

THE ABUSE OF ARCHITECTONICS BY DECORATING IN AN ERA AFTER DECONSTRUCTIVISM

*DECONSTRUCTION OF THE TECTONIC STRUCTURE
AS A WAY OF DECORATION*



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*'In fact, all architecture proceeds from structure, and the first condition at which it should aim is to make the outward form accord with that structure.'*¹

Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1872) *Lectures*

*Everything depends upon how one sets it to work... little by little we modify the terrain of our work and thereby produce new configurations... it is essential, systematic, and theoretical. And this in no way minimizes the necessity and relative importance of certain breaks of appearance and definition of new structures...*²

Jacques Derrida (1972) *Positions*

*'It is ironic that the work of Coop Himmelblau, and of other deconstructive architects, often turns out to demand far more structural ingenuity than works developed with a 'rational' approach to structure.'*³

Adrian Forty (2000) *Words and Buildings*

Theme

In recent work of architects known as deconstructivists the tectonic structure of the buildings seems to be 'deconstructed' in order to decorate the building's image. In other words: nowadays deconstruction has become a style with the architectonic structure used as decoration. Is the show of architectonic elements in recent work of architects known as deconstructivists referring to a deconstruction of the architectonic structure or is it possibly a way of decoration?

Motivating questions

- How can deconstructivism be defined and what should be the objectives of deconstructivists' architecture?
- What is the architectonic structure of a building how can the architectonic structure function as a decoration?
- Is the architectonic structure in the recent work of deconstructivists used as decoration?
- If the architectonic structure is used as decoration, is that according to the objectives of deconstructivism?
- Has the today's connotation of deconstructivism changed by the use of the architectonic structure as decoration?

Research approach

This graduation thesis is built up from afore mentioned motivating questions. In order to clarify the used meaning of terms as deconstruction and architectonic structure literature on these topics from key writers is reflected on examples from the architectural presence. To avoid a discussion whether a particular architect could be labelled as deconstructivist or not, all architects part of the exhibition Deconstructivist Architecture are considered as such. The used examples are selected to cover a wide range of architects, projects, locations (USA and Europe) and periods of time, but the chosen projects could easily have been different as well. For the aim of this essay I'd like to refer to Jacques Derrida's own project:

*'To go after [architecture]: not in order to attack, destroy or deroute is, to criticise or disqualify it. Rather in order to think it in fact, to detach itself sufficiently to apprehend it in a thought which goes beyond the theorem – and becomes a work in its turn.'*⁴

Jacques Derrida () *Point de Folie*

¹ Viollet-le-Duc, E.-E. 1872 *Lectures on Architecture*, 2 vols. New York: Dover Publications, p. 3

² Derrida, Jac. 1972 *Positions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 24

³ Forty, A. 2000 *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*. New York: Thames & Hudson, p. 281

⁴ Derrida, Jac. 1986 *Point de Folie – maintenant l'architecture*. In: Kate Linker *AA Files*, no. 12, pp. 326

DECONSTRUCTIVISM AND ITS OBJECTIVES

In 1988 Philip Johnson was, together with Mark Wigley, curator of an exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The exhibition brought together architects which represented at that time the movement of deconstructivist architecture, what was as well the name of the exhibition. The deconstructivists, or at least the architects whose work was exhibited, were Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelblau, Rem Koolhaas and Bernard Tschumi. In the essay accompanying the exhibition was stated:

'The projects in this exhibition mark a different sensibility, one in which the dream of pure form has been disturbed. It is the ability to disturb our thinking about form that makes these projects deconstructive. The show examines an episode, a point of intersection between several architects where each constructs an unsettling building by exploiting the hidden potential of modernism.'

Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley (1988) *Excerpts from Deconstructivist Architecture*

By emphasizing on the disturbing form of the building, the curators/writers seem to leave the philosophical starting point of the movement, which is deconstruction according to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. He appropriated the term deconstruction from Martin Heidegger's use of 'Destruction' and 'Abbau' in *Being and Time* as respectively 'not a destruction but precisely a destructuring that dismantles the structural layers in the system' and 'to take apart an edifice in order to see how it is constituted or deconstituted'.⁵ The philosophical theory of deconstruction, which Derrida proposed from the sixties of the last century, became, especially by his collaboration with Peter Eisenman, the basis for an application in architecture. This process of applying the theoretical concept of deconstruction to architectural design becomes clear in a study on the definition of deconstruction which gave Derrida himself. In the early years, in the interview *Positions* of 1971 and in the preface to the book *Dissemination* of 1972 Derrida proposed that in deconstruction two phases can be found, which reveal the metaphysical character of deconstruction, particularly in literature.⁶ In the first phase is, in opposition to Platonism, appearance made more valuable than essence. The second phase is characterised by the infinitesimal difference between on the one hand past and present and on the other present and future, what destabilises the original decision that instituted hierarchy.⁷ In *Force of Law* Derrida gives a more political characterisation by providing two styles, the genealogical and the formalistic or structural style of deconstruction.⁸ He also provides three aporias, denoting in philosophy a state of puzzlement. These aporias are briefly listed here. The first is the epoche of the rule referring to the re-institution of the rule in justice. The second aporia is called 'the ghost of the indecidable' in decision making processes.⁹ The third is called 'the urgency that obstructs the horizon of knowledge' wherein justice remains an event yet to come, or in other words remains impossible.¹⁰ In the essay *Et Cetera* from 2000 Derrida gives the third definition of deconstruction by providing a notion of its formal nature which is, quoted from Leonard Lawlor: 'even though the word 'deconstruction' has been bandied about, we can see now the kind of thinking in which deconstruction engages. It is a kind of thinking that never finds itself at the end. Justice – this is undeniable – is impossible (perhaps justice is the 'impossible') and therefore it is necessary to make justice possible

⁵ Wigley, M. 1993 *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, pp. 41-42

⁶ Derrida, Jac. 1972 *Positions*. Paris: Minuit

Derrida, Jac. 1972 *La Dissemination*. Paris: Seuil

⁷ Lawlor, L. 2006 *Jacques Derrida*. In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press

⁸ Derrida, Jac. 1992 *Force of Law*. In: Drucill Cornell a.o. (eds.) *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. New York: Routledge, p. 3-67

⁹ Cornell, D. a.o. (eds.) 1992 *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. New York: Routledge, p. 24-28

¹⁰ Idem

in countless ways.¹¹ Deconstruction can be seen as a post-structuralist method of questioning and criticizing thinking in hierarchies and oppositions first and for all in literature. To bridge this philosophical point of view to architectural practice there has to be taken in account that deconstruction aims on where a system seems to be unite and closed. The objective is to break open and by doing so fragmenting every totalising and unifying thinking. Deconstruction isn't anti-systematic or aims at deregulation for the sake of deregulation, no matter how much it emphasises changeability of rules and meanings. One of the keywords in deconstruction is absence. The application of the concept of deconstruction on the architectural practice becomes prevalent in Derrida's *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*.¹² About the consideration of the possible gap between philosophical thought and the architectural practice Mark Wigley putted it like this: 'Architecture and philosophy are effects of the same transaction, effects that never can be separated... The sense that they are separate is actually an effect of the very contract that binds them according to complicated folds, twists and turns that defy the institutional practices of both discourses.'¹³ Derrida's application of deconstructive thought was elaborated in his collaborations with Peter Eisenman and Bernard Tschumi in the design of the Parc de la Villette in Paris, which opened in 1986. This collaboration is documented in *Chora L Works*.¹⁴ We can conclude that deconstruction aims at questioning solidarity, uniformity and cohesion. Deconstruction in architecture is only possible, according to Mark Wigley, if the architect first questions the entire 'architectural rhetoric of foundation, construction, architectonics, and so on.'¹⁵

DECORATION AND THE ARCHITECTONIC STRUCTURE

'Decoration' is etymologically derived from the Latin 'decorāre' and has as its purpose to embellish or to distinguish.¹⁶ In opposition to ornament is decoration only an addition to a building, like an infill of a post-beam structure. Decoration isn't related to or reminiscent of the tectonic structure, like in Greek times an ornament was a material expression of the bearing structure.

