DECONSTRUCTION AND ARCHITECTURE: A BRIEF CRITIQUE

"Good or Evil: you cannot build your life apart from this distinction."
--Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

An architect friend of mine, a former classmate now teaching at an east coast architecture school, journeyed to Chicago to attend a two day Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) regional conference on deconstruction and architecture. The official title of the conference was "Looking for America, Part II: Decentering / Dislocation," and my friend was drawn to it by some academic work that she was pursuing with regard to the post-war suburb. The conference themes of decentering and dislocation seemed to her peculiarly apt with respect to suburban America; and although my first thought was that she might be disappointed at the content of the conference, which after all had to do with the relationship of literary theory to contemporary architecture, after the conference I saw clearly that her intuition had been correct. For however "radical" the epistemological assumptions of deconstructionist theory, it has a strong affinity with the habits of mind that have produced the post-World War II American suburb. Not only has deconstruction clearly replaced Marxism as the opiate of the intellectuals; it also seems to have become, perhaps unintentionally, the ultimate intellectual justification of the privatization of modern life, the philosophical counterpart to health clubs, self help magazines, and the glorification of processes that exemplify what Alexis de Tocqueville feared 150 years ago as the rise of "individualism," and what Philip Rieff characterized in 1966 as the "triumph of the therapeutic." I suspect this is not how deconstructionists tend to see themselves, as *de facto* defenders of a contemporary status quo. Indeed, it is as a species of "critical theory" that the deconstructionist attitude is held in high esteem by its practitioners and admirers.

I too hold critical thinking in high regard, and am well aware of both the "constructed" nature of social reality and the contingent nature of social constructs. So it is not that deconstruction purports to be critical theory that I find problematic; it is rather the intrinsic inability of deconstruction to be critical that is problematic. Philosophy, traditionally understood, is inherently critical, because it has as its admittedly elusive goal a true and comprehensive understanding of reality. And because the proper subject matter of philosophy is everything, it follows quite logically that philosophy has implications for architecture. But deconstruction is anti-philosophy; and purporting to say nothing about reality, it would seem to follow that it would have nothing to say about architecture. That it attempts to do so is only one of what its defenders would call paradoxes, and its detractors contradictions. But perhaps deconstruction is less properly regarded as a philosophical position that has something to say *about* architecture than a philosophical attitude that one brings to bear *upon* architecture. Even this understanding is not without its inherent difficulties.

Gilbert Chesterton, in his 1933 publication *St. Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox*, observed that

> Since the modern world began in the sixteenth century, nobody's system of philosophy has really corresponded to everybody's sense of reality; to what, if left to themselves, common men would call common sense. Each started with a paradox; a peculiar point of view demanding the sacrifice of what they would call a sane point of view. That is the one thing common to Hobbes and Hegel, to Kant and Bergson, to Berkeley and William James. A man had to believe something that no normal man would believe, if it were suddenly propounded to his simplicity: as that law is above right, or right is outside

> reason, or things are only as we think them, or everything is relative to a reality that is not there. The modern philosopher claims, like a sort of confidence man, that if once we will grant him this, the rest will be easy; he will straighten out the world, if once he is allowed to give this one twist to the mind. . . . Of [such] philosophies it is strictly true that their followers work in spite of them, or do not work at all. No skeptics work skeptically; no fatalists work fatalistically; all without exception work on the principle that it is possible to assume what it is not possible to believe. No materialist who thinks his mind was made up for him by mud and blood and heredity, has any hesitation in making up his mind. No skeptic who believes truth is subjective has any hesitation about treating it as objective.[1]

Deconstruction is the descendant of these modern philosophical traditions, notwithstanding its profession that its goals are different, that it seeks no new "systems," that it is a critique of all systems and a liberation from the oppression of inherited constructs. That it is itself a construct is truly inconvenient, especially if you begin with premises that deny the possibility of evaluating the validity of all constructs. As ACSA conference panel member and critic Catherine Ingraham has written, "the 'unthinkability' of a world without structure is what deconstruction tries to think about."[2] This, I think, exemplifies the problem that Chesterton identified: the impossibility of fashioning coherent philosophical arguments--ontological, ethical, or aesthetic--apart from the acknowledgement of first principles. Deconstruction may be likened to C.S. Lewis's arresting image of "taking one's eyes out to look at them." Chesterton notes that contemporary readers of Thomas Aquinas express

