

palimpsest:

A Trace of the "Presence-Absence" in Architecture

PRE-SCRIPT

The Beginning of a Trace: Examining the Opposition

This project is a personal investigation into some existing ideas in architecture. The investigation is based on an attempt to search for a possible connection between the architectural ideas of different times and contexts. Taking the idea of "Presence-Absence" in architecture as the beginning of the trace, some inquiries are made into the oppositions:

What does "Presence-Absence" mean?
What does "Presence-Absence" mean in architecture?
What does architecture mean to "Presence-Absence"?

Tracing the idea from different discourses—philosophy and architecture, the study projects some concepts of the opposition from different times --past and present, and from different contexts--oriental and occidental.

This trace is presented in a continuous series of collages of "Scripts"--copies and writings of literary text and "Graphic Scripts"--copies and drawings of illustrated text. The presentation takes the form of scrolled reading, starting from left to right.

THE PRESENTING SCRIPT

"PRESENCE-ABSENCE"

Absence marks presence as well as
presence marks absence.
We perceive presence
by its existence in absence,
And we conceive absence by
non-existence of presence;
Therefore, presence and absence
beget and complement each other.

Presence and absence mark architecture.
Presence forms absence,
and absence informs us of presence.
Form contains space,
as well as maintaining its existence in space.
In architecture, we gain from what is present
--solid and form,
And we utilize what is absent
--void and space.
Together, the presence of form
and the absence of space
form a unity, an inseparable reality.

Thus "Presence-Absence"
is the mode of representing architecture.
As well, architecture through a continuum of history
is a representation of man's presence
in this absent world.
Is the present architecture an architecture of absence,
one which ceases to represent
the historical continuity?
And is there an "Architecture of the Present,"
one which marks the present stance
in the historical continuum?
If there were such, should we, and how could we,
re-present that which is absent
in the present architecture,
and simultaneously represent
the "Architecture of the Present"?

REPRESENTATION	PRESENTATION	INTERPRETATION
BEING * NON-BEING	PRESENCE * ABSENCE	PERCEPTION * CONCEPTION
SUBSTANCE * NON-SUBSTANCE	FORM * SPACE	ARTEFACT & EDIFICE
spatial * temporal	differ différance defer	space * time
PAST * PRESENT	MEMORY * REALITY	HISTORICAL CONTINUITY
PAST PRESENT FUTURE	TEKTONIK & TECHNOLOGY	IDENTIFIABLE EPOCH

THE PAST SCRIPT

"TAOISM"

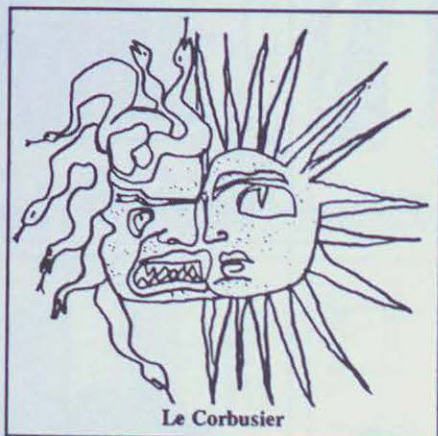
ORIENTAL

When the people of the world all know beauty as beauty,
There arises the recognition of ugliness.
When they all know the good as good,
There arises the recognition of evil.
Therefore, being and non-being produce each other;
Difficult and easy complete each other;
Long and short contrast each other;
Sound and voice harmonize each other;
Front and behind accompany each other.¹

--Lao Tzu
Tao Te Ching, ch.2

We put thirty spokes together and call it a wheel;
But it is on the space where there is nothing
that the utility of the wheel depends.
We turn clay to make a vessel;
But it is on the space where there is nothing
that the utility of the vessel depends.
We pierce doors and windows to make a house;
And it is on these spaces where there is nothing
that the utility of the house depends.
Therefore, just as we take advantage of what is,
we should recognize the utility of what is not.²

--Lao Tzu
Tao Te Ching, ch.11



THE PRESENT SCRIPT

"DECONSTRUCTION"

OCCIDENTAL

Axioms of Deconstruction:

Axiom 1 Everything can be given at least two equally cogent explanations.

