppression of Modernism. Architecture was no exception, because new thoughts, styles, movements and new constructive techniques arose, which produced and caused a (re)affirmation of Architecture in society, through the implementation of new configurations and modern spatial conceptions. “Deconstruction”, as an architectural movement, arose from the fusion of the Russian Constructivism and other movements related to the philosophical concept of “Deconstruction” presented by Jacques Derrida. But it is the 1988 exhibition “Deconstructivist Architecture” organized by Marc Wigley and Philip Johnson at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), in New York, that acknowledges Deconstruction in Architecture. Frank Gehry, Peter Eisenman, Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelb(l)au, and Bernard Tschumi were the avant-garde architects featured in this exhibition. On the 25th anniversary of the exhibition, MoMA curator Barry Bergdoll hosted “Deconstructivism: Retrospective Views and Actuality”, which traced the subsequent careers of that seven architects to examine the impact of the exhibition and the changes in architecture in those 25 years. This paper identifies the Deconstruction concepts that were the basis of deconstructivist architecture but keeping in mind that Iconic deconstructivist architects were not committed completely to all concepts of this philosophy as they produced their architectural objects. Two iconic buildings as Peter Eisenman’s City of Culture outside Santiago de Compostela (Spain) and Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (Spain) are presented to achieve the debate.

1. Introduction

In the 20th century, in the Human Sciences, especially in Philosophy, new concepts and thoughts emerged that marked and conquered the opinions of the intellectuals of that time. One of these new concepts was the “Deconstruction”, around the 60s of that century [1].



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The French philosopher Jacques Derrida started the idea, basically in terms of Language, and then his idea spread until reaching Architecture. Most of Derrida's work continues a line of thought which began with Friedrich Nietzsche and ran through Martin Heidegger [2]. The term "Deconstruction" was used for the first time by Derrida in his work "De Grammatologie" [3] in 1967 and it refers (in the first instance) to the way in which the 'accidental' features of a text can be seen as betraying, subverting, its purportedly 'essential' message [2].

Architecture was no exception, because new thoughts, styles, movements and new constructive techniques arose which produced and caused a (re)affirmation of Architecture in society through the implementation of new configurations and modern spatial conceptions [1]. Deconstructivist Architecture emerged in the 80s of the 20th century. Deconstruction had as the main intention the rediscovery of new values through the contrast of concepts, and the suppression of Modernism [1]. "Deconstruction" as an architectural movement arose from the fusion of the Russian Constructivism and other movements related to the philosophical concept of "Deconstruction" presented by Jacques Derrida [1].

2. Deconstruction: a contextualization

In architectural discourse, translating deconstruction is not to recover faithfully some original, undivided sense of deconstruction. The architectural translation of deconstruction is literally the production of deconstruction [4]. This production must be organized by the terms of a contract between Architecture and Philosophy which is inscribed within the structure of both in a way that defines a unique scene of translation [4].

As Derrida expressed on his Aphorism nr. 48: "*Contrary to appearances 'deconstruction' is not an architectural metaphor. The word ought and will have to name a thought of architecture, it must be a thought at work (...). Next, a deconstruction, as its name indicates, must from the start deconstruct the construction itself, its structural or constructivist motif, its schemes, its intuitions and its concepts, its rhetoric. But it deconstructs the strictly architectural construction as well, the philosophical construction of the concept of architecture. The concept is governed by the model both in the idea of the system in philosophy as well as in the theory, practice and teaching of architecture*" [5].

The deconstruction concepts that were the basis of deconstructivist architecture led to iconic deconstructivist architects who were not committed completely to all concepts of this philosophy as they produced their architectural objects [6]. As Hoteit said: "*The 'transfer' of the concepts of deconstruction to architecture was not direct and literal; some concepts were modified and renamed to suit architecture. Moreover, iconic deconstructivist architects were not committed to all concepts of this philosophy; they were known to focus on one or two concepts in deconstruction and make them fundamental principles of their personal styles in architecture.*" [6].

