Subverting The 'Straight and Narrow':
The Potential of Philosophical Enquiry within the Architectural Endeavor

MICHAEL K. JENSON
University of Colorado at Boulder

Fig. 1. The Bingham Mine, located in Colorado. Photo by Associate Professor Alan Berger, Harvard University

Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definitive answers to its questions, since no definitive answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination, and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation; but above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good.

— Bertrand Russell,
The Problems of Philosophy[1]

In the preface of his text, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt*, Mark Wigley recounts the story of Bernard Tschumi's 1985 invitation to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida to collaborate on the design of a piece of Parc de la Villette in Paris. Though the overall project had a design methodology that was already largely determined, the architect felt that a certain aspect was missing. An 'absence' was apparent that was felt could be exploited by the philosopher, another kind of discourse could be developed, if you will, within the conceptual space/structure of the Project. More than mere criticism was developed from the texts produced within this context. The articulation emerged of an ''uneasy relationship'' between a rather specific form of thought and a particular type of spatial construct which cultivated an extended negotiation that opened up several new fronts of argument within architectural theory and philosophy alike.[2]

This event spawned a vigorous discourse that eventually lead to a myriad of conferences, symposia, books, articles, interviews, grants, academic appointments, documenting the development of the critical discourse of deconstruction within the realm of architecture.[3] From this ''new'' theoretical dialogue, the popular architectural media became filled with projects incorporating 'flying planes' and 'shard' glass wall systems designed by architects that probably never had direct contact or an understanding of the actual premise of the argument, let alone read any of its seminal texts. In many instances and rather ironically, in the hands of architects, this anti-institutional cryptic discourse had become the same type of static institution that it was attempting to critically break down.

However, the intention of this paper is not to critique the validity of the deconstruction movement within architecture, but to denote the event that Wigley has asserted was the fertile grounds to where the discourse

emerged: the collaboration between architecture and philosophy. This is by no means a new phenomenon. For instance, several decades ago, Michel Foucault was invited to collaborate with architects on the speculation of how power and architecture were related. There is a long history of the discipline of architecture's interest in philosophy of which deconstruction is but one of its latest manifestations. Consequently, with the rather convoluted and enigmatic rhetoric produced under the banner of deconstruction, the potential of the relationship between these disciplines has become mystified. In this context, the central purpose of philosophy seems to have been lost in the self-referential language used by many deconstructionist architectural theorists.

The point here then, is the exploration of a relationship that would seem to contain a great potential for illuminating many facets of the prevailing architectural discourse as well as allowing a greater clarity of thought to emerge within the inherent complexities of its design methodologies. The strategy will be to undertake this exploration within the spirit of philosophy, a spirit that fundamentally seeks to question its subject matter in an attempt to move past surface readings and preconceptions. In short, this examination seeks to highlight the potential that philosophical enquiry could have as an informative tool within the architectural design and critical discourse. And for this to be done in this spirit of philosophical discourse, one must undertake an investigation with as little preset agenda as possible and to formulate a disinterested position towards ones subject. The phrase ''disinterested'' in this context refers to a state of objectiveness towards the subject to be examined. To make the potential relationship between architecture and philosophy apparent, the implications of two questions must be examined carefully. The first is the question: *What is philosophy?* The second being*: How can philosophic modes of enquiry influence the architectural endeavor?*

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

In attempting to ask and then answer the question: *What is philosophy*? Certain common preconceptions must be overcome. To many outside of the discipline (especially those who consider themselves to be persons of pragmatic or scientific agendas), the philosophical mode of enquiry is often considered to be constituted of naïve or trivial attempts to define and discuss endlessly, questions that are impossible to answer because they are inherently outside the capability of the human mind to do so. As Bertrand Russell states in *The Problems of Philosophy*, this misconception stems not only from a misunderstanding of the goals of life in

general, but also in the actual ends that philosophy seeks to achieve. The central propagators of these misinterpretations are individuals who are mistakenly described as being ''practical'' or ''pragmatic.'' Such persons often only attempt to address material needs and perceive those of the mental or spiritual as somehow superfluous to the true aim of life, *survival.* This aspect, is of course, only conceived of in the material sense.[4]

To counter this prevailing notion, Russell contends that even if all of our material needs were met, all disease, poverty, and injustice in the world was solved, there would still be large amount of work necessary to create, what he terms to be a *valuable* society. The philosopher insists that the value of the philosophical discourse resides within the welfare of the mind and it is only those who are not focused singularly on the welfare of the body who can perceive its inherent usefulness. By this, philosophy aims at knowledge through the critical examination of our intrinsic beliefs, prejudices, and convictions. Given the nearness of such examinations to our fundamental state of existence, definitive answers are exceedingly difficult to attain. Hence, the perception that the utility of philosophy is somehow questionable within the pragmatic situations of the world of the everyday emerges because quantifiable answers are never given.[5]

This is not the case for the truths sought by the sciences. When asked for the definitive answers to the imperative questions that have been ascertained within the fields of knowledge such as physics, mathematics, or history, its practitioners will be able to produce substantial bodies of evidence that very systematically set out questions and provide answers to them in the form of reams of quantitatively verifiable data collected through disciplinarily accepted modes of research. These proofs are usually presented in a rather esoteric language and system of codes that often can only be understood by members of each discipline. However, there are demonstrable results confirming the answers to the questions asked. Philosophical enquiry can provide no such results and appears to the outsider as wrought with uncertainty and any ability to produce evidence that definitively answers the questions posed.