> surprise that he does not deal at all with what many now think the main metaphysical question; whether we can prove that the primary act of recognition of any reality is real. The answer is that St. Thomas recognized instantly, what so many modern skeptics have begun to suspect rather laboriously: that a man must either answer that question in the affirmative, or else never answer any question, never even exist intellectually, to answer or to ask. . . . [A] man can be a fundamental skeptic, but he cannot be anything else; certainly not even a defender of fundamental skepticism. . . . Most fundamental skeptics appear to [prosper] because they are not consistently skeptical, and not at all fundamental.[3]

It has been said that critics who from common sense epistemological assumptions undertake a critique of the deconstructionists are analogous to persons frantically waving their arms and shouting "The earth is round! The earth is round!" Relax, we are told; you're taking all this far too seriously. Truly it seems, deconstruction, like St. Paul, is all things to all people. An enthusiast once tried patiently to explain to me that deconstruction is simply a contemporary version of the Socratic admonition "Know thyself." Chicago architect Stuart Cohen has suggested that deconstruction is the literary / philosophical equivalent to Bernini's advice to novice architects to turn their drawings upside down when they become bogged down in the design process. Professor of English and conference panel member Susan Handelman enjoys the playful, punning character of deconstructionist literary critiques. Catherine Ingraham adopts a deconstructionist stance for purposes of launching a moral critique. New York architect and conference panelist Peter Eisenman appears to be maneuvering deconstruction to wealth, power, and fame. Chicago architect and educator (and conference convener) Stanley Tigerman has buckled the School of Architecture of the University of Illinois at Chicago in for a deconstructionist ride to--irony of ironies--intellectual respectability. And every architectural student knows that deconstruction is both the sexiest and most dangerous of explorations to

undertake in the studio setting.

Now, I would be the last person to denigrate critical thought, good advice, play, moral criticism, wealth, fame, power exercised justly for worthy ends, intellectual respectability, sex, and (for those who seek it) danger. But none of these topics is intrinsically related to deconstruction; and to mistakenly assume they are so related might lead one to overlook the primary, ironic, and singularly objectionable function of deconstructionist theory: to normalize the absence of all normative criteria. Someday, someone with more patience and scholarly discipline than I should and will undertake a thorough characterization of deconstruction and its effects. Until then however, consider what follows the outline of a critique: part ontological, part moral, and part sociological, focusing primarily upon the implications and consequences of deconstructionist thought for architecture.

The Ontology of Deconstruction

A number of theorists interested in the implications of deconstruction for architecture--Eisenman, Tigerman, Ingraham--have gone to great pains to caution against what Ingraham calls the error of

> misconstruing. . .the term "deconstruction" to mean the reversal of construction--which is a much too literal reading. Architecture that is informed by deconstruction produces neither buildings that are falling down, nor a scene of destruction.[4]

An impartial observer, on the basis of empirical observation of selected deconstructionist works (say, Eisenman's House VI [FIGURE 1] as illustrated in the PBS television documentary "Pride of Place") might wish to take issue with Ingraham's assertion; as might someone who has seen any of the famous Best Products "crumbling facades" [FIGURE 2] done by James Wines and his colleagues at Sculpture in the Environment (SITE), who have defended their work not in explicitly deconstructionist terms, but in the terms of philosophical skepticism, irony, and critical method so dear to the deconstructionists. One might also note the irony of deconstructionist theorists attempting to articulate a canonical understanding of the meaning of deconstruction. Deconstructionists, apparently, are allowed to "mis-read" for fun and profit as they please, but they would bind the rest of us to the more or less correct meaning of their intellectual enterprise.

But let us take Ingraham's caveat at face value. I'm willing, and for some time have contented myself with understanding "deconstructionist architecture" as architecture done by architects who say that they have been influenced by deconstructionist literary theory. In the absence of either a "deconstructionist architecture" identifiable by visual or spatial criteria, or a plausible definition of any possible relationship between architecture and deconstruction, this has seemed like the ecumenical thing to do. But at the aforementioned ACSA conference, Eisenman gave a cogent explanation of architecture informed by a deconstructionist attitude.

After noting the problems inherent in the application of the word "deconstruction" to architectural theory, and proposing for pragmatic reasons to shelve this term in favor of the term "post-structuralism," Eisenman went on to speak of a post-structuralist attitude toward architecture that, unlike any previous efforts at architectural theorizing, has as its goal a radical critique of what he called, marvelously, "the metaphysic of architecture."

