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GAME ON THE BORDER OF COMPLIANCE WITH RULES, OR DECONSTRUCTION IN DETAILS

GRA NA GRANICY ZGODNOŚCI Z REGUŁAMI, CZYLI DEKONSTRUKCJA W DETALACH

Abstract

Unique architectural details may sometimes act like a lens or hologram, allowing better understanding of the general principle ruling the entire architectural concept. It shows both the game of intrinsic geometric transformations, and the game as diversion or entertainment. This is illustrated with examples from Parc de la Villette (1982–1990) in Paris, designed by Bernard Tschumi.

Keywords: deconstruction in architecture, detail, Parc de la Villette, pavilions, Bernard Tschumi, Bicyclette ensevelie, Claes Oldenburg, Coosje van Bruggen, playing with user's sensory impressions

Streszczenie

Unikatowo zaprojektowane i zrealizowane zgodnie z projektem detale budynków, jak soczewka, skupiają cechy całości lub, jak hologram, pozwalają poznać zasadę, jaką się ona rządzi. Pokazują zarówno grę przekształceń architektonicznej geometrii według własnych, hermetycznych zasad, jak i pozwalają użytkownikom na grę rozumianą jako zabawę. Zjawiska te zostały zilustrowane przykładami z paryskiego parku de la Villette (1982–1990), projektu Bernarda Tschumiego.

Słowa kluczowe: dekonstrukcja w architekturze, Park de la Villette, pawilony-folies, Bernard Tschumi, Bicyclette ensevelie, Claes Oldenburg, Coosje van Bruggen, gra z doznaniami użytkownika

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Graphic representations of architectural theories using diagrams, graphs etc. tend to focus on general concepts: buildings as a whole and their relationship with their setting, urban complexes, and city parks. The details tend to get left out of the theory. Yet, a broad layout usually can only be seen from an airborne perspective. This applies to casual modernist urban layouts and their organic variety as well as post-structuralist and – in particular – deconstructionist concepts. These are often a game of geometric transformations based on their own hermetic principles, or a variation based on the themes derived from the aforementioned trends.

However, unique architectural details – specifically designed and executed in line with the project – may sometimes act like a lens or a hologram, focusing the properties of the whole and allowing better understanding of the general principle ruling the entire architectural concept. Such details may be examined from various different perspectives and points of view and, when they are directly accessible to the public, they may be used in line with, in opposition to, or even in parallel with the designed purpose. This is another type of game: a game understood as a diversion or entertainment. In this paper, I focus on the relationship existing between the two abovementioned types of games coexisting within the same space thanks to the use of a wide range of architectural details, which leads to the participation in a broader theory. This is illustrated with examples from the Parc de la Villette (1982–1990) in Paris, designed by Bernard Tschumi.

Much has already been written about the concept behind the Parc de la Villette, being perhaps the fullest practical application of the premises of architectural deconstruction [1, p. 8–11; 6, p. 33–39; 2, p. 92–101]. Written analyses and Tschumi's own comments are illustrated with diagrams showing three design layers – lines, points and planes – initially designed according to different guidelines and subsequently superimposed. The result is a great number of unpredictable clashes between different geometrical systems. However, neither the broad layout nor the principle ruling is fully visible, despite the existence of widely accessible elevated viewing platforms. This is due to the park's extensive surface and geometric complexity.

The aforementioned principle consists in applying the premises of philosophical deconstruction to architecture in line with the formula elaborated in collaboration with Jacques Derrida. It involves undermining and/or overcoming the dualistic opposition between the *signifie* and the *signifiant*, i.e. the notion and the voice (or visual form) that it represents. Derrida claimed that deconstruction is not a method (originally: of literary analysis), since a method is supposed to lead to a certain goal or a completion of a procedure, while deconstructed text, defined as one in which the underlying syntax structures and deformations resulting from linguistic and grammatical determinants were uncovered, can/should be subjected to further deconstruction *ad infinitum.*

Despite Derrida's approach, deconstruction becomes a method when applied to architecture. The construction process finally comes to an end and the building is put to use. The fact that it may be interpreted in many different ways following its completion does not change its final shape; still, it does undergo changes due to the passing time, advancing deterioration, renovations etc. Therefore, deconstruction in architecture constitutes a method of design. Deconstructionist interpretation ("all is interpretation") of architecture is no different than deconstructionist interpretations of other "cultural texts" (for Derrida, all such "texts" are products of culture, including those that are not linguistic in their nature).