Throughout the 80s of the 20th century, Deconstruction demarcated and established a set of theoretical projects of different areas of the Human and Social Sciences, covering beyond Literature and Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Anthropology, Law, Architecture, Theology, Political Theories, among others [1]. Architecture, in this context, can be described as a structural "reproduction" of philosophical thought, as well as a manifestation and reproduction of different "appearances" of thought. Thus, the correspondence between Architecture and Philosophy is not only evident in the texts of the philosopher Jacques Derrida, but is also intelligible in Derrida's cooperation with architects, as it was the case of Peter Eisenman and Bernard Tschumi [1]. The fact that Eisenman is not only an architect but also a theorist has facilitated the translation of Deconstruction into Architecture [6]. Eisenman has also contributed to the definition and clarification of Deconstruction's central concepts [6].

According to Rodrigues [1] the main objectives of Deconstruction are: architecture's "liberation" from the of modern constructive canons, of Rationalism and Functionalism, such as the "purity of form", "rigor of materials", or the motto "shape follows the function"; it requires the breakdown of all Euclidean geometric foundations which comprise the concepts of uniformity, harmony and firmness; it requires the "distortion" of the correspondence between the interior and the exterior; and lastly, it requires that the presence of an archetypal construction is initially established which may be deconstructed in the future (figure 1). As Wigley declared: "*A deconstructive architect is therefore not who dismantles buildings, but one who locates the inherent dilemmas within the buildings*" [7].

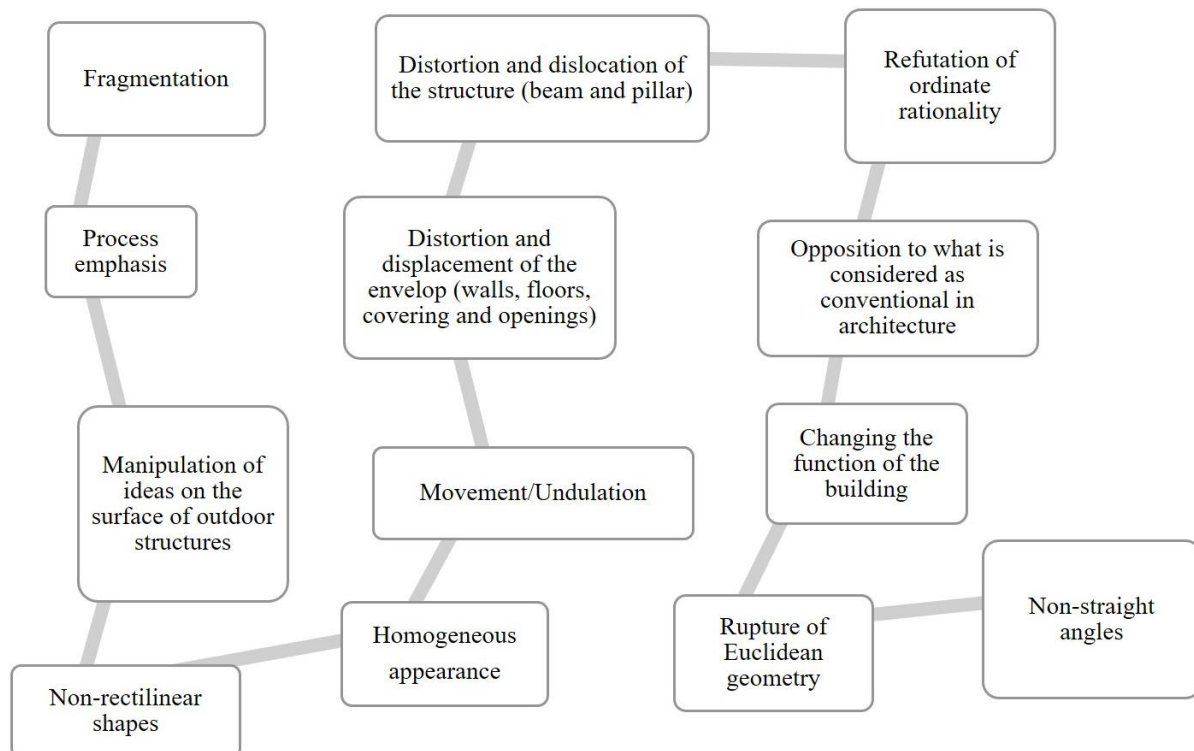


Figure 1. Deconstruction according to Rodrigues [1]

As Murer, Fuchsberger and Tscheligi [8] presented, the Deconstructive visual appearance can be characterized by controlled chaos as well as unpredictability and distortion. As these authors stated: "*Underneath its skin, deconstruction is not about a style or a movement. Rather, its proponents understand their work as an opposition to the ordered rationality of postmodernism.*" [8].