About 'structure': according to Adrian Forty the term has, in relation to architecture, three uses.¹⁷ The first relates to any building in its entirety. The second meaning, as used in the above quotation of Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, is 'the system of support of a building, distinguished from its other elements, such as its decoration, cladding, or services.'¹⁸ This second use of the term 'structure' is a particular case of the third meaning, which is known as a schema through which a variety of elements become intelligible, usually identified by the arrangement of tectonic parts, the masses of an architectural object. This tectonic structure can be seen as part of the triad apparent in all architecture as a tectonic, tactile and material vector converging in a constantly involving interplay, as putted forward by Kenneth Frampton.¹⁹ For Frampton are the poetics of construction and the art of making, as expressed by tectonics, the chance to

¹¹ Lawlor, L. 2006 *Jacques Derrida*. In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press

Derrida, Jac. 2000 *Et Cetera*.

¹² Derrida, Jac. 1978 *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*. In: *Writings and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

¹³ Wigley, M. 1993 *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt*. Cambridge: The MIT Press

¹⁴ Derrida, Jac. and Eisenman, P. 1997 *Chora L. Works* Monacelli Press

¹⁵ Wigley, M. 1993 *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, p. 47

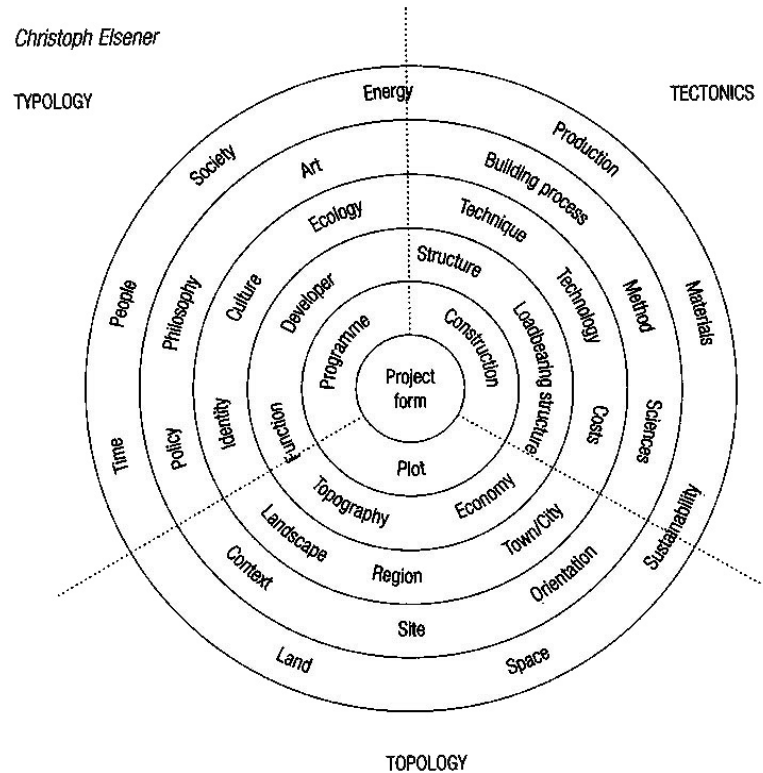
¹⁶ Philippa, M. (ed.) 2003 *Etymologisch Woordenboek*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press

¹⁷ Forty, A. 2000 *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*. New York: Thames & Hudson, pp. 276-285