In order to undermine and/or overcome the opposition between the *signifie* and the *signifiant* (the foundation of Western philosophy since Plato, as evidenced by all the dualisms

existing in fields ranging from philosophy to traffic organisation: spirit/matter, *res cogitans/ res extensa*, bright/dark, up/down, right/left, stop/go), it is not sufficient to negate the opposition, as this does not eliminate dualism, which remains, the only change being that it includes a contrary, "negative" component. Hence the recurring phrase in deconstructionist analyses of architecture – *in-between* – and the deconstructionists' search for shapes and spaces that are neither within nor without any given framework, limit, or system, but rather between them, or– even better – at the same time between and within those systems. Therefore, the concept does not consist in negating the opposition, but rather outwitting it.

This "halfway in and halfway out" theme is visible in the Parc de la Villette alleys and their intersections, made with tiles of varying material, texture, colour and geometry, in order to somewhat confuse the visitors strolling through the park. While this confusion is relatively harmless in a park where people have time to spare and even expect certain attractions, it also demonstrates visually the complexity of the structural components and emphasizes the issue of functionality or utility, allowing one to experience his or her reflexive actions, like turning from one park alley to another, in a different way. This "issue of functionality" has a direct impact on the human body without engaging language, thoughts (that are also linguistic in nature), linearly sequenced associations, persuasion, interpretation, cause and effect, or in other words those qualities that are intrinsic to a dualistic model. For a visitor strolling through the park, this outwitting and undermining of oppositions happens *en passant*; in the case of a cyclist – who moves faster and whose perception of changing pavement texture is even stronger – it happens at intersections and turns, where they are at risk of slipping and colliding against a curved, arc-like bench sitting almost in the middle of the curve and in opposition to the path's curve.

Another similar example of the deconstructivist game – although more complex and three-dimensional – is an outdoor stairway in one of the red pavilions (*folie*) situated at the entrance to the park, which houses a tourist information point. The name evokes the garden pavilions of the rococo and romantic era, promising folly, extravagance, or at least entertainment. Even though this entertainment interferes to some extent with functionality, it does so without disregarding it completely.

The lowest step in the stairway has more or less half the height of the remaining steps. At first glance, this appears to be an obvious construction error (one quite commonly seen in Poland) when the previously calculated and executed steps reach an unexpectedly raised floor or slab level. If any doubts remain as to whether this was simply a mistake or, quite the opposite, a game with the user being part of a deconstructionist discourse, it is definitely resolved by the construction of the stairway railings that clearly indicate intentional design.

One of the railings consists of rectangular modules arranged diagonally in parallel to the stringer, filled with wire mesh, completed with flat bars, and topped with a railing bar. The bottom flat bar in the lowest module meets the paving of the square in the middle of its length, where it slants and continues in parallel to the pavement; then, it returns to its proper course so that the module has the same length measured along the railing slant, the only difference from the remaining modules being the cut-off at the bottom. At the same time, the railing topping the module throughout its length extends beyond the last step and descends lower, approaching the pavement at a height considerably lower than standard for exterior stairway railings (which is at approximately 1.1 metre above the paving, just like in Poland) and only then does it slant at a right angle and continue once again diagonally along the flat bar enclosing this lowest, cut-off module.
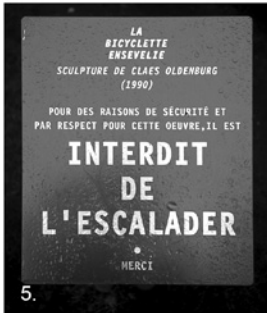
Ill. 1.   Parc de la Villette in Paris, 1982–1990, Bernard Tschumi. Intersecting alleys
Ill. 2.   Stairs at the tourist information pavilion
Ill. 3, 4, 5. *Bicyclette ensevelie*, 1990, Claes Oldenburg, Coosje van Bruggen
             (Photos by p. Winskowski)

The distinctive lines of the flat bar enclosing the railing module, the consistency result-ing from the same length of all modules despite their incorrect distribution in relation to the length of the flight of stairs, the railing's solid mounting, its extension beyond the line of the last step, the right angle bend, and the continued course of the railing, redundant in terms of functionality, until it ostentatiously reaches the paving as a way of enclosing the bottom module and the entire railing: all these measures point to deliberate decisions, even though the signals sent by thus shaped forms are indeed ambiguous.