What is the metaphysic of architecture? According to Eisenman, it is the common set of expectations that have traditionally been and continue to be regarded as the constituent concerns of architecture, including shelter, structure, use, durability, order, beauty, and meaning. As Eisenman described it, a post-structuralist architectural sensibility would seek a dislocation or displacement of the metaphysic of architecture, an architecture that has freed itself from the "repressions" inherent in the metaphysic of architecture. Now, to some of us (the author and readers), both the possibility and desirability of such an "architecture" may seem at first glance problematic; but this should not detract from our appreciation of Eisenman's articulation of the implications for architecture of a post-structuralist attitude.

An ontological critique of post-structuralism might begin therefore with a closer examination of the idea of "repression." I call this an ontological critique because I wish to defend the reality of a phenomenon called "architecture." Architecture is distinguishable from other phenomena by the several characteristic features identified above under the rubric "metaphysic of architecture." The post-structuralist complaint is that acceptance of the metaphysic of architecture (hereafter to be referred to as the MOA) arbitrarily and artificially limits the possibilities of what architecture can be. Never mind the impressive variety of forms created by four thousand years of architecture undertaken from within the MOA. The post-structuralists want more, and are impatient with those who argue that the MOA, given half a chance and a dozen roses, seems likely to produce more.

This post-structuralist understanding of repression is odd. It apparently requires the rejection of established standards of excellence of a centuries old discipline, architecture, in the name of greater freedom to be employed in the service of. . .what? Innovation? Self expression? It is one thing to want to discover and expand the possibilities inherent within a discipline; or to recognize possible relationships between two or more disciplines; or to become aware of the mental borders within which one's own thoughts occur. All of these situations bespeak opportunities to increase one's freedom of thought and action, to overcome repression in a way that any ordinary thinking person would regard as salutary. But the unanswered and too often unasked question is: What is this freedom for? And understated, if not unrecognized, is the fact that there are some borders that are the sine qua non of the discipline in question; break the boundaries and you have destroyed the discipline. The person who has stepped outside the MOA not only ceases to *do* architecture; she is no longer *free* to do architecture.

An example may make this point clearer. The structure of the game of baseball allows a certain degree of innovation, which typically occurs when some student of the game, thinking about ways to help his or her team win, recognizes possibilities inherent in the game of baseball of

which no one else has heretofore thought. Consider the "double switch," a now common practice the origin of which is generally credited to Gene Mauch [FIGURE 3]. The double switch has become widespread following the advent of the relief pitcher as a specialist in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is typically employed late in a game when a manager wants to change pitchers, but the pitcher is due at bat in the next inning (we are talking here of pre-designated hitter baseball; which is to say, Baseball). Instead of simply replacing one pitcher for another, the manager makes a double switch: he brings in a new fielder with the new pitcher, puts the fielder in the pitcher's spot in the batting order, and puts the new pitcher in the batting spot of the replaced fielder. This makes it possible both to get a better hitter up to bat sooner and to keep the new pitcher in the game a little longer because the manager won't have to pinch hit for him in the next inning.

This was an innovation in the 1960s, and it made a lot of sense; now everyone in baseball does it. Perhaps in the future its use will be refined and improved; already it is occasionally employed even when pitchers aren't involved in the substitutions. No doubt other innovations will occur in other aspects of the game. When they do, it is much to be hoped that the innovations will develop from a logic *internal* to the game; and the history and possibility of such developments are part of what make baseball, or any complex human activity, enjoyable. The rules and basic structure of baseball, however, far from being experienced as "oppressive," are the condition of our enjoyment of the game. There is ample room in baseball for idiosyncrasy and personal freedom within the constraints and purposes of the game, but both fans and players are generally happy that pitchers don't use an unusual pitch to "express themselves" if they can't throw it for strikes, and that outfielders don't intentionally throw the ball into the stands instead of to the correct base as an artistic expression of "the chaos of the age."

If I understand the post-structuralist attitude, a post-structuralist approach to the game of baseball might seek a baseball played outside the metaphysic of baseball (MOB). Imagine then a tie game at Chicago's Wrigley Field in the top of the ninth. The Cubs pitcher, due up second in the bottom of the ninth, walks the leadoff hitter. The manager comes to the mound, apparently to make a double switch. Instead, he pulls out a pistol, shoots the runner on first, lobs a hand grenade into the opposing dugout, and drags the opposing team's third base coach into the Cubs dugout as a hostage. He later issues a statement to the press explaining his behavior as an attempt to overcome the oppressive character of the metaphysic of baseball, and appears briefly before a television camera waving his arms wildly and yelling "Bonjour Jacques!"