¹⁸ Idem, p. 276

¹⁹ Frampton, K. 2001 *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in 19th and 20th century architecture*. Cambridge (Mas.): MIT Press

escape homogeneity in architecture.²⁰ It is an antidote to Robert Venturi's 'decorated shed' because it can be considered as astylistic, internal to the discipline (i.e., autonomous) and mythical. In the perception of Venturi, are the historical allusion and the decoration of the 'shed' adding richness to architecture which modernism had forgotten.²¹



1 | Christoph Elsenner, the tecton, topos and typos

Originally the word 'tectonic' is derived from the Greek word 'tekton', signifying carpenter or builder. The in this thesis used connotation of the tectonic is the expressive potential of the material structure which carries over forces of the constellation of building parts and its components.²² This goes together with the tactile structure of buildings and its capacity to express the textures of the material structure. To master confusion the addition of 'archi' is putted in front of 'tectonic', clarifying we're dealing with the tectonic structure in architecture. Nevertheless should the architectonic not only be considered in this sense, but to make a consideration of the application of the philosophical term deconstruction on the architectonic possible, the architectonic as in Aristotelism and Kantianism as a systematization of all knowledge has to be taken in account as well.

DECONSTRUCTIVISTS' DECORATION

Peter Eisenman, Wexner Center for the Arts of 1989 in Columbus, USA

²⁰ Nesbitt, K. 1996 *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: an Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, pp. 516-517

²¹ Venturi, R. 1966 *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art Press
Venturi, R. 1977 *Learning from Las Vegas*. Cambridge: Cambridge MA

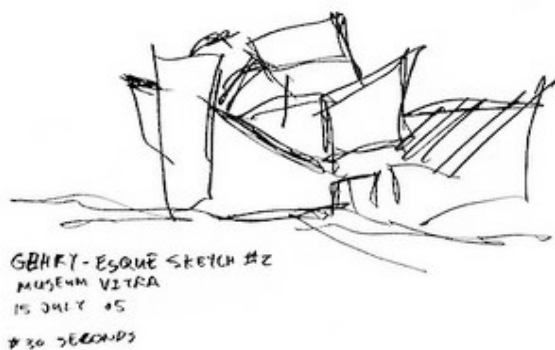
²² Kleijer, E. 2004 *Instrumenten van de Architectuur: De Compositie van Gebouwen*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Sun, pp. 106-111



2 | Peter Eisenman, Wexner Center

For Derrida it is clear that when heterogeneity purely is about style and doesn't do anything to the roots of a structure, in that case there can never be a deconstruction. For Peter Eisenman architecture has the function to carry meaning.²³ Architecture is a language and design, a text wherein organisation of activities and material aren't dominant anymore. The process of giving meaning is infinite. For Eisenman deconstruction is a constructive activity which should be part of the design and the building process. Eisenman agrees that deconstruction isn't a style, but an approach, and when it becomes a style or fashion it should be attacked. A deconstruction never is invisible, but marks what can't get a shape and addresses how a problem gets a (temporal) solution. An architectonic object should express what isn't made and can't be made. Also Neil Leach underlines that Derridean deconstruction is not an architectural style. I would like to provide one example to illustrate deconstruction in architecture. The Wexner Center for the Arts in Ohio of Peter Eisenman does with its fragments in a way question the modernist meaning of the architectonic structure of the building. The image of the building is reminiscent to an old castle, once present at the place. Yet the absence of a part of a 'column', going down to a stair, might appear to some people as decoration, but the dialectic role of breaking up the architectonic structure makes it justifiable to me.

