WHAT_IF_...?

UNTITLED_SPACE_AND_THE_ARCHITECTURE_OF_CONSTRUCTIVE_THINKING

Maaike Bleeker

"Can architecture, like both subjectivity and signification — two
models that have dominated the contemporary forms of its theoretical
self-reflections — be rethought in terms of the outside, in terms of
surfaces, in terms of a certain flatness, in terms of dynamism and
movement rather than stasis or the sedentary? Can architecture
inhabit us as much as we see ourselves inhabiting it? Does
architecture have to be seen in terms of subjectivization and
semiotization, in terms of usage and meaning? Can architecture be
thought, no longer as a whole, a complex unity, but as a set of and
site for becomings of all kinds? What would such an understanding
entail?" (Elizabeth Grosz) [1]

Architecture is not only the knowledge of forms, it is also a form
of knowledge. From time immemorial, it has been the form of
metaphysical knowing, characterized by telos and logos, foundation,
cohesion. This knowing expresses itself in monumental works such as
the philosophies of Kant and Hegel: all-encompassing systems that
are as solid as a house, in which we feel protected, in which we can
nestle and, if so desired, hide.
The architecture of these systems is closely related to the
Cartesian subject as centre of the (thought) universe. This is the
subject that is characterized by unity and psychological depth. It
is the subject that sees itself reflected in the logic of symmetry,
centralization, stability and binary oppositions such as interior-
exterior, public-private, inner-outer, spirit-matter, presence-
absence.

"What if …" John Rajchman asks himself, "What if the architectonic
in Kant were not an overarching system but something that has itself
to be constructed anew, in each case, in relation to fresh problems

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[1] Elizabeth Grosz: *Architecture from the Outside. Essays on Virtual and Real Space*
(MIT press 2001), p.70-71

- something looser, more flexible, less complete, more irregular, a
free plan in which things hang together without yet being held in
place?"[2] Suppose we were able to strip the architecture of thinking
of its static character. Suppose that this architecture is in fact a
construction that has to unfold itself again and again in the act of
thinking, in the manifestation of the "I think". Suppose that
thinking is always a question of designing, of exploring new
possibilities, as in a novel, a painting or a piece of music, in
which the rules have to be constantly reinvented, constantly
redesigned, and constantly bent and broken. The architecture of this
kind of thinking manifests itself in constructions that open a
gateway to the as yet unseen, the as yet unheard, to "virtualities"
that unfold in the here and now. What does this mean in terms of the
thinking? What can it mean in terms of architecture? What does it
mean in terms of relationship between the two?

the outside
"If we are no longer to explore the textuality — its immersion in
discourses, its textual implications and investments, its own modes
of marking, as Derrideanism entails - but to explore the
possibilities of becoming, the virtualities latent in building, the
capacity of building to link with and make other series deflect and
transform while being transformed in the process, Deleuze's work may
prove crucial." (Elizabeth Grosz)[3]

Both Derrida and Deleuze focus in their work on what Grosz calls
"the outside": the external, the other, that which is excluded or
not part of the system. Derrida repeatedly points out that "the
outside" is constitutive of "the inside", that it has always had its
roots there, and that it is therefore impossible to understand the
two detached from each other. He points out the impossibility of a
strict separation between the outside and the inside. The outside
and the inside imply each other and therefore, what is inside, or
what the structure encompasses, can never be understood separately
from "the outside", which the building attempts to exclude.

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[2] John Rajchman: *Constructions* (MIT Press 1998), p.1
[3] Elizabeth Grosz: *Architecture from the Outside. Essays on Virtual and Real Space*
(MIT press 2001), p 73

Derrida — a philosopher himself and therefore, as far as architecture is concerned, an outsider — has left an indelible mark in the discourse of and about architecture and public space. With his term *différance* he focuses attention on the continuous slippage of meaning, on the trail of the residue that penetrates the walls of the system and infects logic, no matter how austere the construction may seem to be. Derrida focuses attention on the exception to the rule in order to question the rule itself and, especially (to speak in architectonic terms again), the foundation of the rule.