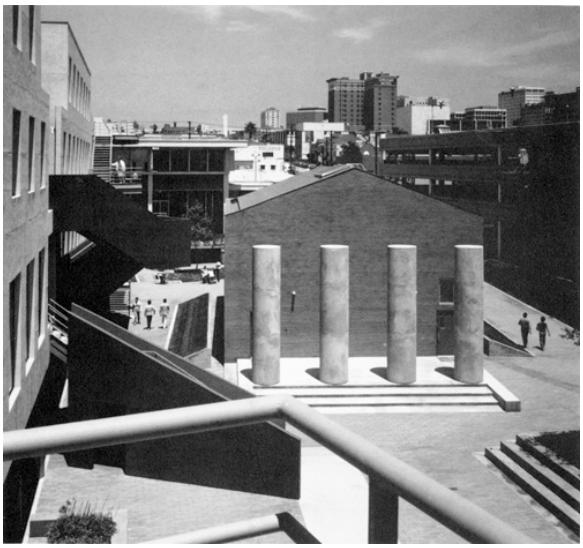
Perhaps post-structuralists with a misanthropic disposition will relish this suggestion that their philosophic attitude is the moral equivalent of terrorism. But there are gentle post-structuralists, whose hearts beat with human kindness; and they might regard as a better example of post-

structuralist baseball an event that actually occurred in a 1987 minor league game. Catcher Dave Bresnahan, in an apparent attempt to pick a runner off third base, threw wildly; the runner trotted toward home, only to find Bresnahan waiting for him with the ball, at which time he was tagged out. Bresnahan had thrown a potato in the direction of third base, holding on to the ball so he could tag out the incoming runner. He informed the umpire that he had studied the rule book carefully and had discovered no prohibition against throwing potatoes. The umpire was unimpressed, the runner was ruled safe, and Bresnahan was summarily ejected from the game. Later, he was fined and released. Asked about his plans, Bresnahan replied that he intended to run for governor of Idaho.

This latter story is likely to have greater appeal to most of us than the former because it is rather funny (and one wishes Mr. Bresnahan's employers had had a better sense of humor). And many post-structuralists claim their critics misunderstand the essentially playful and comic character of their work. Post-structuralism properly considered is a sort of royal game, rather than an attitude meant for consistent and universal application.

This defense has a certain merit when made with respect to comedy and comedians. Comedy is inherently critical of taken for granted assumptions, and comics and satirists from Rabelais to Swift to Chaplin to Bill Murray are wonderfully anarchic *in their roles as comics*. But even if everything is at least potentially fodder for or subject to their comic perspective, there are limits to the influence of that perspective upon the reality that they lampoon: the limits inherent in what one might call, for lack of a better term, the metaphysic of humor (MOH). Such limits permit jokes about architecture; it is less clear whether and to what extent it would permit architecture *as* a joke. In any event, to my knowledge post-structuralism does not purport to be a synonym for comedy. It is promoted by its advocates as a critical philosophical attitude, and thereby claims, implicitly if not explicitly, all of reality (insofar as all of reality is regarded as a construct) to be subject to its critical viewpoint.

The Ethics of Deconstruction



A second and more serious critique of post-structuralism is moral, and has two aspects. The first of these might ask just how far the post-structuralists are willing to allow the post-structuralist attitude to be extended? By "mis-reading" literary texts, post-structuralist critics perpetrate a limited injustice, perhaps inflicting pain only upon authors, and upon readers of post-structuralist criticism. Post-structuralist architects wish to apply this attitude to architecture, leading, as we have seen, to a dislocation from the MOA. So how are Eisenman, Tigerman, and, say, fellow architect and conference panelist Frank Gehry going to react to their first encounter with a post-structuralist general contractor, whose objective is to overcome the repressions inherent in the metaphysic of contracting (MOC), and who undertakes the construction of their designs by intentionally mis-reading the contract documents [FIGURES 4-5]---so as to make, say, Gehry's

Loyola Law School to look like Jefferson's University of Virginia Rotunda? And how might this contractor respond to a post-structuralist client who, feeling oppressed by the limitations inherent in the metaphysic of economics (MOE), tries to pay his fee in, say, Monopoly money, or perhaps eucalyptus leaves? And suppose that the post-structuralist surgeon called upon to treat the parties injured in the predictable violence subsequent to this bizarre series of exchanges could no longer tolerate enslavement to the metaphysic of medicine (MOM); rather than continue the oppressive patterns of medical practice expected of her, might she be encouraged to exercise her artistic impulses and at her whim subtract--or even add--a limb or two during her next surgical performance?