Axiom 2 In the temporal process of thinking about anything, one explanation collapses into its contrary.³

--E. D. Hirsch, Jr.
"Derrida's Axioms"

"Différance," as Derrida uses it, has two senses. It means, differ and defer.

To differ means to be spatially separated (nothing, not even the present or consciousness, is self-present or identical; there is no original identity).

To defer means to be temporally separated (nothing ever is wholly present; even the present is always delayed). Since what we take to be objective reality is fundamentally spatial and temporal—think of what we mean by the built environment, for example—Derrida is claiming that there is no moment when anything is given as itself, in full self-present identity; there is always a gap, an absence in the heart of reality. Indeed, it is this difference which is primal.⁴

--Robert Mugerauer
"Derrida and Beyond"

Let us never forget that there is an architecture of architecture This naturalized architecture is bequeathed to us: we inhabit it, it inhabits us, . . . we must recognize in it an artefact, a construction, a monument. . . . This architecture of architecture has a history; it is historical through and through. . . . The concept of architecture is itself an inhabited constructum, a heritage which comprehends us even before we could submit it to thought. . . . architecture must have a meaning, it must present it and, through it, signify.⁵

--Jacques Derrida
"Point de folie--Maintenant l'architecture"

THE GRAPHIC SCRIPT

PRESENCE-ABSENCE



Yin-Yang

Absence

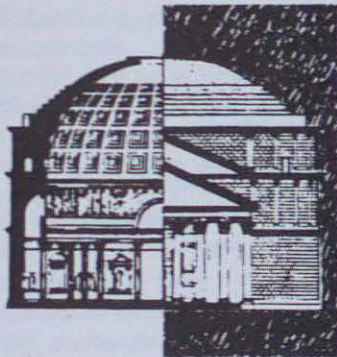
White Circle on White Square

Presence



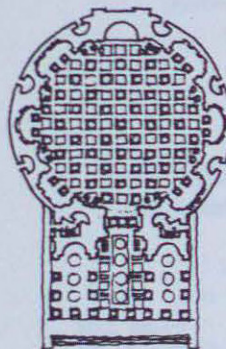
Black Circle on Black Square

FORM-SPACE

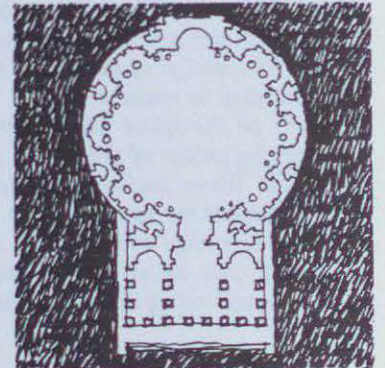


Pantheon, Rome

Form & Space Solid & Void



Form maintained in Space



MEMORY-REALITY Historical Continuity



Natural Column
Laugier's Primitive Hut

Caryatid



The Erechtheum, Athens, 405 B.C.

Corinthian Order



Francesco di Giorgio
Studies in Proportion

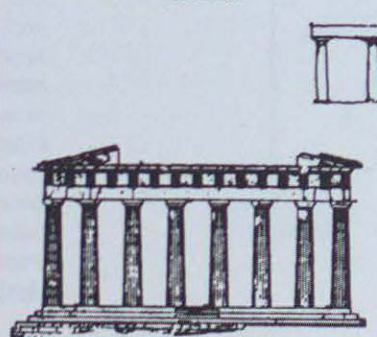
Pantheon, Rome
A.D. 120

TEKTONIK & TECHNOLOGY Identifiable Epoch



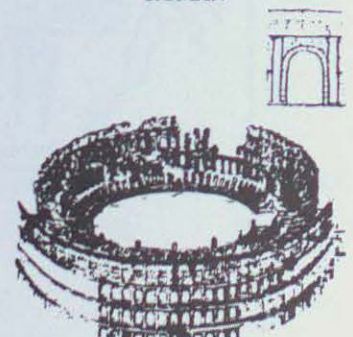
Hera Temple, Paestum

GREEK



Parthenon, Athens, 438 B.C.