Ironically, it is this attribute of uncertainty that is the philosophical endeavors greatest strength. For it is impossible to conclude that the ''certainty'' of the sciences could or should ever be reached, given that the value of philosophy is not its systematic production of answers to its central questions. One only has to look at the arguments and systems that arise within the discourse of metaphysics to see that such a body of

knowledge proven with scientific certitude is an impossibility. Nevertheless, it can also be observed that the individual who goes through life avoiding the acknowledgement of philosophical uncertainties and instead only takes their bias for truths are imprisoned by the habits of the everyday. The national customs, media frenzies, common sense prejudices, and intuitive childhood convictions formulate a belief system that can be neither systematic nor reasonable. The world, to such an individual becomes definite as well as finite and all encounters with new objects, ideas, or possibilities, are generally met with suspicion and derision. Any amount of serious contemplation on even the most rudimentary of everyday things quickly leads the thoughtful and unprejudiced person to uncover a myriad of problems that cannot be answered completely or with complete certainty.

The serious contemplation of these types of problems can lead quickly to the suggestion of many possibilities that might be answers, thereby enlarging the scope of our thoughts and severing the tethers binding one to the tyranny of custom. It allows one to quit reacting to events and circumstances in a haphazard method and begin to draw conclusions and make connections, however incomplete, in relation to a coherent and reasonable system of values and beliefs. Hence, while philosophy may greatly diminish our perception of certainty in regards to what is encountered in our lives, it also removes our reliance on poorly informed or unqualified thoughts. It also cultivates a sense of *wonder*[6] or as Heidegger[7] terms it, a sense of astonishment, by taking the common and displaying it in an uncommon light. It is the constant ability to see ones surroundings constantly anew that is the mark of a great philosophical mind.

The philosophic endeavor also allows another trait to emerge, the capacity to enlarge our interests and agendas to align with those of the outside world. It provides an avenue for one to cease viewing the world solely as a means to an end in regards to self-interest or in other words, purely as a vehicle for the expression of self-interests. For with philosophic contemplation, one starts from the point of view of the *not-self* and only then considers the appropriate role of the self. As Russell so eloquently describes it, ''In contemplation, on the contrary, we start from the not-self, and through its greatness the boundaries of Self are enlarged; through the infinity of the universe the mind which contemplates it achieves some share in infinity.''[8]

So by this, one can gather that philosophy is a fluid subject that is to be encountered and studied not in search of definitive answers to its underlying questions,

but rather for the understanding that posing the questions themselves can bring about. For it is these mental objects that when contemplated with a seriousness and rigor of thought, can expand our ability to envision the possible, ameliorate our imagination, and overcome a purely reactive state towards the structure of our surrounding culture. It allows us to formulate a value system in a rigorous and disciplined manner in an effort to explore how our interests might be seamlessly intertwined with other elements and agendas discovered within the world as a whole. It allows the mind to understand that it is part of a larger order and by letting go of its narrow agendas and dogmatic conceptions it can assert itself within the surrounding world in a positive manner.

Heidegger likens the contemplative state of the philosophic endeavor to the choosing or definition of a path or perspective. It is not the sole path that can be chosen, but a path that is one of many possible paths, but none-the-less one that allows us to search out and contemplate transcendental truths. It is a path where we can achieve a correspondence, and continually receive responses to our questions when we remain in the conversation that the philosophic tradition delivers to us. This correspondence, this questioning that poses unanswerable questions, brings forth the character of astonishment that is the instigator of all philosophical discourse, and it is this discourse that allows us to better understand the surrounding world and our place within it.[9]

In the past section we have come to understand that counter to common perceptions philosophy is not in essence about providing definitive answers or truths to our questions, for such truths are impossible to acquire. Its strength lies in the posing of questions that seek out and embrace the uncertainty of the existence of both humanity and the world. It is through this method of enquiry that an understanding of potential opportunities of engagement can be uncovered and cultivated. With this, now our next question can be asked: How can this interrogative method inform our goals and aims within the architectural realm.

HOW CAN PHILOSOPHIC MODES OF ENQUIRY INFLUENCE THE ARCHITECTURAL ENDEAVOR?