Frank O. Gehry, Vitra Design Museum of 1989 in Weil am Rhein, Germany



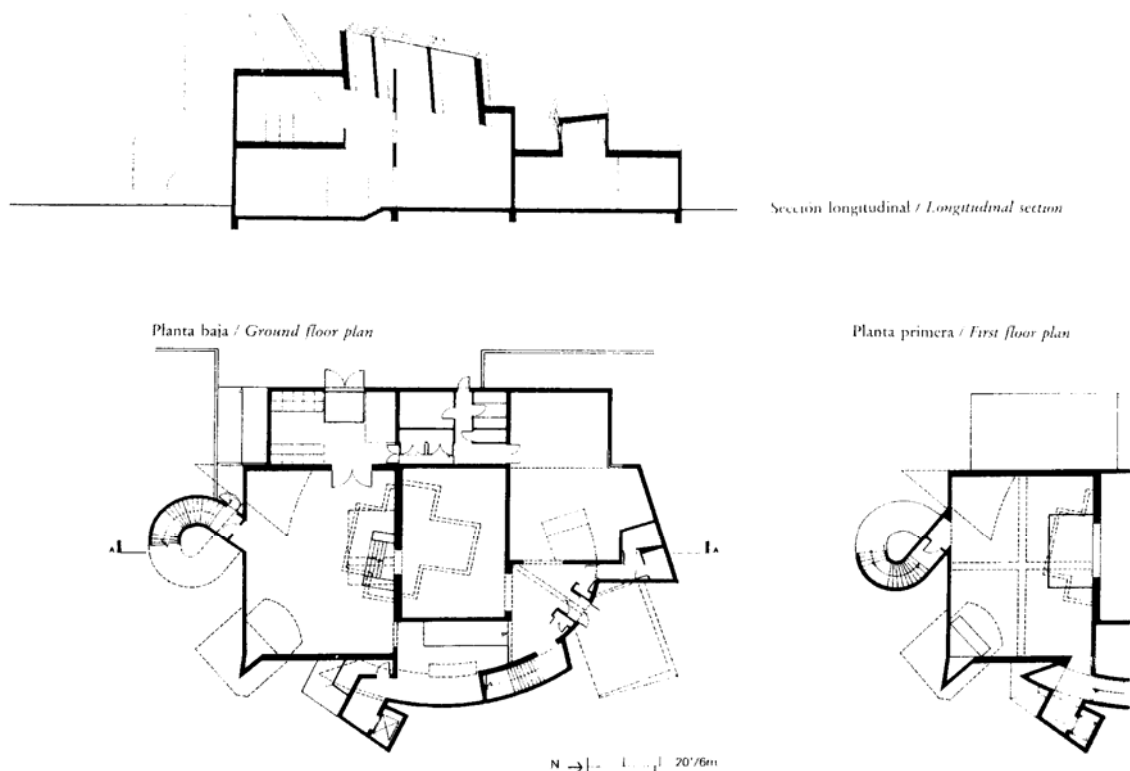
3 | Sketch of entrance facade



4 | Model of the museum and adjacent factory

²³ <http://www.eisenmanarchitects.com/>

In the earlier mentioned exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture* there was as well work displayed of Frank O. Gehry. Through the years many of his projects became very important for the acknowledgement of the movement, and his Vitra Design Museum of 1989 in Weil am Rhein, Germany is exemplary. The building was intentionally designed to house the private collection of Rolf Fehlbaum, but in the final design a factory production hall and a gatehouse to the factory were incorporated as well. 'The museum building is composed of a catalogue library, office, storage and support spaces in addition to exhibition space. The galleries are treated as connected volumes spatially interpenetrating each other so that the exhibitions can communicate from one space to another. Each has a different character vis a vis natural light, volume, surface, and scale, and although visually connected, they may all be secured separately.'²⁴ The building was Gehry's first in Europe, and was realised in collaboration with the architect Günther Pfeifer.