To Wigley [7] "*The deconstructive architect puts the pure forms of the architectural tradition on the couch and identifies the symptoms of a repressed impurity. The impurity is drawn to the surface by a combination of gentle coaxing and violent torture: the form is interrogated.*" To translate deconstruction into architectural discourse is to examine the gaps in deconstructive writing that demand an architectural translation in order to constitute those texts as deconstructive [4]. Wigley mentioned that: "*In each project, the traditional structure of parallel planes – stacked up horizontally from the ground plane within a regular form – is twisted. The frame is warped. Even the ground plane is warped. The interrogation of pure form pushes structure to its limits, but not beyond (...) Moreover, forms are disturbed and only then given a functional program. Instead of form following function, function follows deformation*" [7].

3. Two Exhibitions

“Deconstructivist Architecture” was an exhibition directed by Philip Johnson (as guest curator), Mark Wigley (as associate curator) and assisted by Frederieke Taylor which took place in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York between 23th June and 30th August 1988 [1], [7] that acknowledges Deconstruction in Architecture. Earlier, in 1932 Johnson was responsible for other landmark exhibitions such as “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition”. Philip Johnson, as well as Henry-Russel Hitchcock and Alfred Barr, started a quest for a new style of architecture. Johnson said: *“I started our quest, for a new style of architecture which would, like Gothic or Romanesque in their day, take over the discipline of our art”* [7].

The unconventional architects featured in this exhibition, whose work marks the emergence of a new sensibility in Architecture, were Frank Gehry, Peter Eisenman, Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelb(l)au, and Bernard Tschumi. These architects present their works with diagonals arcs, and warped planes, and disrupted the right angles of Modernism [7].

Regarding the MoMA “Deconstructivist Architecture” exhibition, Johnson [7] explains that it is a confluence of a few important architects’ works that in the 80s of the 20th century showed similar approaches and similar outputs. Regarding Deconstruction and the architectural projects in the exhibition, Mark Wigley refers that it is the ability to disturb our thinking about the shape that makes these projects deconstructive [7]. Thus, this exhibition represented a preliminary attempt to label a new design orientation and Wigley used the term “Deconstructivism” to label this new sensibility. Considering the chosen architectural projects and architects of this exhibition, Wigley stated that: *“They are not an application of deconstructive theory. Rather, they emerge from within the architectural tradition and happen to exhibit some deconstructive qualities. (...) A deconstructive architect is therefore not one who dismantles buildings, but one who locates the inherent dilemmas within buildings”* [7].

In 2013, the 25th anniversary of the exhibition “Deconstructivist Architecture” was celebrated and the MoMA curator Barry Bergdoll hosted “Deconstructivism: Retrospective Views and Actuality”, which traced the subsequent careers of that seven architects to examine the impact of the exhibition and the changes in architecture in those 25 years [1].

4. Iconic Architecture vs Bilbao Effect

In 1997, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, designed by the architect Frank Gehry, opened to the public. Ever since its opening, the promise of duplicating or copying the transformative effects generated by some exceptional architectural or urban projects have been approached by planners, city authorities, real estate promoters and scientific observers alike [9]. Exceptional architectural projects play significant roles in urban transformation processes as Alaily-Mattar and Thierstein point out [9]. This has led to the use of terms like “signature”, “branded” but also like “iconic” which are used to describe certain aspects of exceptional architectural or urban projects [9], [10] as well as the term “starchitect” or “iconic architect” are essential in fulfilling this accomplishment [10].

According to Jencks [10], the iconic building has replaced the monument and nowadays anything can be an icon. The before and after of Frank Gehry’s New Guggenheim and the so-named “Bilbao Effect” must be highlighted. The new Guggenheim has put Bilbao ‘on the map’, thus bringing it to international attention [11]. As intended by the local government, which commissioned it, it instantly became, for the rest of the world and also for the locals, the symbol of Bilbao [11].