ROMAN



Colosseum, Rome A.D. 70

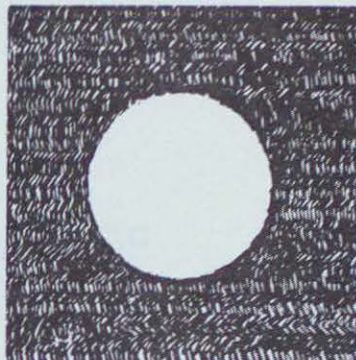
"PRESENCE-ABSENCE"

Absence forms Presence



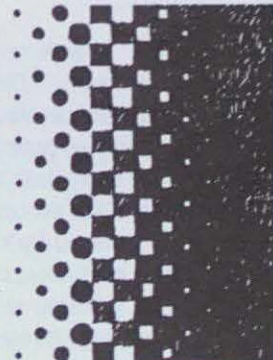
Black Circle on White Square

Presence forms Absence



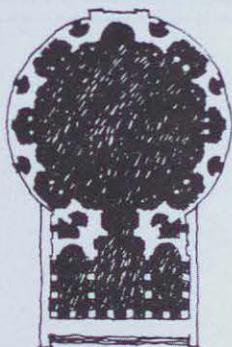
White Circle on Black Square

Presence & Absence

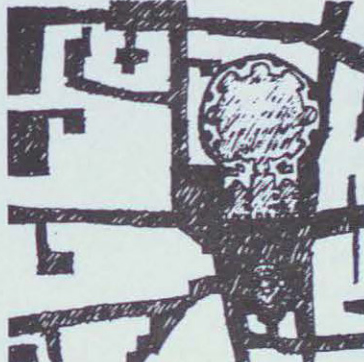


Black Circle & White Square

Form containing Space



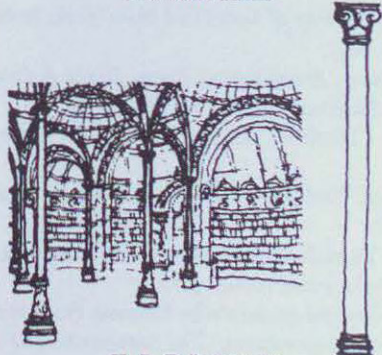
Forms containing Space



Form & Space



Cast Iron Order



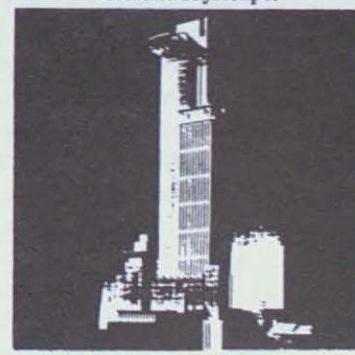
H. P. F. Labrouste
Bibliothèque National, Paris, 1868

Doric Tower



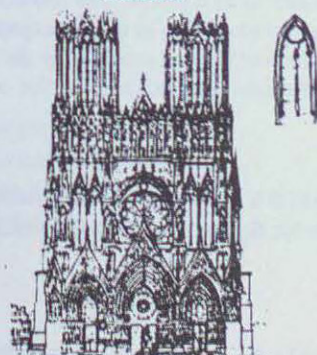
Adolf Loos
Chicago Tribune Tower, Competition, 1923

Column Skyscraper



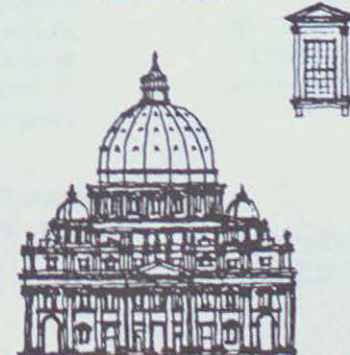
Kohn Pederson Fox Assoc.
Frankfurt A. M. Project, W. Germany, 1987

GOthic



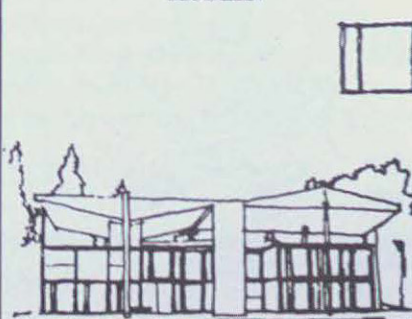
Reims Cathedral, Reims, 1290

CLASSICISM



St. Peter's, Rome, 1564

MODERN



Le Corbusier
Center Le Corbusier, Zurich, 1967

POST-SCRIPT

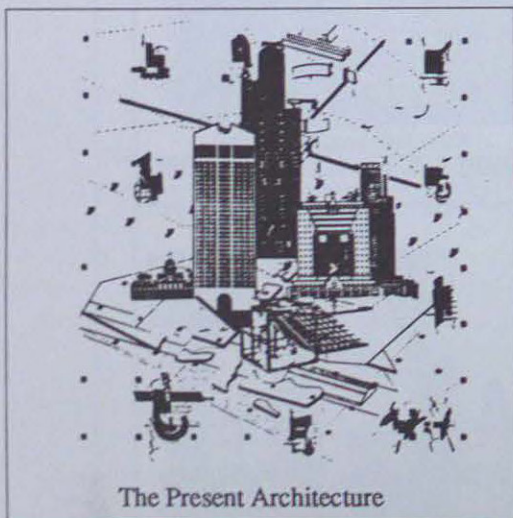
The End of Trace:

The Absence of "Architecture of the Present"

From the "Presence-Absence" in architecture, two notions are derived: "memory" and "tektonik." The first, "memory" represents its meaning as historical continuity. In the transformation of architecture from one period to another, the architecture of the past never represents a total disruption from its precedent. The stain of the preceding period often remains and its meaning can be traced back to its origin. The attitude of looking forward to the future, searching for new developments, is perpetually inherent in man; however, man can never detach himself from his past and memory. Because memory is always a part of man's life, the reminiscence staining man's culture is the representation of his development through the long continual process of civilization.

The second, "tektonik", a primary principle of the architectural discipline, is another aspect which resides in every period. The possibility of a new architecture in the transition from one period to another often results as a part of the exploitation of new materials and development in construction technology. From ancient to modern, the great architecture of each period always reveals this exploitation through "tektonik"—a structural poetic which represents the identifiable epoch of architecture.⁶

However, both "memory" and "tektonik" are only two aspects involved in architectural discourse. The achievement of architecture, in fact, depends on many aspects, and in each aspect its condition always changes from time to time, and from place to place. Thus, no single concept of architecture can be appropriated at all times and for all places. Architects invariably have to search for that appropriateness for their specific time and place. Therefore, the paradigm of "Architecture of the Present" is always absent, and is waiting for a new exploration for its appropriate presence. ■



"The Architecture of the Present"

NOTES

1. Wing-tsit Chan, *The Way of Lao Tzu* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), p.101.
2. Francis D.K. Ching, *Architecture: Form, Space & Order*. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1979), p.10.
3. E.D. Hirsch Jr, "Derrida's Axioms", in *London Reviews*. (1988):p.29.
4. Robert Mugerauer, "Derrida and Beyond", in *Center*, vol. 4 (1988): pp.66-67.
5. Jacques Derrida, "Point de folie—Maintenant l'architecture", in *AA files*. no.12 (Summer 1986): p.65.
6. As quoted from Stanford Anderson by Kenneth Frampton in "Towards a Critical Regionalism," *The Anti-aesthetic*. Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983; pp.27-8: "Tektonik" referred not just to the activity of making the materially requisite construction...but rather to the activity that raises this construction to an art form...The functionally adequate form must be adapted so as to give expression to its function. The sense of bearing provided by the entasis of Greek columns became the touchstone of this concept of Tektonik.

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