Theoretically, could not such a "critical approach" extend from literature, philosophy, and architecture to disciplines ranging from acting and archaeology to zoology and zymurgy? Post-structuralists would seem to have no moral or intellectual grounds for objecting to any such extensions. Indeed, to resist them could only be understood as a form of "repression," perhaps the one moral evil the post-structuralist universe of discourse will acknowledge.

The set of expectations embodied in the MOA, MOB, MOC, MOE, MOH, and MOM are only a fraction of that larger body of mutual expectations that constitute social life and are the very substance of "morality." Moreover, although architecture, baseball, contracting, economics, humor, and medicine are undeniably social constructs, they assuredly cannot be "deconstructed" without causing a great deal of mischief, and without encountering understandable and justified resistance.

The word "justified" is related to the word justice; and the second aspect of the moral critique of post-structuralism concerns the idea of legitimacy implicit in the idea of justice in particular, and virtue in general. As noted earlier, many post-structuralist critics undertake their work precisely as a moral critique, and claim affinities with (and often themselves are) feminist and / or minority scholars who are exploring and reexamining histories that have ignored or denied or oppressed women and minorities. Intended as a critique of power and its manifestations, this attitude is evident in much of the work of Catherine Ingraham that has appeared in *Inland Architect*.

An essential aspect of Ingraham's critical approach is the rejection of the authority of authors (both literal and metaphorical) made possible by the "mis-reading" of "texts." Texts are to be mis-read because texts enshrine power interests. The most insidious of these are to be found in traditional western metaphysics, "foundationalism," which in the post-structuralist reading stands accused of being an enormous corporate manifestation of the will to power, guilty above all of domination and repression of the Other. Post-structuralism is in this view a strategy of empowerment: the reader who mis-reads the text in effect becomes the author, no longer subject to the original author's "strategy of domination."

Let us accept the implicit assumption (I do) that political freedom and the diffusion of political power are desirable. Even so, as a moral critique of any given situation, the post- structuralist approach seems problematic for several reasons. While it certainly is helpful to be conscious of

the complexities of power relationships, it seems extraordinarily myopic to interpret all of life in terms of power. Foundationalism is suspect because it allegedly defines the Other for purposes of domination; but post-structuralist mis-reading is celebrated even as it *defines away* the Other (whether it be the Author, or even "the world," where world is understood to connote a reality that exists independently of the individual perceiving it) for purposes of empowerment. Defining away the Other is itself problematic, but even more problematic morally is the fact that this is done as an expression of the will to power---done, that is, for the same reason for which foundationalism is judged morally deficient.

It is necessary here to make two points. The first is a defense of the category of the Other. The irrepressibly occidental Woody Allen once remarked, "I and the universe are two." The privilege and the wound of individuality is the wisdom of the Judaeo-Christian west, which holds that the world is indeed inhabited by others; and that the Other is interesting largely because of its otherness--that certain hard, inconvenient facticity that won't go away, and is perhaps the Other's greatest charm.

Now, power is a fact of life; and can be pursued for both good and bad reasons. Most people are probably content to hold sufficient power to protect themselves from being victims. With sufficient imagination, they may even surmise that the Other enjoys domination no more than they. But the Other is also of interest for reasons having nothing to do with trying to dominate it. Depending upon what particular manifestation of the Other you are talking about, you can properly take it for a walk, or wear it around your neck, or contemplate it, or hang it over your fireplace, or make love to it, or throw it a slider in on the fists, or burp it and change its diapers; you can argue with it, eat it, fly it, or paint it; write it or read it, jump on it or cuddle it, build it or celebrate it next year in Jerusalem; you may have to change its oil every 3000 miles; if it is Totally Other you may have a justifiable inclination to worship it; and that's just for openers. So it is at least arguable that many people have better things to do with their time than to spend too much of it devising strategies of domination.