In fact, city authorities, real estate promoters and developers could see the economic logic of the architectural gesture with its many enigmatic meanings on a landmark, and the same method was applied to any and every building type [9], [10]. As Charles Jencks stated: *“This presented a semantic problem,*

inverting notions of appropriateness and decorum, for now an outrageously expressive museum could take on the urban role of a cathedral or public building, such as a city hall" [10]. Alaily-Mattar and Thierstein [9] argue that the development of star architectural projects must be regarded as a complex process that has economic, architectural, urban and social dimensions. Muratovski [12] studied the role of architecture and integrated design in city branding. For that to be achieved, the relationship between architecture, branding, territory and iconicity was explored. This author has defined Architecture as: *"a medium that can deliver new experiences and perceptions while being a part of a larger system that brings together economic developments, technological progress and social change"* [12].

Plaza [13] carried out a study in which the role that the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao played in the growth of tourism asserting that this city verified as an: *"outstanding test case for the impact of a single internationally famous facility, considering that Bilbao was not previously known for its tourism potential, in a context that otherwise does not lend itself to large flows of tourism"*.



Figure 2. Two iconic buildings in Spanish Territory: A) Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, B) Eisenman's City of Culture of Galicia

5. Two Spanish Examples: Two Architects and Two Buildings

Two iconic buildings (figure 2), both in the Spanish territory, like Peter Eisenman's City of Culture outside Santiago de Compostela (figures 3 and 4) and Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (figures 5 and 6) will be presented. Regarding Deconstruction and its architectural expression, it can be said that Peter Eisenman focused on the concepts of presentness and trace, while Frank Gehry focused on binary oppositions and free play [6].

5.1. Eisenman's City of Culture of Galicia

The City of Culture is located in north-western Spain, on the Gaiás' Hill in Santiago de Compostela, Province of Galicia (figure 3). The design and conceptual basis of the City of Culture comes from the superposition of three different kinds of information: i) the medieval city street plan of the centre of Santiago de Compostela which is superimposed on the topographic plan of Gaiás' Hill, ii) a modern Cartesian grid which is laid over these medieval pre-existences, iii) the distortion of the topography of the hillside, which was possible through computer modelling software that allowed the distortion the two flat geometries and consequently generated a topological surface which repositioned old and new in a simultaneous matrix [1], [14]. Hoteit [6] refers one more superimposition to be added to the downtown's historic street grid, to the topography of the hill and to the abstract Cartesian grid which is the scallop shell: the symbol of the city of Santiago and of Saint Jacques' Routes.



Figure 3. Aerial view of Gaiás' Hill and Eisenman's City of Culture of Galicia (Spain)



Figure 4. Eisenman's City of Culture of Galicia (Spain)

Peter Eisenman superimposed these four abstracted traces to create an imaginary site condition that became a real site [6], conceiving Gaiás as a city itself [1]. The six buildings of the City of Culture are conceived as three pairs: i) the Museum of Galicia and the International Art Centre, ii) the Centre for Music and Performing Arts and the Central Services building, iii) the Library and Archives of Galicia [1], [14]. The City of Culture of Galicia is conceived as a large-scale cultural hub which is currently devoted to knowledge and creativity. Its buildings, interconnected by streets and plazas equipped with state-of-the-art technology, are seen as instruments that combine past and present, thus enabling an integrated approach to a strategic element for the development of Galicia which is Culture [1], [14], [15].

As an iconic building, the City of Culture of Galicia (figure 4), is perceived as: “*a formidable architectural milestone for the new century*” [16]. In its webpage, it can be read: “*the City of Culture of Galicia rises on the top of mount Gaiás as a formidable architectural milestone for the new century. Designed by the American architect Peter Eisenman to host the best of cultural expressions of Galicia, Spain, Europe, Latin America and the World, this new "city", inclusive and plural, shall contribute towards meeting the challenges of the information and knowledge society*” [16]. Regarding Gaiás Centre Museum, it is intended to be an architectural reference of the 21st century [1].

5.2. Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

The Basque city of Bilbao, in northern Spain, was founded in 1300 and reached its peak of prosperity during the industrial revolution. It was Spain's northern capital of steel and shipping up until 1975 when the recession struck and as Plaza said it: “*turned it into a decaying backwater*” [13].



Figure 5. Aerial view of Bilbao's Nervión River and Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

In the 80s of the 20th century, the city authorities began to take the tourism industry seriously as a source of job creation and income [13]. Furthermore, Bilbao lacked a positive image as a consequence of industrial decaying and the terrorism of the ETA [13]. As Plaza stated: *“the Guggenheim becomes a symbol of Basque fiscal autonomy, a public investment made without recourse to central government funds”* [13].

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is located in the old industrial heart of the city, on the edge of the Nervión River (figure 5) and features exhibitions organized by the Guggenheim Foundation and by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, as well as selections from the permanent collection of the Guggenheim museums. As Plaza [13] concludes, the building is not only unique but is also located in the appropriate place. The site, once occupied by an old factory, is unusual. The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao sprawls underneath one of Bilbao’s busiest road bridges, the *Puente de la Salve*, ending in a tower of structural steel and stone. Gehry’s building, as Plaza referred it: *“strengthens the image of the city’s past, rooted on the shipyards and steelworks, yet looks forward into the future through its innovative design”* [13]. In fact, *“The same building in a different site would transmit neither the strength nor the significance it communicates from Bilbao”* [13] as Plaza concluded. Crumbaugh pointed out: *“the inauguration of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao heralded the definitive reconversion of Bilbao’s depressed, post-industrial landscape into a European cultural centre and tourist hotspot”* [17].

Gehry’s use of cutting-edge computer-aided design technology enabled him to faithfully translate his concept into the structure and into the support construction. This way, it was possible to translate poetic forms into reality. To do so, Gehry’s team used an advanced software (CATIA) initially conceived for the aerospace industry, to translate the eccentric forms of the design into polynomial equations [1], [18].



Figure 6. Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (Spain)

As an iconic building, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (figure 6), is perceived as “*the most important building of its time*” [19]. In its webpage, it can be read: “*When it opened in 1997, the Frank Gehry–designed Guggenheim Museum Bilbao—a spectacular structure made of titanium, glass, and limestone—was hailed as the most important building of its time*” [19] and further ahead “*The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is a pinnacle in Gehry’s outstanding architectural career as well as in the field of museum design. It remains unsurpassed in its integration of art and architecture, maintaining an aesthetic and programmatic unity.*” [19]. Crumbaugh, when writing about the release of a film shot in Bilbao’s most impoverished community, stated that Guggenheim Museum of Bilbao: “*...hailed as a marvel of postmodern architecture won the museum commission’s approval precisely because it integrated and re-created the city’s industrial ruins in a more gratifying spectacle of asymmetrical metallic curves*” [17]. Also, Ceballos [20] refers to Guggenheim Museum Bilbao as achieving many ‘effects’ on the lives of local citizens and politicians as well as on wider communities such as architects, planners or cultural policy-makers

Rodrigues argues that the design base of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao “emerged” from the concept of a boat, thus reminiscent of the city’s port past and it is known for its complex, oversized and dynamic curvilinear configurations [1]. Gehry’s work was the centrepiece of an entire urban rehabilitation effort. In fact, Bilbao has achieved other iconic interventions such as a transport network with station entrances by Norman Foster, a transportation hub designed by architects Michael Wilford and James Stirling, a new airport and the footbridge over the Nervión river by Santiago Calatrava as well as a vast waterfront development of parks, apartments, offices, and stores adjacent to the Guggenheim designed by Cesar Pelli [13], [21].

6. Conclusions

Deconstruction is demarcated by buildings that spread the idea that they are in constant transformation and development, because their configurations and structures, of “fragile” features, seem to collapse, thus “testing” the law of gravity, or even revoked the traditional inequalities between the base and the top and the interior and exterior. This way, it could be said that these buildings show a vigorous physical presence at the implantation site, thus transforming them often into authentic passable, habitable and observable “sculptures”. These buildings, inwardly, disseminate a wide range of “sensibilities” and feelings to their visitors and inhabitants, “sensibilities” and feelings that are “awakened” by the “games” of light, by the structuring and orientation of spaces, by their materialization, as well as for the activities carried out in them.

Concerning the work of the City of Culture, in Santiago de Compostela, despite the great investment made, it is observed that the “complex” is devoid and even somewhat “forgotten” in the city of Santiago de Compostela, due to the fact that there are still elements that are not completely finished, as well as a lack of visitors in both the exterior and the interior spaces of the “complex”. In opposition, the construction of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is accountable for the development of the city, at a cultural and economic level, as well as the development of the city itself. Nowadays, the city of Bilbao is in permanent progress, thus having become a city of services with a strong tourist character, due to the design and construction of large buildings and under-structures, but always preserving the traditions and the identity of the city.

The City of Culture and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao are two iconic buildings with different follow up processes and different interactions with the cities where they are inserted, but nevertheless, both are architectural landmarks.

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