This question strikes at the heart of a debate within the discourse of many disciplines including architecture: What is the role of theory in relation to practice. For millennia within architecture, a line has been rhetorically and conceptually drawn between the architectural theorists and the practitioners. In regards to this perpet-

ual stand-off and in his own efforts to define how speculative thought might inform the practice of architecture, Stan Allen makes a useful distinction that serves well as a starting point for our exploration involving the potential influence of philosophical modes of enquiry within the development of an informed mode of critical thinking about architecture. Allen states that his argument for *practice vs. project* is an attempt to overcome the notion of *dumb* theory. This concept is described, as a way of working that desires the mechanical application of theoretical concepts. In other words, a method that envisions the act of building as the dogmatic materialization of abstract ideas that have been artificially imported from a context outside of the architecture. Besides the inherent problem of translation and the poverty of results visually of many projects attempting this, the central problem with this type of 'theory'' is that it tends to flatten and becomes rather static and monolithic in regards to the contingent demands of practice. Crushed under the weight of their own static agenda of overarching ideas, such dogmatic applications of theory within the flux of the pragmatic world tend to materialize in a superficial and overwrought manner.[10]

Allen points out that his critique is by no means advocating the conventions of modern architectural practice either. Many of the traditional assumptions and preconceptions of professional practice also saddle the actual practice of architecture with a static structure of values and practices. This emerges in the form of legal codes and standards, as well as building and representation techniques that are at times mutated to the point of being almost unrecognizable in their attempts to fulfill the ever transforming demands of the reality of the building process.

To combat the diametrically opposed positions that theory and practice are generally posited, Allen depicts a loose paradigm that seeks to overcome the gulf that such statically preconceived notions of theory and practice imply. The architect argues for a ''pragmatic realism'' that could address the complexity, fluidity, and unpredictable nature of architectural endeavor within the pragmatic world. Allen anticipates this relationship to be:

''Architecture's inside and its outside, I would suggest, might be productively imagined as two open sets that intersect to form an indeterminate figure. As the landscape of the real shifts, so too the definition of architectural practice would have to shift, continually re-configuring the territory where the two overlap. Theory is defined here as an

agent of doubt and uncertainty, and practice as the exercise of pragmatic imagination.''[11]

The key to this exploration of architectural theory to practice as well as our investigation to the whole of the philosophic endeavor is the importance of doubt and uncertainty and our ability to accept and utilize these attributes in a positive manner. Allen insists that all that is truly being demanded is a straight-forwardness of agenda and the acceptance of a method that allows theory to be employed loosely and fluently. To achieve this straight-ahead approach, a certain openness to a multitude of possibilities must be allowed. In other words, theory's relationship to practice is not a set, prescriptive one, but it is, (to use Heidegger's terminology again) a continual correspondence. In this way, the traditional distance between theory and practice can first be bridged and then done away with altogether.

Allen gives a very relevant example of how a modern master, Frank Lloyd Wright, displayed such a capacity in one of his most innovative and famous projects. In the construction of the ramp for the Guggenheim museum in New York, Allen insists that Wright could ''deploy multiple structural principles with effective operational freedom precisely because he was committed to structural rationality as *practice*, not as *project*''. What does this mean in terms of Allen's argument and our exploration of the philosophic mode of enquiry to the architectural process? Wright began initial explorations of the ramp with the fold as a structural principle to achieve an integrated and seamless spatial effect in line with his conception of the continuity necessary in the embodiment of an organic architecture. However, what was undoubtedly a compelling structural and architectural concept, was at the time impractical due to several building trade and regulative issues. One specific example, the requirement of complex wooden formwork to support the concrete during construction, proved to difficult and costly.[12]

Contrary to the common myth of his uncompromising personality, Wright allowed substitutions for his original demands such as conventional steel rods to be used in place of a steel mesh, form work to be reused dictating that the ramp be poured in sections, as well as a series of radial piers located at 30 degree intervals to be included for support. These changes moved away from his original conception of a continuous and seamless structure in its conception, materialization, and spatial configuration, but did allow for this radically new type of space to be constructed that was perceptually seamless and smooth in its inherent quality of architectural space. At each obstacle in its design and construction, Wright asked questions concerning his

central goal for the project, thus allowing for the discovery of new opportunities and potential avenues to bring his spatial vision to life. Allen suggests that:

''Because Wright was not ideologically committed to structure as symbolic or expressive construct, he gained a pragmatic, improvisational flexibility that made realization of this unprecedented space possible. He was more concerned with effective and realistic means to realize the building than with the expression of the intrinsic properties of concrete as a building material……What is revealing, and speaks as much to Wright's tactical flexibility as to his intimate knowledge of building technique, is that, in practice, the desired continuity is in no way compromised by his apparent structural expedient.''[13]

In essence, he had critically examined his agenda for the building in regards to his career as a whole and the specific context of the time and sought out possibilities for the development of his vision. Here the potential of the connection between philosophy and the design process becomes most apparent. In short, he put his preconceptions aside and maintained an openness to new possibilities for the expression of his ideas throughout the entire process from sketch to finished construct.

CONCLUSION: THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE ARCHITECTURAL PROCESS.

In the previous text, we have set out in the first instance to define the nature of philosophy and in the second explore to how this might inform the architectural enterprise. It was surmised that philosophic contemplation consisted in the positing of questions that were impossible to answer with any real certainty, but by doing so, our awareness of possibilities will be expanded, as well as the awareness of our role in our surrounding environment. