

Architecture in the Space of Difference

I. Hermeneutics and the Dialectic of History and Fiction

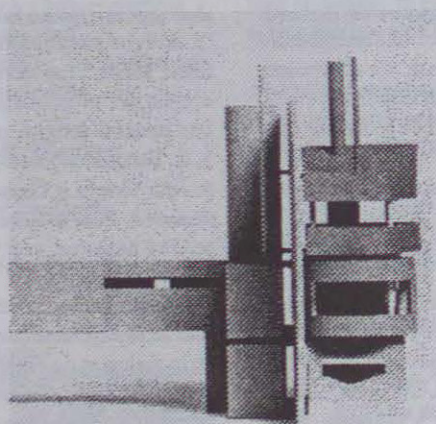
In the writings of Paul Ricoeur the hermeneutic project is presented as the "theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts".¹ Here 'text' is understood as any discourse fixed and preserved by writing. With this precise definition Ricoeur thus remains faithful to the tradition of hermeneutics as set forth by Wilhelm Dilthey in the 19th C. Yet in his own work the hermeneutic project is expanded to take into consideration other phenomena that exhibit some if not most of the characteristics of the text, such as meaningful action. It is in this light that the work of art, or architecture, may also be considered in the terms of hermeneutics. The work of art / architecture is first a 'work', fixed and preserved, whose meaning is ultimately autonomous to the subjective intentions of its author/creator.² In all these characteristics it is consistent with the paradigm of the text. More fundamentally, however, the work of art / architecture opens up and discloses a world unique to the work, and into which I could project one of my ownmost possibilities.³ This is the 'moment of understanding' that defines the hermeneutic problem as interpretation: the projection of myself into the world of the work as a structure of "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger).

To the extent that architecture may be spoken of in these terms, what then would be the implications of a grafting of the hermeneutic project as it is articulated by Ricoeur onto the theory and practice of this art? Against the background of the cultural transformations that have virtually redefined the architect's 'metier' since the beginning of the Scientific Revolution, a hermeneutics of architecture necessarily constitutes a shift in priorities. The domination of instrumental and economic values in the mainstream of architectural production is challenged by a fundamental reconsideration of the problem of 'meaning' itself. From a hermeneutic perspective this reconsideration must be

I cannot lie.

I am not a philosopher, nor am I a historian. I am working towards becoming an architect, but I seem to spend all my time writing; writing about philosophy, writing about history, writing about writing. Scratching words onto this paper, I cannot be sure as to their implications. As for the truth,

I can only speculate.



My speculations here take the form of a rough sketch, a preliminary work burdened by too many intentions without the refinement necessary for a complete and final statement. That is a task for others, others who seek the absolute. My ambitions here are more provisional: to trace the outlines of a crossing (X), a space (or gap!), between Architecture and Hermeneutics from which to initiate a reconsideration of the possibilities of contemporary architectural theory and practice. Yet this 'space of possibilities' will not be drawn out, will not be rendered simply, by following well established principles or arguments. It emerges rather from a certain displacement, or radicalization, of the hermeneutic project itself; that is, as a proposal for a "radical hermeneutics", undertaken as an architectural strategy.

placed within a framework of the 'already meaningful' - a science of that which man has made: history.

In search of the potentialities of the present within the traces of the past, theory and practice are reconciled in a hermeneutics of architecture as a strategy for the recovery of meaning at the level of making/interpretation.⁴ The historical text/artifact, and the world that it opens up, establishes a ground for interpretation, the creative yet critical taking of a stand in relation to the architect's personal 'historia'. But this can no longer be a 'making' in the traditional sense, a *mimesis* (or representation) of a shared transcendental order of the *physis* as revealed in the stars. The modern world has abandoned that *mythos* in its pursuit of reason. Looking rather to the artifacts themselves - the texts, buildings, and works of art from the past - the hermeneutics of making as interpretation becomes a *mimesis* of the shared order of history. The world as made replaces the order of the cosmos, to which we no longer have access, as the shared ground for action and meaning. And *truth*.