This ambiguity is an intrinsic part of undermining/outwitting/overcoming the discourse of functional straightforwardness in architectural elements. But besides the discourse, there are also other factors at play: a risk of tripping on the lowest, non-normative step and hitting one's knee against the railing's right angle bend.

The construction of the other railing of this same stairway is different: it is a massive wall of regulation height but without a separate handrail, descending diagonally to the ground without any disruption or slanting. Therefore, it protrudes even farther into the square, going beyond the limit of the last step, hence creating a risk of tripping for people approaching the stairway from another direction.

Both the above-described railings that belong to this particular stairway – especially when considered together as a functional whole – transgress, as it seems, the criteria of the seemingly obvious dualistic opposition model: at least in terms of categories such as good/bad, harmonious/disrupted, useful/useless, and even comfortable/uncomfortable. Visual disruptions in the design of the railings, noticeable from a considerable distance, are bound to capture the attention of even distracted users enough to avoid injury while climbing the stairs; the task is made easier thanks to the lights set in the filled-in railing illuminating the steps.

Five hundred metres from the tourist information point one finds another setting that allows dynamic movement of the human body while actively participating (the users do this more or less consciously) in a certain architectural or artistic theory. The site in question is an example of a game of simultaneous climbing and descending (similarly to the previously described stairs), set in the context of the 20th century art's constant aspiration to blend the realms of art and life, merging art with life and life with art. An aspiration that, let us add, leads to permanent physical deterioration of the artwork as a result of its success in the area of performative activity.

This setting represents an enormous sculpture *Buried Bicycle* (*Bicyclette ensevelie,* 1990, Claes Oldenburg, Coosje van Bruggen), fallen to a side and partially sunk in mud, protruding from the lawn exposing part of a wheel, half of the handlebars with a handgrip and a bell, half of the saddle, and one pedal. The sculpture is traversed in the middle by linear elements belonging to Tschumi's concept: a paved alley and a row of trees.

The most attractive parts of the sculpture, particularly for children, are its wheels. Obviously, they do not turn, but only evoke a possibility of movement by association with real bicycles; but it is possible to climb them up to 2.5 metres above the lawn, thus reaching a height rather risky for kindergarteners. By climbing the sculpture and using the site as a playground, they damaged (and continue to damage) the wheel. In this case, a success in terms of artistic theory and public reception brought on a failure technology and execution-wise. After all, in the realm of pop-art imagery such a toy must always look like it is "brand new". The adopted style does not tolerate destruction, devastation, or a "post-industrial" look, etc. The sculpture, being both a solid work of art and a generator for performative activities, allows carefree playing with a bicycle that seems to have been abandoned by some unknown giant.

At the same time, this ludic and artistic concept has been misunderstood by the park administration. Next to a solid, cast plaque providing information on the title, the authors, and the date of the sculpture, another plastic plaque has been placed (omitting the co-author, Coosje van Bruggen, Oldenburg's wife, included on the first plaque, which demonstrates both inaccuracy and negligence in terms of gender equality). Leaving aside its cautionary red colour, this second plaque would be more suited to a museum and to a work of art aimed

at solemn contemplation, since it proclaims that "climbing is prohibited". And why is that? "For security reasons and out of respect for the artwork"! Risk of accidents and security regulations notwithstanding, the plaque clearly demonstrates the failure in predicting possible spontaneous usage of the sculpture, and an attempt (albeit ineffective) at preventing the game on all of the above-described levels.

The idea of the multisensory impact of space, currently at the centre of attention of architectural theory, usually associated with the effects of silence or delicate reverberation, diffused light, increased (subjective) temperature in an interior covered with thermally non-conductive materials (such as wood), and scents of such materials (wood, resin), has its origins not only in the remote history of art and architecture, as many contemporary authors claim [3, 4, 5, 7]. In the architecture of two or three decades ago, now somewhat *passé* in terms of style, we find the origins of experiments consisting in playing with the users' sensory impressions and modifying them to a considerable extent on many different levels. Although the deconstructivist discourse regarding these experiments now seems to be a closed chapter in the theory of architecture, their results in architecture still allow new generations of users to experience space in new, different ways. These experiences are worth analysing for the purposes of designing and defining space in architecture, also as part of a different discourse: even if this means following the same path in the opposite direction.

R e f e r e n c e s

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