

Peter Eisenman's *Chimera*

Andri Gerber

“There are no descriptions in fiction, there are only constructions...”¹

William H. Gass, 1970

¹ Gass, William H., *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970, S. 17.

² Gerber, Andri, „A life less ordinary“, in: AA files 71, 2015, S. 574-581; „Independent or Bureaucratic? The Early Career Choice of an Architect at the Turn of the Twentieth Century in Germany, France and England“, in: Footprint 7, 2015, Volume 9, N.2, S. 47-67.

³ Tafuri, Manfredo, *Teorie e Storia dell'architettura*, Bari: Laterza, 1968.

Architecture's discourse has been scattered with fictions, mainly aimed at eclipsing the ineffectivity of architecture vis a vis a general public. The irrelevance of the discipline in the shaping of our environment, compared to the amount of built volume by developers or investors, has always been striking and at odds with the grand narrative of architects themselves and their history, made up of heroes and outstanding buildings. One example might suffice to substantiate this dystopic vision of the discipline: in its construction of the myth of the independent and creative architect, architectural history has successfully suppressed the fact, that until the second world war, in particular in Germany and France, most architects were bureaucrats, working for administrations (yet striving to free themselves from this bureaucratic bonds).² Fictions that tend to elide the reality of the profession, continue to haunt architecture, both on the meta-level of history and theory and inside the narratives architects produce themselves. Such fictions are mainly sustained by architectural faculties and by architectural magazines, be it by the retreat into the autonomy of architecture, or by the opening of the dis-

cipline into fields and disciplines outside of architecture. Manfredo Tafuri had once characterized this merry-go-round, that periodically and alternating engages architecture, as “sphere and labyrinth”.³ Autonomy is such a fiction, because architecture can never be autonomous from the political, economical or technical context that sustains it, yet autonomy allows for an ideological suspension from these influences. The opening of the discipline also functions as a fiction, as it engages with everything, except with architecture itself.

While nowadays “Anthropocene” and “global south” are indispensable buzzwords for every serious architect/theoretician/curator, twenty years ago nobody would even remotely consider such subjects, lost into speculations about Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze and playing with Maya or 3D Max. At the time, these philosophical speculations reached such a magnitude, that one wished sometimes what Woody Allen put in scene in his 1977 film *Annie Hall*: While waiting in the queue for a movie and being bothered by a guy behind him in the waiting line, explaining the theory of Marshall McLuhan to his girlfriend, and pretending to give a seminar on the topic at Columbia, Allen in a magnificent *coup de théâtre* had the real Marshall McLuhan come out from an angle and tell the “want to be professor” of media theory, that he had no clue on the subject.

Twenty years ago, architectural discourse was sustained by philosophy, text-theory or structuralism in a splendid crescendo of complexity. One architect in particular was then at the edge of discourse: American architect Peter Eisenman. He was known rather for his highly complex texts and elaborated drawings and diagrams, than for his built architectural oeuvre, often not standing the test of time. Eisenman's theoretical reflections accompanied almost 50 years of development in philosophy and textual theory, from Ferdinand De Saussure to Roland Barthes, from Jacques Lacan to Michel Foucault and from Jacques Derrida to Gilles Deleuze. And if there was an architect who believed he understood Derrida, it was definitively Eisenman. Eisenman's aim was not only to understand these references in all their complexity, but through a concurrent work on text and project, to translate the philosophical preoccupations of his time – in the sense of a *Zeitgeist* – in built or unbuilt architectural projects. Yet, as he sometimes admitted, he never succeeded in doing so. As he said once: “What I am searching for is a way to turn deconstruction from a mode of analysis into one of synthesis. I ask myself, ‘How does one turn Jacques Derrida into a synthesizer?’”⁴

⁴ Eisenman, Peter, Derrida, Jacques, *Chora L Works*, New York: The Monacelly Press, 1997, S. 8.

⁵ Peter Eisenman, Interview with Andri Gerber, in: Gerber, Andri, *Theorie der Städtebaumetaphern. Peter Eisenman und die Stadt als Text*, Zürich: Chronos, 2012, S. 370.

Emblematic of this failure was his collaboration with Jacques Derrida on the *Villette* Project in Paris 1986 – they had been brought together by Bernard Tschumi – which resulted in the exchange of reciprocal accusations: Derrida would blame Eisenman for not having a clue of his philosophy and Eisenman would blame Derrida of having an extremely conservative view of architecture. Yet their fruitless collaboration had a very interesting by-product, the book *Chora L Works*, based on the discussions between the two of them, edited by Eisenman's collaborator Thomas Leeser and Eisenman's philosophical side-kick Jeff Kipnis. The book reflected radical literary experiments such as *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (1897) or the unachieved *Le Livre* by Stéphane Mallarmé: it starts in the middle, trying to avoid tradi-

tional forms of hierarchy and is pierced by two different sets of holes that make the book basically unreadable.

Eisenman's work was thus sustained by his interest in philosophy and literature and by his strive to translate these influences into architecture, yet even though in his theoretical work he seemed obsessed by the former, it was the latter that really sustained his design. Even though he would seldom mention postmodern authors of fiction such as William Gaddis, John Barth, William Gass or Thomas Pynchon, these played a far more larger role when it came to establish a method of design. By focussing in his discourse on Derrida rather than on Pynchon, he consciously established a fiction about his own work and about the references that influenced him.