5 | Section and plans

In my opinion there can be found deconstruction in this project and in a way Gehry is in his design aiming at the same objective as projects of deconstruction are supposed to do according to Derrida. In the Vitra Design Museum the ordered rationality of Modern Architecture is countered as well as the conventional ways of perceiving form and space. The architecture of the building appears fragmented, non-linear, with uneven, freely curved outlines and incomplete forms, which could be considered as indicative for the theory. The used geometrical shapes are reminiscent to the art of the Russian Constructivists and the white stucco reminds of the Modernist architecture of the 1920s. In this way the traditional white cube architecture of many art galleries might be questioned, nevertheless is the deconstruction of the organisational layout less evident. I think it's in the plans clearly visible that the three rectangular exhibition spaces and the one on the first floor are rational and functional basic elements and all the shapes around

²⁴ *Museum and Factory Vitra In: El Croquis 43*. Madrid: El Croquis Editorial, p. 74

those volumes are just additions, added in order to get the wanted appearance on the outside of the building. Whether it's a good thing to have the basis of a simple sequence of boxes or not, the dressing up of the building reminds of another practitioner of post modern architecture, Robert Venturi. In contrast to deconstructivism is in the perception of Venturi the decoration of the 'shed' and historical allusion adding a richness to architecture that modernism had forgotten.²⁵ So the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein is an project that often is considered as deconstructive, a claim which is valid for me for the questioning of the reminiscent legacy of modernism, but its deconstructing aspects are at the same time as ruptured as the image of the building is fragmented. Both given images of a sketch by Gehry of the building's entrance facade and of the model of the building with the adjacent factory show hardly any difference with the final design. At the same time are those very well succeeding in covering the simple basic elements of three rectangular boxes where the freely shaped geometries are added to, what brings me to the conclusion that in this deconstructivist project the appearance is made most valuable. Just like a project of Derridean deconstruction is supposed to, using Derrida's first phase in deconstruction. Nevertheless, the tectonic structure of the building remains untouched.



6 | Street side view of the Vitra Design Museum

Daniel Libeskind, Westside Shopping and Leisure Centre of 2008 in Bern, CH



7 | Daniel Libeskind, Westside Shopping and Leisure Centre

²⁵ Venturi, R. 1966 *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art Press
 Venturi, R. 1977 *Learning from Las Vegas*. Cambridge: Cambridge MA

The Westside Shopping and Leisure Centre is a very recent project of Daniel Libeskind, who was as well one of the architects whose work was exhibited in the MoMA back in 1988.²⁶ May the extension of the Jewish Museum in Berlin possibly be considered as deconstructive, his recent projects, like this one in Switzerland, seems for me to have nothing to do with the aims and objectives of the philosophical idea as proposed by Derrida. Although the building appears fragmented and ruptured and therefore might remind to the destabilising method of deconstruction, no underlying (tectonic) structure is putted into question and all the disturbing shapes and forms have become part of the personal handwriting of Libeskind.



8 | Daniel Libeskind, Westside Shopping and Leisure Centre

Zaha Hadid, Nordpark Cable Railway Stations of 2007 in Innsbruck, Austria



9 | Zaha Hadid, Railway station

Some of the architects of the exhibition protest against being labelled as deconstructivist, but still Zaha Hadid is often considered as part of the movement as well with her paintings reminiscent to the movement of Russian Constructivism and her spatial translation in 1992 of a painting of Wladimir Malevitsj for an exhibition in the Guggenheim in New York.²⁷ During her career the shapes of her projects shifted as much as the technological possibilities to realise those. The smooth contours of the railway

²⁶ <http://www.daniel-libeskind.com/projects/show-all/westside-shopping-and-leisure-centre/>

²⁷ www.zaha-hadid.com

stations, with their shiny white panels, are cladding to a hidden steel structure, necessary to realise the image of the architectural object. Checking for the criteria for Derridean deconstruction is a useless thing to do. For me Zaha Hadid is the ultimate example of making appearance more valuable than essence, which is the first phase of deconstruction. But the project's smooth curves don't question or criticise thinking in hierarchies and oppositions, nor break open or fragment totalising and unified thinking.