Ah, reply the post-structuralists: spoken by someone who has never known the burden of domination. This brings us to the second point, which concerns the idea of legitimate authority. The post-structuralist attitude presumes that all authority is inherently oppressive. This is not true. Some authority may be oppressive---say, law enforcement officers permitting or participating in the beating of innocent citizens. Some authority may be legitimate---say, law enforcement officers arresting persons attempting to assault innocent citizens. The difference between legitimate authority and oppressive power is that the former is governed by the idea of Right, the idea of Justice. It was, wrote Tocqueville

> the idea of right which enabled men to define anarchy and tyranny; and which taught them to be independent without arrogance, and to obey without servility.... If...you do not succeed in connecting the notion of right with that of private interest, which is the only immutable point in the human heart, what means will you have of governing the world except by fear?[5]

But the notion of Right is itself a construct, say the post-structuralists, a constituting element of the strategy of domination that is the essence of foundationalism. Is it necessary to belabor the point that the post-structuralist moral condemnation of foundationalism depends absolutely upon an idea of Right? There have indeed always been persons whose overriding concern has been to devise strategies of domination. They are frequently successful. They will probably always

be with us. They will not be thwarted from their evil purposes by their victims trying to wish them away. They can only be thwarted by power allied with virtue---that is, by legitimate authority.

Talk of virtue and the idea of Right begin to suggest ideas of natural law, probably regarded by most post-structuralists as the foundational Beast par excellence; and in any case regarded by many as impossible in a pluralistic society such as ours. But it is worth noting that natural law theory originated among the Greeks in response to a social situation not unlike our own, i.e. one characterized by pluralism, by a competition of world views. Natural law theory was, in part, the philosophical effort to understand common elements of human behavior, with an intent toward identifying and articulating general standards of moral and political behavior conducive to human well being. As a philosophical theory it has a long history, but has been out of favor since the advent of the Enlightenment and its faith in Progress. The experience of the Holocaust, however, and the post-war Nuremberg Tribunal's condemnation of Nazi atrocities as "crimes against humanity," have raised anew the question of whether there is a natural (moral) law that is more than a "mere" construct, in which legally constituted governments and governmental agents participate, to which they are accountable, and from which they derive their legitimacy.

A post-Holocaust reconsideration and articulation of natural law would be an exciting, if difficult, intellectual endeavor. But however problematic it may be, it is a far more likely source of a serious and intellectually coherent moral critique of both contemporary architecture and contemporary social arrangements than is post-structuralism. As my friend recognized after attending the aforementioned ACSA conference, in spite of any good intentions on the part of post-structuralists, the logic inherent in post-structuralism not only facilitates our culture's abandonment of public life and descent into narcissism; it is also incapable of coherently disputing the contention that power is ultimately justified by the possession of the biggest sticks.

The Metaphysic of Alienation

Finally, there are certain sociological observations to be made about the phenomenon of alienation and its relationship to post-structuralism. The issue of alienation, and its sub-theme of resentment, was never far from the surface at the ACSA conference; but was addressed directly only by Prof. Susan Handelman (an author and literary critic identified in the program as a spokeswoman for a Jewish theological perspective on post-structuralism, paired with professor of religion Mark C. Taylor as a purported spokesman for a Christian perspective) in her discussion of ethics, post-structuralism, and Jewish identity in the writings of twentieth century Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.

Whether "Jewish identity" is to be defined more by participation in a community centered to a greater or lesser degree around reverence for and observance of Torah, or more in terms of membership in a community defined by the suffering it has endured as a persecuted and alienated minority, is a question intensely debated within the Jewish community; and it is a question certainly not properly answered by gentiles, including this one. But Handelman seemed to be defending an idea of Jewish identity centered in the distinctiveness of Jewish religion, against the notion that Jewish identity is fundamentally a function of otherness as defined by non-Jewish majority populations.

Handelman's appeared to be a minority voice however, among both the panel at large and the panel's several Jewish members. There was a general sense of disaffection among the panelists, perhaps best expressed by the complaint of one that, far from feeling energized and elated at being in the intellectual avant garde (a ranking figure in the community of the alienated, as it were), he felt isolated and abused for his post-structuralist opinions. Indeed, so apparently alienated from each other were the panelists that a good portion of the morning session of the first day of the conference was spent on panel members explaining their jokes to one another.

To the extent that post-structuralism is embraced by persons who understand themselves to be somehow "marginal," and is understood by its advocates as a tool of empowerment, it can likewise be understood as a species of protest against alienation. But the significance of alienation, both with respect to post-structuralists and modern societies in particular, and the human condition in general, seems a bit more complex than is typically acknowledged in most species of contemporary critical thought. At least four points deserve consideration.