In my opinion, he did so for two reasons: first, because at the time Derrida was “hipper” than Pynchon and second, because Eisenman – as I will try to show in what follows – translated, in an extremely concrete way, techniques of writing from literature into techniques of design, a fact he was not willing to admit. He preferred to leave a veil of uncertainty over his work, instead of overtly declaring his methods, what would have brought him too close to a modernist position. Asked by the author about how consciously he would overlook such a reference, he answered with his usual irony: “[...] am I consciously unconscious, am I conscious in being unconscious? Yes, of course I am [...]”⁵

Gaddis, Barth, Gass and Pynchon, among others, were authors who, with regard to the failure of modernist literature to depict reality – what ended in the labyrinthine complexity of John Dos Passos or James Joyce – decided to explicitly create fictional worlds, that the reader would recognize as such. The construction of new worlds instead of the description of existing ones, was also a consequence of the structuralist intuition, that the world was a construction and thus their interest in ,manifesting such a construction in overtly fictional worlds. The resulting literature was based on the crossing of boundaries between disciplines and genres

and as such, was labeled for example as “Fictiosophy” by William Gass or “Paraliterary” by Rosalind Krauss. In order to do so they would adopt a strongly self-referential tone, explicitly discussing the construction of their text, with an often ironical tone, particularly towards the author as god-like creator and they would develop specific literary methods, which they used in their books and novels. These can be mainly identified as the metaphorical confrontation of opposites, the Möbius-like structure of their narrative, apparently without beginning or end, and the parody of detective novels, where clues were disseminated in the text announcing a solution that would never take place. These methods or strategies can be easily retraced in most of the novels of the authors mentioned above. The books of Pynchon in particular were masterly built upon these, with the aim of frustrating and alienating his reader, who is constantly holding up some structures and some clues, yet to discover that these are only there to throw him off the scent. The reader would have to interact with these texts and he should give up the search for an ultimate sense, instead experience the reading as a kind of “pleasure of the text” – to paraphrase Roland Barthes.⁶

⁶ Barthes, Roland, *Le plaisir du texte*, Paris: Éditions du seuil, 1972

If we come back to Eisenman, it is striking to retrieve exactly the same methods in his projects, particularly in those of the 1980s. If we take a project like *Cannareggio West* in Venice from 1978, we have a grid that is deformed, a ground that is folded in a Möbius-like manner and the insertion of a house from a former project of Eisenman, that is scaled three times to become a museum, a house and a grave. The grid was taken from the unrealized project for an hospital in Venice by Le Corbusier (1964), it was extended and deformed. The same way as Pynchon would subvert the rationality of the detective novel, Eisenman would relativize the rationality of the grid. There is only one flaw in this operation: the original grid by Le Corbusier had an exception and was not regular, a fact Eisenman consciously ignored as he rectified it. He needed to have a totally homogeneous

grid to transform. In order to criticize the rationality of modernism *via* grid, Eisenman would not stop at making Le Corbusier’s grid more modern. This deformation of the grid corresponds to the deformation of the detective novel – both *topoi* of modernist architecture and literature.

The superposition of the self-referencing houses on a Möbius-like folded ground corresponds to the metaphorical entanglement of opposites and to create a seemingly endless space.

The goal of Eisenman was to realize what he called a “textual architecture” – yet referring to Barthes or Foucault and not to Pynchon or Gass. While he even gave seminars on Pynchon and he had a collaboration with William Gass who wrote a piece on his House VI, which resulted in a never published book, these seminal experiences find almost no mention in his immense written oeuvre. Yet in all the projects Eisenman developed in these years we can find similar methods adapted to architecture, which maintain the idea that the act of design can be compared to the act of writing and sustaining our hypothesis.

Unlike many architects of the time who remained in the realm of fiction, Eisenman here tried to *realize* a fiction, by translating methods and not forms from literature to architecture. The case of Eisenman is thus particularly interesting because while sustaining another fiction – the translation of Derrida or Deleuze into his architecture –, he simultaneously attempted to translate a literary fiction into the reality of his projects. The boundary between reality and fiction thus becomes blurred – to use one of his favourite terms. As is well known, Peter Eisenman did not build many projects and those realised often failed the test of time: House II in Vermont was saved by its last owner, who ironically added himself a garage in “Eisenman style”, the *Wexner Center* had to be closed for three years, ten years after completion, to be refitted, the lecture halls of the *Cincinnati school of architecture* were leaking after some

students played golf on the roof, his building for the *Nunotani* corporation was one of the most expensive building in terms of cost/m² that was ever built in Japan – and the building was subsequently demolished after the bankruptcy of the firm, and finally his masterpiece, the *Ciudad de Cultura* in Galicia that was never finished, remaining a ruin with the cladding of the enormous façade falling to pieces, supposedly because of a mistake of the contractor, who is still working on its replacement in a process similar to Tantalus' torment.

Peter Eisenman came close to realising *fictions* with his oeuvre, inspired by the *fictions* of literary authors such as Pynchon, Barth or Gass yet to the cost of failure and ruin, which he seemingly accepted as endemic to his approach. To remain in the realm of fiction, we could name Eisenman's approach a *Chimera*, originally in greek mythology a hybrid made of a goat, a lion and a snake, today the term stands for that which is impossible and which is unattainable. It was also the title of a book by John Barth, published in 1972, where the author starting from three conventional plots, transformed them and gave them a new content. Interesting is how in the three stories John Barth himself appears and how the heroes of the stories wish to rewrite their history, to a point where it is not anymore clear who is the author and if there can be one at all. In a similar manner, Eisenman do not only explicitly appears in his projects, these are designed in a way to reflect their making and their making of other spaces. His work represents a fantastic investigation on the borders and threshold of the discipline and on the possibility of an indifference between reality and fiction but also an attempt to overcome by metaphorical interpretation of architecture as text and architectural design as writing. The question remains, whether he was consciously unconscious or unconsciously conscious in doing so.

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