Whereas Derrida wants to re-admit that which is excluded, suppressed or rendered invisible, Deleuze shifts the attention to the surface, to surfaces. He does not perceive the surface as a container of content but as a site that interacts with what is "outside". Deleuze is also a differential thinker. Deleuze also resists the philosophy of closed systems, but he does not do this from the perspective of failure or the impending loss of stability, fixed form and security. In fact, the continuous shifting and slippage of meaning holds a promise for him: the promise of transformation, of constantly new "becomings". Therefore, no deconstruction for Deleuze, but construction. The confrontation with "the outside" is the source of movement, of a form of thinking that detaches itself from rigid systems.

Does this still leave room for architecture?

reflection
A series of images, partial views of a building. At first sight, it seems to be modern architecture as expected and anticipated. A lot of glass, probably a construction of steel and concrete. Straight lines, austere, empty spaces with here and there a detail that points to human use: a toilet, a football, an exercise bicycle, a chair, a cabinet with a telephone. All of them elements that make reference to an interior surrounded by the reflecting surface of the glass walls.
The interior elements, however, pale into insignificance compared to the emphatically present images of the building's environment seen

through or reflected in the glass surfaces. "The outside" imposes itself, dominates. All attention is compelled by the interplay between reflections and views in and through the glittering surfaces. It is this interplay of reflections that stands out in the images, and not, for example, the construction of the building, the design of the exterior or the spatial effect of the interior. This building is not about content, about what could be placed inside, or the fact that you could be inside it. It has not been designed to be entered. It has been designed as a reflection machine.

This building can justly be called "hyper-contextual". It has an emphatic relationship with its environment. The building literally provides a reflection of the environment. Indeed, the building becomes especially visible in the way in which it reflects the environment. Architecture and environment meet each other in an interplay of reflections on the surface of the building, an interplay that in turn can be interpreted as a reflection on reflection.
Reflection, according to the Dutch "Van Dale" dictionary, means, in the first place, a mirroring, in the second place that which is mirrored (lustre, glow), and, in addition, also consideration, contemplation, pondering and, finally, in the philosophical sense, thinking. All these definitions seem applicable to the series *Untitled Space*. The images demonstrate (1) the principle of the mirroring; they do that (2) by means of an interplay of mirrored images. This interplay of images can (3) be read as a reflection (in the sense of consideration) on the relation between the building and the environment that is mirrored in it. Finally (4) this visual consideration can be read as a reflection on the thinking process itself. It can be read as a visualization of Deleuzian thinking. What connects these four definitions of reflection with each other is the construction, the architecture, of the building in which we see the mirrored images: the architecture that is the basis for the interplay of reflections seen in the images of the building.

Does this building possibly answer Elizabeth Grosz' question: "How to keep architecture open to its outside, how to force architecture to think?"[4]

The architecture of thinking
An important part of Deleuze's philosophical project (of both his own work as well as his collaboration with Guattari) is about thinking. About how we think and how thinking is an act. Thinking in Deleuze's terms is the consequence of a confrontation with something outside ourselves. He does not speak about thinking in terms of an interior, as is the case in the Cartesian cogito that grasps the world from the inside to the outside with the help of reason. Instead of that, according to Deleuze, thinking is the consequence of the confrontation with "the outside". Challenged by I know not what, our thoughts are set into motion and in this progression , both the thought and the "I think" unfold as the *locus* of this thought, as the place from which that thought is projected. This locus of thinking is the place implied in the architecture of the thought, just as the point of perception is implied in a construction of perspective. Point of perception and construction cannot be detached from each other. The point of perception does not precede the perspective that is evoked by the construction, nor does the construction precede the point of perception implied. They can only be understood in relation to each other.

In the case of *Untitled Space*, this relation is provided in the construction of the architecture. The building offers a view of the environment, it offers many views, but no overview. Mirror images from different directions overlap each other, merge into each other, some surfaces revealing no more than fragments. It is possible to recognize elements from the various environments, such as an electricity pole, a bit of skyline, the tower of the St. Hubertus Castle reflected upside down in the water, air, part of a forest; but the whole remains undefined.