The first is that a racially, ethnically, and religiously pluralistic society such as America can almost be defined as one in which everyone will, at some time or place, feel alienated. This is true even if all the various groups in such a society possess full political enfranchisement. That this latter achievement has not yet been fully realized makes political enfranchisement no less desirable a goal. But if this participatory diversity is indeed a goal to be pursued, then complaints about alienation need to be balanced both by an articulation of the specific goods of which the alienated think themselves deprived, and by an acknowledgement of the various goods that the kind of pluralism described above makes possible. Pre-modern monolithic societies ("cohesive communities") appear to have produced fewer alienated individuals than modern pluralistic ones, but at perhaps too great a cost in personal freedom; and twentieth century Marxist and fascist attempts to engineer monolithic societies for the purpose of eradicating alienation have instead only managed to maximize alienation while virtually eradicating personal freedom. The willingness therefore to accept a certain degree, or at least the possibility, of alienation is perhaps a non-negotiable element of any knowing effort to promote a free and pluralistic society.

A second point is that in spite of the pains typically associated with the experience of alienation, there are psychological satisfactions that frequently attend it. I don't want to overemphasize or romanticize this; but to stand apart, to be "marginal," makes possible a clarity of vision unavailable to those who are "at the center." This clarity of vision is neither in itself a guarantee of the moral superiority of being alienated, nor a necessarily adequate compensation for alienation's associated pains. But neither the intellectual satisfaction derived from such distancing, nor the possible moral and intellectual validity of the alienated point of view, should be dismissed as either unreal or unimportant.

Some people choose to stand apart precisely from a commitment to clarity of vision, from a desire to understand; and alienation may be the personal price they pay. But one has the suspicion that some post-structuralist architects take a far too active enjoyment in their alleged alienation to protest it as much as they do. Their alienation gets them commissions, gives them something to write about, attains for them wealth and notoriety, gets them on the cover of architectural magazines. They run schools and hold honorary degrees, organize and participate in foundation sponsored conferences, are interviewed on radio and television, and are widely (even justly) regarded as experts in their field. They are people of power in the architectural

community, and their rhetoric of alienation has a slightly hollow ring. This is not to say that they are necessarily happy; it is only to say that to persons even mildly disposed to entertain a hermeneutic of suspicion, post-structuralists' talk of madness, their perspective beyond good and evil, their rhetoric of marginalia, *the difficulty of their lives*, sounds suspect.

Whether contemporary American society should be understood fundamentally in terms of a covenant relationship articulated in our nation's founding documents (a theme succinctly summarized as "E Pluribus Unum"), or in terms of a pervasive sense of alienation from each other and our institutions, is a question that was asked from the floor (but not answered by the panelists) at the ACSA conference---the only question, it turned out, directly related to the conference theme "Looking for America." It raises a third point with respect to the phenomenon of alienation: the significance of the human desire for membership and belonging.

Alienation may be desired by some for its own sake. But it may also be undertaken and endured as a temporary vocation ultimately in service to the desire to belong. Returning, for example, to Jewish and Christian perspectives, both scripture and tradition speak often of the divine imperative that Israel and the Church, respectively, be "different" from other communities. In the religious understanding, however, this difference is not an end in itself. Its intent is instead redemptive and anticipatory: to announce and bear witness to the ultimate and inclusive purposes of God. The experience of belonging to Israel or to the Church therefore may mean alienation now, but it foreshadows an ultimate belonging---the reconciliation between God and a broken creation.

This leads directly to my final point with respect to the idea of alienation: that it is not a particularly recent discovery. Both Judaism and Christianity have long recognized a kind of ontological alienation as a universal human condition: an instinctive self centeredness that is a consequence of the goodness of human freedom gone wrong, the theological name for which is sin. Estrangement from one another and from God is seen as a consequence of the Fall, an event that whether or not it was "historical" describes our perennial human condition. Faithful Jews and Christians differ from post-structuralists in believing that deliverance from this condition of alienation---through Torah, through Christ---is possible; but this deliverance is not yet complete, and will not be until the Messiah comes, or comes again as the case may be. It is important to make these perhaps obvious points to indicate that whatever differences exist between western foundationalism (of which Judaeo-Christian theological categories are constituent elements) and post-structuralism, the reality of alienation is something that they hold in common. As panelist Mark Taylor said to me during one of the breaks, "I believe in Crucifixion; no Resurrection."