To uncover the roots of this concern for history in contemporary hermeneutics we must look back to the late 19th Century to the writings of Dilthey. Here for the first time the hermeneutic problem became truly a philosophical and epistemological one: the elaboration of a critique of historical knowledge as solid as Kant's critique of the natural sciences.⁵ In the writings of Martin Heidegger, however, this connection of hermeneutics to the epistemological concerns of the human sciences was to be subordinated to a more fundamental, ontological investigation into the nature of understanding as a mode of *Being*. The problem of the human sciences, and of historical knowledge in particular, has resurfaced nevertheless in contemporary hermeneutic thought with the attempt to reconcile the rift established by Heidegger between ontology and epistemology.⁶ The ground for this reconciliation is perhaps most convincingly articulated in the work of Paul Ricoeur, whose investigations into the

II. Inhabiting the Gap

I can only speculate.

In this investigation of the dialectical relationship of history and fiction something passes unnoticed. The arguments are thorough and rigorous, yet something remains unspoken, implicit in the foundation of this distinction and the guarantee of its truth. It is the *truth* itself.

To inscribe historical and fictional discourses into the structure of narrativity, into the teleology of the plot, is already to identify them with the representation (or *mimesis*) of the real, of truth. The narrative function is not a neutral structure independent of the question of reference. As the representation of reality, it is the structure of the truth in discourse.

Similarly, it is on the basis of truth that the dichotomy between history and fiction is simultaneously reconciled and reinstated. In truth and narrative, history and fiction are united in the crossing of their opposed referential modes to bring to language our very historicity: the truth of our existential experience of historical being.

One is pressed to ask, however, what (or who) is served in maintaining the distinction between history and fiction. The dialectic between the real and the possible which 'truly' underlies this division occupies both genres. Is it simply a matter of degree? Both history and fiction tell us something about who we think we are relative to who we are not, i.e.: through an understanding of another, the "other". In what manner of truth then are they ultimately distinguishable?

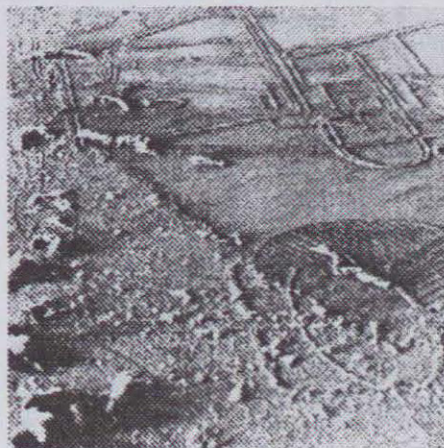
The question, 'ultimately', is of an *historical* nature. To begin with, it is worth recalling that the concepts of 'history' and 'fiction' have only recently attained such significance as to be considered in terms of a fundamental dialectic. Nevertheless, the distinction is prefigured, I will suggest, in the separation of *logos* from *mythos* with the discovery of philosophy in Ancient Greece. History is implicit in the domination of the *logos* over the *mythos*. History is first the rejection of the meaning of the *mythos*, the reduction of myth to the status of fiction. The truth of History is the history of the Truth.¹⁵

The dialectic of history and fiction consequently can be seen as the institutionalization of the realm of the true, the real, as distinct from the non-true or imaginary (if not simply a lie). The separation, repeating that of the *logos* from the *mythos*, preserves the domination of the former and plays a fundamental role in shaping our understanding of the world— "structuring that which is to occupy the central arena of interest in the theatre of reality, and that which is to be

problem of history and historical knowledge will be taken as the basis for the discussion to follow.

The decisive step in Ricoeur's analysis of historical experience is taken when he introduces the concept of the narrative function into the problem of understanding. As Ricoeur points out, the recounting of history constitutes a sophisticated form of "storytelling" whose intelligibility is determined by the extent to which the events recalled are understood to contribute to the development of a *plot*.⁷ Traditional "scientific" or "physical" theories of explanation fail in this regard to recognize the role of the narrative function in conferring meaning on otherwise singular historical events by placing them within the larger configuration of a story. Without this fundamental dimension an event cannot properly be called historical.

At the same time it can be said that it is



the narrative function which gives to history its specificity within the human sciences while conversely tying it to the narrative genre as a whole.⁸ Ricoeur's examination of the narrative function in history in this sense must be seen as only part of a broader study of all the diverse forms of the "game" of storytelling and their relation to the human experience of temporality. Indeed it is Ricoeur's central thesis that "narrativity is the mode of discourse through which the mode of being which we call temporality, or temporal being, is brought to language".⁹ We must recognize consequently that our experience of historicity, as a fundamental dimension of temporal being, is accessible in language only within the structure of narrativity.

The unity of the narrative genre and its temporal significance is threatened, however, by a major dichotomy at the level of

relegated to the margins".¹⁶ Woven into the web of values that underlie all our thoughts and actions, in architecture as in all disciplines, the maintenance of this dialectic has carried profound consequences: it is embodied in the world which we have made.

If one is to engage in any substantial reconsideration of the question of meaning in architecture (or any other field), if we are to push beyond the boundaries of this logocentric universe of thought towards some (any) form of a recovery of myth, it will only be possible when these dialectical relationships and implicit hierarchies—the whole metaphysics of truth—are challenged. The question would seem to be how? We cannot simply step outside of metaphysics; the outside has always been absorbed as one of the moments of the inside.¹⁷ Nor can we simply reverse it; the dialectic would remain. We must inhabit it, rather, and step through it. The question, therefore, is not one of 'how' but 'where'?

One need look no farther than Ricoeur's text on the distinction between history and fiction. At the crossing (a chiasm perhaps) of the two genres, of the real and the possible, we confront the structure of difference in both: in history, the distance between ourselves and the other which is our past; in fiction, the distance between the worlds of imagination and everyday life. In the crossing (X), we discover a gap, the space inside the dialectic into which we must relocate the problem of meaning if we are to step through the metaphysics of truth. The dialectic implodes into the gap (chaos): the *space of difference*.

It is here, within this space, that the hermeneutic project as a project of "difference" must be articulated. From Ricoeur we borrow the basic terms of the hermeneutic problem, a problem of understanding and interpretation. At its root exists the dialectic of distanciation ("more primitive than the opposition of speaking to writing and which is already a part of oral discourse *qua* discourse"¹⁸) which gives rise to the problem as such. It is the distance (or "difference") at the heart of discourse and symbolization, exemplified most directly and clearly in the "text". Distanciation is the very condition of interpretation, and consequently, understanding, for there is understanding only from and through a distance to the signs of humanity embodied in cultural works. To understand is first to understand oneself in front of a work/text and to receive from it the conditions for a self other than that which existed prior to interpretation, an unfolding of the world of the work.¹⁹

But in front of the work, ultimately, we confront the distance, the gap between worlds: that of the work and that within ourselves. This is the

"reference" i.e., in the extent to which all narratives can justly claim to represent the truth. The diversity of the narrative field is consequently divided between those narratives which are recognized as holding a substantial truth-claim, such as history and biography, and fictional narratives drawn from the imagination. This "irreducible asymmetry"¹⁰ would oppose historical reality to fictional reality thus undermining the claim that all modes of narrative refer to the temporal experience of historicity.

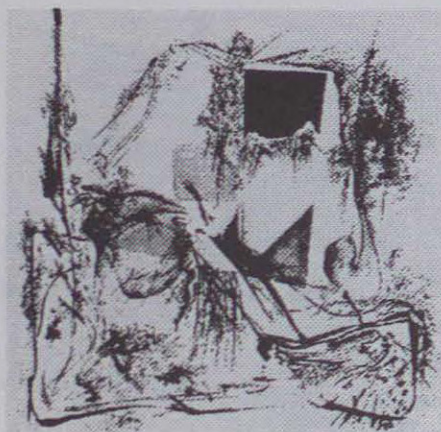
To counter this dichotomy and support his argument, Ricoeur has attempted to show how in fact all narratives, historical and fictional, make a referential claim to the truth, although in different ways. In the case of historical narratives, the claim is generally well accepted. Yet Ricoeur emphasizes the extent to which the historical text must also be recognized as a "literary artifact"¹¹ with a greater degree of imaginative reconstruction than we often admit. Nevertheless it is still justified in its claim to be a representation of past reality, and thus the truth. Its reference, however, is "indirect", for the historical world is accessible only through traces- the documents and archives from the past.