CONCLUSIONS

If I compare early works of deconstruction to recent work of architects once known as deconstructivists, I don't find the same dialectics on deconstruction. Criteria for deconstruction as breaking up or fragmentising the architectonic structure are absent; instead, the abundance of architectonic elements is overwhelming. Despite this abundance of decorative elements, the theoretical basis of deconstruction is rather small. About this decoration: Robert Venturi represents post-modernism in architecture wherein decoration and historical allusion add a richness to architecture that modernism had foregone. The 'decorated shed' can be seen as an approach to the legacy of modernism that is in contrast with deconstruction. Where for Venturi the application of signs and ornaments to a pragmatic architecture can instil the philosophic complexities of semiology, Derridean deconstruction on the other hand should question underlying structures, like functional aspects of buildings. In my opinion there was deconstruction of the architectonic structure apparent in the Wexner Center of Eisenman. In the Vitra Museum of Gehry might the way of how form and space were perceived have been deconstructed, but the underlying functional scheme and tectonic structure remain untouched. I think that the questioning, or any of the objectives of deconstructivism cannot be found in recent projects of deconstructivists like the Westside Shopping and Leisure Centre of Daniel Libeskind and the Railway Stations in Innsbruck of Zaha Hadid. What seems to have happened over time is that, what Derrida calls the first phase of deconstruction, wherein appearance has become hierarchically prevalent to essence, has become more important. In the work of Libeskind, and even more in Hadid's, the architectonic elements have become a decoration of the buildings image or are banded out at all. While this first phase grew in attention, the movement of deconstructivism never arrived at the second phase, wherein deconstructivists show an awareness of the minuscule difference between on the one hand the past and the present and on the other the present and the future. In the scope of the given examples Eisenman was more reacting on the Modernist legacy and Hadid, on the other side, is trying to realise the future with digital technology, but the difference between both might be smaller than assumed. Maybe the recent work of architects, once known as deconstructivists, doesn't always use the tectonic structure as a way of decoration. Nevertheless has this study made clear to me the importance of the appearance of the building, what increased over time. If the architectonic structure was used in deconstructivism as a way of decorating the building to enhance its image, Derridean deconstruction isn't carried out according to its own principles, neither should a fragmented appearance have been used as a style. To conclude this research I would like to endorse Leslie Jaye Kavanaugh's search for a new structure: *'I will not be calling here the demise of metaphysics, for its 'Destruktion', or even for its 'deconstruction' (...) In this way this project is to do metaphysics, to construct yet another architectonic of philosophy. Because finally, to 'overcome', to 'escape', to 'end', to 'deconstruct', to 'go beyond', is in my opinion at present not only not possible, but also perhaps not even desirable.'*²⁸

Pim Gerritsen, March 09

²⁸ Kavanaugh, L.J. 2007 *The Architectonic of Philosophy: Plato, Aristotle, Leibniz*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p. i

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Images:

Cover: Compilation of deconstructivists' architecture

Source: www.flickr.com (12/03/09)

1 | Christoph Elsenner, the tecton, topos and typos

<http://images.google.co.uk/images?ndsp=18&hl=en&um=1&q=christoph+elsener&start=90&sa=N> (12/03/09)

2 | Peter Eisenman, Wexner Center

Source: www.flickr.com (12/03/09)

3 | Sketch of entrance facade

<http://architecturesketches.blogspot.com/2005/12/vitra-design-museum.html>
(12/03/09)

4 | Model of the museum and adjacent factory

Museum and Factory Vitra In: *El Croquis* 43. Madrid: El Croquis Editorial, p. 74

5 | Section and plans

Museum and Factory Vitra In: *El Croquis* 43. Madrid: El Croquis Editorial, p. 82

6 | Street side view of the Vitra Design Museum

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/46/Vitra_Design_Museum%2C_side_view.jpg (12/03/09)

7 | Daniel Libeskind, Westside Shopping and Leisure Centre

<http://www.daniel-libeskind.com/projects/show-all/westside-shopping-and-leisure-centre>
(12/03/09)

8 | Daniel Libeskind, Westside Shopping and Leisure Centre

<http://www.daniel-libeskind.com/projects/show-all/westside-shopping-and-leisure-centre>
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9 | Zaha Hadid, Railway station

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