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[4] Elizabeth Grosz: *Architecture from the Outside. Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (MIT press 2001), p 64

The mosaic of reflections of the environment, in turn, forms a mirror image of the construction of the building. Because of the reflections, the surfaces from which the building is erected become visible and the attention is focused on the multitude of different surfaces and how these surfaces interact in their various spatial relations. But here, too, the viewer does not gain insight into the system of the whole. The straight lines and transparent surfaces suggest the funcionality of a modern office building, but closer inspection reveals that overview is far from present.
Just as we are only able to form an image of the building's environment on the basis of the way in which this environment is reflected in the building, we can only form an idea of the construction of the building on the basis of the way in which the building reflects the environment. Both can only be understood from the relation between the inside and the outside, and this relationship is mediated by the architecture of the building.

You could say that this architecture, in a series of visual thoughts, literally mediates reflections on the environment, on architecture and on the relation between the two. The architechtonic construction opens up new vistas of the environment. These vistas unfold in relation to the points of perception that the images of the building present to the viewer. The result is a less than stable position for the "I think" of these visual thoughts. Not only can the thoughts branch out in all directions, but the point from which the thought-spaces open up also seems to keep slipping and shifting. This makes the images a reflection on viewing, on the position of the viewer, and on the relationship between this position and that which is seen and thought.

Where exactly is the viewer? No human being can be seen, neither inside the building, nor in the reflections of the gleaming exterior. The angles from which the building is shown suggest a subjective vantage point, but the subject that sees this remains outside the picture. The building reflects all sorts of things, but not the viewer. It is precisely this prominent absence that holds a mirror to the viewer, a mirror that invites this viewer to identify

him/herself with the position of an observer who is not part of the visible world: Descartes meets Lacan.

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall who is the fairest of them all?"
According to Lacan, the image of the body as seen in a mirror plays a crucial role in the development of consciousness. In his famous essay about the mirror stage, Lacan describes how a child between the age of six to eighteen months begins to recognize itself in the image of its own body reflected in a mirror.[5] This image shows the body as a cohesive unit, an image that, according to Lacan, is in contrast with the confusion and fragmentation that the child feels inside. The image in the mirror presents the child with an *imago* that, due to its attractiveness, invites identification, and only through this identification with this imago, according to Lacan, does the experience of the self come into being.
The image of the body in the mirror is a visible trace of one's presence in the reflected environment. But the child discovers the relationship between its own movements and the movements in the mirror, it learns to understand the relation between the virtual space in the mirror and the reflected reality. During this process, the imago present in the mirror image mediates between the reality in which the child finds itself and the virtual space in the mirror, but also between what Lacan calles the "Innenwelt" and "Umwelt", between the inside world and outside world. Identification with the mirror image thus lays the foundation for an identity which is based on a fundamental confusion between inside and outside, between self and other, between me here and the image there. At the same time, this confusion is constitutive of the formation of a self-experience based on exactly that distinction between a psychological inside world and a material, physiological outside world.

The Lacanian ego therefore forms itself around the image of the body. Ironically, it is simultaneously an ego that distances itself from the body because it forms itself around an image of this body as seen from the outside. It is, after all, an image of the body in

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[5] See: Jacques Lacan. *Ecrits: A Selection*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977).

the mirror that is recognized as "I", at the expense of the body
from which that image is seen, the body that is the locus of seeing
and perceiving. That means, paradoxically, that the identification
of the child with the image of the body in the mirror is
simultaneously an identification of that same child with the
position of the observer as the Cartesian *disembodied eye/I*: an eye
that looks on from a dis-embodied position. It is this disembodied
eye that, after having cast doubt on everything, says: "I think,
therefore I am".

(in)visible imago

Untitled Space undermines the position of this dis-embodied
thinker/viewer as the centre of the universe and does this by means
of a strategy which seems, at first glance, to actually be a
corroboration. The images invite identification with the position of
an observer who is not part of the visible world him/herself.
However, by not showing this world directly, but reflected in a
glittering surface, these images focus attention on the blind spot
that is constitutive of the architecture of the Lacanian subject:
how the separation between the inside and the outside is not an
absolute separation, but rather the remaining invisibility of the
relation between the two; how in this, the imago presented in the
mirror image functions as a Derridean trace that is constitutive of
the creation of the difference that it simultaneously undermines.
Untitled Space draws attention to this blind spot by means of a dual
movement. Viewers see themselves confronted with images which lack
an imago as a reference point for positioning themselves in relation
to the spatiality represented. The "reference point" that is given
to us is our own mirror image reflected in the Perspex sheet, behind
which images are framed. These reflections enable the viewer to see
and thus undermine the position of this viewer as an all-seeing but
invisible spectator, a position such as those that are suggested in
the images. The reflection points the viewer to his or her
relationship to the image but does so in a way that simultaneously
disrupts the viewer's understanding of this relationship. This
viewer sees him/herself "placed in" a space that is not his or her
own "Umwelt", but where images of this "Umwelt" merge with the

complex mixture of interior and exterior that was already taking place in the images.

Untitled Space opens up new views, not only of the space and the environment, but also of the relationship between space and observer, and in the way in which both come into being in relation to one another. The images make tangible the importance of a stable viewing position for the customary distinction between inside and outside, real and virtual, the distinction that plays such an important role in the architecture of the Lacanian subject. Instead, it seems that here inside and outside, real and virtual, permeate one another and establish new bonds. The architecture of the building thus challenges us to have new thoughts about what is real and what is virtual, and how both play a role in our understanding of the world around us and of our own worlds. The architecture of the building challenges us to such thoughts, mediates, but does not represent. What we see here is not a representation of thought-content, no judgements, statements or claims about how it is. What we see here is a creative proposal for thought, for the establishing of relations, the act of making observations. And with that, the architecture of this building touches the core of what Deleuze considers to be philosophical thinking.

virtuality

"[T]he question of philosophy is the singular point where concept and creation are related to each other. Philosophers have not been sufficiently concerned with the nature of the concept as philosophical reality. They have preferred to think of it as given knowledge or representation that can be explained by the faculties able to form it (abstraction or generalization) or employ it (judgement). But the concept is not given, it is created; it is to be created." (Deleuze & Guattari)[6]

Deleuze wants to liberate thinking from the elements that restrict, limit and imprison it. And that is, according to him, first and foremost representation because representation encourages

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[6] Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari: What is Philosophy? (Columbia University Press 1994) p. 11

reproduction instead of production. That is why radical
intellectuals, whether scientists, philosophers or artists, must
extricate themselves from what is already there and think beyond it,
design new concepts, and thus unfold the virtualities that are
inherent in the architecture of that which already exists.
This Deleuzian unfolding of virtualities is not the same as the
actualization of possibilities within the logic of that which
already exists, nor is virtuality, in the sense proposed by Deleuze,
a reflection of what is given in reality, as in Lacan. The
actualization of such possibilities does not essentially change
anything to that which exists. Instead, Deleuze proposes a concept
of the virtual as an entrance to that which is not (yet) possible,
not (yet) fathomable within the logic of the existing.
The virtual presents opportunities that undermine or transform the
logic of that which already exists, such as in the architecture of
the mysterious room in Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves*.[7] This
room is sometimes very large and sometimes very small and keeps
changing form, while in the meantime the form and size of the rest
of the house remain unchanged. It is impossible to place this room
within the total architecture of the house. The room is unmistakably
there for those who enter it, but its spatiality resists the logic
of the geometry that applies to the rest of the house. The door to
this room gives access to a virtual world that unfolds itself in the
middle of the world of normal, daily life. The room is a hiatus in
the logic of daily existence, an entrance to a space that is
impossible within the logic of the real world. The room is an
instable space that keeps changing form and size and hence creates
confusion, not only with regard to what the room itself is, but also
because this room undermines the apparent stability of the world
around it.

Untitled Space also presents architecture as a "site for becomings",
as virtualities that unfold in the middle of the real world. The
inside and the outside seem to slide over each other and in their
encounter with each other new spaces are created. The interplay of
reflecting surfaces suggests spatiality, both between the surfaces
and in the reflections. In the reflection of the real space, new

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[7] M.Z.Danielewski: *House of Leaves* (2000)

spaces seem to open up, virtual spaces that undermine the building's logic and system as a marker of the border between the inside and the outside spaces.

In fact, the entire building that we see is virtual. The building in the "photographs" only exists as a virtual construction that becomes visible through the outside space, "the outside", that is projected onto it. This environment is real, but the way in which this environment becomes visible in the virtual construction, in turn transforms the environment into a virtual space that is the product of the interaction with the virtual architecture. Thus the virtual architecture opens a door to what is as yet unseen in already existing environments. Architecture thus emerges as a way to produce and organize reflections, reflections which, as a result of this architecture, establish new bonds previously unthought of or even unthinkable. Architecture, here, is not a container of already existing spatiality, but a spatial exploration. It is an exploration of the environment and of the virtual possibilities of these environments. This exploration continues to be pursued as the series *Untitled Space* grows and more locations are added.

exploration

"The relation between the virtual and the real prefigures and is intertwined with a whole series of other oppositional terms — among them, mind and body, culture and nature, origin and copy. Just as the separation of body from mind has long been the regulating fantasy not only of the philosophical enterprise but of those practices (including architecture) based on the privilege of its terms (reason, order truth light vision etc) so too the relation between the virtual and the real, while generated from a history of philosophy, has ramifications everywhere, from the most global of public spaces (today the global space of broadcasting) to the most intimate of personal spaces (the space of individual inhabitation, production and pleasure). It is the task of architecture, among other things, to negotiate how these spaces are to exist in

contiguity with each other and how we are to inhabit them in times to come."(Elizabeth Grosz)[8]

The relation between virtuality and reality is not an established fact. This relation takes on shape in relation to an entire system of binary oppositions that are at the basis of our thinking. This system is constitutive of our thinking, and in this sense formative, but it is not an established fact. If anything, an established assumption.

Untitled Space shows how architecture can be deployed to make new explorations about the relation between virtual and real spaces, and perhaps to revise them; how architecture can be deployed as a means to investigate real spaces for their virtual possibilities; how architecture can be deployed to give new form in new ways to the relation between the various real and virtual spaces that structure our lives; and, possibly also, how architecture can be deployed to revise the relation between the real and virtual itself. And that would seem especially relevant in a time when the virtual spaces of television, film and the Internet occupy an increasingly large part of the public space we inhabit. Moreover, a time in which it is becoming more and more evident, partly due to an increasing awareness of cultural diversity, that the way in which the real and the virtual relate to each other is a cultural and historical fact.

Such an exploration automatically means an exploration of ourselves as well, who we are and what we might be. If the relation between real and virtual, inside world and outside world, is no longer an established fact that we learn to discover in the world but instead of that the product of cultural- and history-specific interaction with these environments, then this would require a reconsideration of the relation between the topography of the "Umwelt" and the "topography of the self" (Appadurai).[9]

In *Untitled Space* "things hang together without yet being held in place" (Raijchman). What if ….? What if *Untitled Space* holds up a

[8] Elizabeth Grosz: *Architecture from the Outside. Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (MIT press, 2001), p. 81-82
[9] Arjun Appadurai: "Topographies of the self: praise and emotion in Hindu India" in: C.A.Lutz and L. Abu-Lughod (eds.) *Language and the Politics of Emotion.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990, pp. 92-112.

mirror to us that affords us a glimpse of who we (*not yet*) are? Of who we might be?

The architecture of *Untitled Space* plays with the close relation between viewing and thinking as elements of modern Western subjectivity. Architecture reflects this relationship in a way that invites transformation. The thinker in *Untitled Space* is a viewer. This viewer, however, is reminded of his or her positioning in a body instead of being invited to forget it.

Unlike *House of Leaves*, in which the reader is invited to enter, in thought, the mysterious room together with the fictional characters, the viewer of *Untitled Space* remains an outsider. The images challenge us to interact, they encourage reflection, but only from the vantage point of an interaction with the surface. What is missing is the illusion of a spatiality that (however much it is a projection of the abysses of one's own interior) manifests itself as an expanse that we can make our own by entering it.

Virtual architecture thus holds a mirror up to us which does not reflect what is already there, but transforms, and hence offers an inversion of the Lacanian mirror stage. The relation between real and virtual space is not the answer but the question, and what is missing is a mirror image as mediator to determine the relation between the two.