The possibility of redemption, that one can be reconciled both to God and the human community, is a conviction embodied in life centered in Torah or in Christ, and symbolized (not coincidentally) in urban imagery: Jerusalem and the City of God. In this perspective the desire for beauty, for order, for making a physical environment that anticipates Home, is not a nostalgic act. It is a hopeful act, a proto-sacramental act, a finite anticipation and manifestation of the fullness of redemption that is to come. Gilbert Chesterton made a claim for Christianity that applies as well to Judaism: it allows one to be at home in the world without ever once feeling complacent about it. The architectural consequences of the post-structuralist attitude toward our world are just the opposite: one can never be at home in the world, so it makes no sense to try and make it homelike.

Stanley Tigerman, as convener of the ACSA conference, is to be commended for his intuition that theology and philosophy have significant implications for architecture and urban design.[6] Theology and philosophy have been in the business of asking questions for a long time. Post-structuralists on the other hand imagine what they do to be something relentlessly new; and with respect to architecture it probably is. Above all post-structuralism fancies itself as an attitude originating from peculiarly modern insights. The ghosts of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche---representing the allegedly primal claims of Economics, Sex, and Power---hung heavy over the conference;[7] as did another, Dostoevsky's, whose name was curiously absent from the proceedings but whose observation that "If God is dead, everything is permitted. . ." was the unspoken theme. The question that was *not* asked was Philip Rieff's truly post-modern query: not whether civilized men and women can believe, but whether unbelieving men and women can be civilized?

In a certain sense the post-structuralists are surely right: we all do inhabit constructs, myths, fairy tales. The most interesting questions, however, are the ones that the post-structuralists neither can nor will ask: Are these fairy tales true or false? Do they correspond to a greater or lesser degree to the way the world is? Are they conducive to or destructive of human well being? Do they enlarge and evoke or flatten and deny the ambiguities and mysteries of life?

Architect Frank Gehry, at the very end of the last morning session of the conference, provoked instant protests from his fellow panelists when he speculated aloud that post-structuralist theory, rather than being a fruitful new direction for architecture, might in fact prove to be the end of architecture. Gehry, by all appearances uncomfortable with the theoretical discussion taking place, was introduced as a "proto-deconstructionist," and showed many of his own buildings and projects with relatively little comment. His work is both skillful and provocative, appealing precisely to the extent that it operates within rather than outside the metaphysic of architecture, playing subtle and alarming variations on the MOA's several themes. Watching his presentation, I felt for him and his work some of the same high regard that I have for Robert Venturi at his best.

Both Gehry and Venturi are humane and talented designers who take contemporary materials and building techniques, and the contemporary suburban landscape, as givens. They do something special with the ordinary, and for this they deserve the popular and professional accolades they have received. But architecture is, as Catherine Ingraham points out, inevitably about power; it consolidates power, it embodies power, it symbolizes power. Whether it should also symbolize legitimate authority, and to what extent it now can, is a question too few architects seem willing to ask. You cannot build your life apart from the distinction between good and evil, says Solzhenitsyn. Can we *build* apart from that distinction? If so, for how long? And to what end? "What you know," says Gehry, "you question." The last word on post-structuralism is that it doesn't question enough.

The original version of this essay appeared in the January 1988 issue of Inland Architect *as a review of an October 1987 Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) sponsored conference of architects and academics, who met in Chicago to discuss the topic "Looking for America, Part II: Decentering / Dislocation."*

NOTES

1. Gilbert Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox*, (New York: Doubleday, 1956) pages 145-146 and 185.

2. Catherine Ingraham, “Slow Dancing,” *Inland Architect*, September 1987, page 44.

3. Chesterton, *op. cit.*, pages 147-148.

4. Ingraham, *op. cit.*, page 44.

5. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), Volume I, chapter 14, pages 244-246.

6. One really doesn’t know what to make of Stanley Tigerman’s fascination for post-structuralism. In his article on Chicago architect Daniel Burnham in the November 1987 issue of *Inland Architect*, Tigerman pointedly criticizes Burnham and his turn of the century contemporaries for being “insecure in the face of the ‘eastern establishment’ values based upon European traditions”--as if post-structuralism were not a French theory being filtered west to Chicago via New Haven and New York.

7. It does however give one pause to ponder the implications of the spiritual discipline represented by the old Church vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. These may or may not have been (or still be) virtues necessary to sanctified life; but at the very least they represent an ancient awareness of the strength of human drives for money, sex, and power.