The referential status of fiction, on the other hand, is examined within the concept of *mimesis*, drawn from Aristotle's discussion of tragedy in the *Poetics*. Ricoeur, following Aristotle, presents fiction as a *mimesis* of reality- not simply an imitation in the sense of a "copy", but rather a creative imitation, an "iconic augmentation of the human world of action".¹² The structure and meaning of the *mimesis*, however, is established by the *mythos*, or 'fable', which Aristotle identifies as the essence of tragedy. This conjunction of the *mythos* and *mimesis* is taken by Ricoeur as the paradigm for the referential claim of fiction, a "productive" reference. Fiction remakes reality, prescribing a new meaning, while simultaneously suspending reference to the ordinary world and everyday language. In this sense, finally, it is identified as holding a "split" reference.¹³

History and fiction, therefore, must both be seen to have a referential claim, though admittedly of different orders. Further, it is Ricoeur's position that the indirect reference of 'true histories' and the split reference of 'fictional histories' cross upon the basic historicity of human experience, and that only in this crossing of the 'true' and the 'fictional' can our historicity be brought to language, within the structure of narrativity. "If our historical condition requires nothing

space of self-understanding, where we come to recognize necessity, and perhaps meaning. Interpretation, therefore, more than simply unfolding the world of the work, seeks to uncover this space of difference, but to uncover it in the realization of another work, i.e.: at the level of *making*. Herein lies the "radicalization" of the hermeneutic project: the opening of the hermeneutic circle into a *labyrinth*, the mythical symbol and "primordial idea"²⁰ of architecture, as the gap (chaos) between birth and death. Interpretation and appropriation, understanding and self-understanding, are re-inscribed in this order as the polarities of making. We are always "reading" and "writing", interpreting and constructing, not in search of a first or originary truth, but of the gap, the space of difference (between the real and the possible, the past and the future, the text and the world) which is the condition- the possibility- of meaning, and perhaps myth. Understanding as a *mode of being* consequently gives

less than the conjunction of two narrative genres, it is because of the very nature of our experience of *being* historical."¹⁴ The true histories uncover and preserve the "other" that is the past in its difference with respect to ourselves, revealing the buried potentialities of the present. Fiction, on the other hand, leads us to the very heart of reality, the *Lebenswelt* (life-world). In the real we see the possible, while in the possible we confront the real. But it is the function of the crossing to maintain the separation of the true and the fictional, and thus a gap remains between historical writing and literature, distinct in reference.



way to interpretation/making as a *mode of living*, caught in a labyrinth between its entry (birth) and the center(death).

Architecture uncovers the gap, has already constructed the gap, in the order of the labyrinth and the *choros*, the mythical symbol/structures of archaic Greece. The *choros* was the space of ritual,²¹ a place of re-enactment and recovery of the chaos, or abyss, from whence the world originated according to myth. It shares with the labyrinth the order of primordial, mythical space -*chora*, also linked etymologically to chaos and the gap. *Chora* is the space of architecture and myth prior to the reduction of ritual to tragedy. It is, I suggest, the "space of difference".

At a similar level of speculation it is also worth considering the notion of the *chiasmus* or *chi* (X), to which Dedalus, legendary architect of the labyrinth and the *choros*, has also been linked. The *chiasmus* is a crossing, both a spatial and rhetorical place, a riddle or gateway

at which ordinary spatial relations collapse: "extension reduced to a point, time to eternity".²² Is this not the rediscovery of *chora* at the point of crossing; the space, perhaps, within the dialectic? While I am unable to 'truly' confirm this association of the *chiasmus* with *chora*, the 'presence' of the "architect"/artisan Dedalus in this riddle cannot go unnoticed.

In more contemporary terms the idea/figure of the gap/crossing can be identified in the work of several of the more provocative architects and artists in the twentieth century. Investigating the notion of the "cross-over", John Hejduk approaches the problem of constructing the space of difference. It is first realized in the early 'Wall-House' projects in a very direct manner. The wall materializes the cross-over condition, the space between; the gap becomes solid, a concrete metaphor. Hejduk speaks of it as the cross-section of a thought. It is neutral, indestructible, like the *chora* of Plato. The *chora* reappears in the 'Masque' projects for Berlin, Hejduk's more recent work. It is revealed first as the space between the face and a mask; again, the cross-over. The masque then attempts to construct this space as a gap within the fabric of the modern (metaphysical) city. It is no surprise that the labyrinth and the theatre (*choros*) figure prominently.

Speculations...

In his work *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* Marcel Duchamp reconsidered the painter's task: a delay in glass. It is the delay- the "lag inherent in any signifying act"²³- that opens up the space of difference. Duchamp investigated this difference, with pataphysical rigour, in stereoscopy, in the "principle of the hinge" (the line of a fold, a crossing), in the phenomenon of the "infrathin", and most clearly in the "sign of accordance"- the gap (at once separation and unity) between the real and the possible, between technology and desire, love and violence. This gap is 'constructed' in both the Large Glass (consider the dividing horizon bar) and the 'Etant Donnés' (consider the door).

Finally (towards no end other than my own) it is the writing of James Joyce, the labyrinth/text that is *Finnegans Wake*, that reveals the challenge for architecture as a radical hermeneutics, the opening of a space of possibilities from which to initiate the reconstruction of meaning and the (re)creation of myth. As the "abnihilation of the etym",²⁴ Joyce's project undertakes to reconstruct language from the abyss, the chaos of Babel. History and fiction have here lost their distinction; only writing remains. But from this writing within the gap, within the space of differ-

Notes:

1. Paul Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics", in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (hereafter cited as *Hermeneutics*), edited and translated by John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p. 43.
2. Paul Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics", in *Hermeneutics*, p. 111.
3. Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutic Function of Distanciation", in *Hermeneutics*, p. 142.
4. Daniel Libeskind, "The Deconstruction of Architecture", *Lotus*.
5. Paul Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics", in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, edited by Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974) p.5.
6. Refer to Ricoeur's discussion of the development of contemporary hermeneutics in "The Task of Hermeneutics", in *Hermeneutics*. In particular see p.59.
7. Refer to Paul Ricoeur, "The Narrative Function", in *Hermeneutics*, in particular p. 277-278.
8. Paul Ricoeur, "On Interpretation", in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation*, Kenneth Baynes, James Bohanan, and Thomas McCarthy editors (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987) p. 361.
9. Paul Ricoeur, "The Human Experience of Time and Narrative", in *Research in Phenomenology*, No. 9, 1979, p. 17.
10. "On Interpretation", p. 363.
11. Ricoeur seems to borrow this term from "historian" Hayden White. See in particular the article "The Historical Text as Literary Artifacts", *Clio*, 3, 1974.
12. "The Narrative Function", p. 292.
13. *ibid.*, p. 293.
14. *ibid.*, p. 294.
15. See Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play", in *Writing and Difference*, translated with introduction by Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978) p. 291.
16. Daniel Libeskind, "Symbol and Interpretation", in *Symbol and Interpretation/ Micromegas*, Katalog 1980 (Helsinki: The Museum of Finnish Architecture) p. 14.
17. See Jacques Derrida, "Hors Livre", in *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974) p. 5.
18. "The Hermeneutic Function of Distanciation", p. 132.
19. *ibid.*, p.143.
20. Alberto Pérez-Gómez, "The Architect's Metier", in *Section A*, Vol. 2, No. 5/6, p. 27.
21. *ibid.*, p. 28.
22. Donald Kunze and Lesley Wei, "The Vanity of Architecture", *Via* 8, p. 66.
23. Barbara Johnson, "Translator's Introduction", p. ix, in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).
24. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking Press, 1939), p. 353.
25. James Joyce, in conversation with Jacques Mercanton, in "The Hours of James Joyce", *Portraits of the Artist in Exile*, edited by Willard Potts (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979) p. 209.
26. *Finnegans Wake*, p. 3.

ence (between past and present- the "flow of an eternal present"²⁵), Joyce reveals to us a chance, a possibility however tentative, to construct myth. In some eyes it may appear only as gibberish ("bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronnonttonnerounntuonnnthunntrovarrhounawnskawntooohooohordenenthurnuk!"²⁶), and beyond the limits of recognition (consider Daniel Libeskind's *Theatrum Mundi*). Perhaps this is the chance we must take, a risk of necessity, if we are to see with Zarathustra the "great noontide"

Matt Fisher is a graduate student in the History and Theory Program in Architecture at McGill University.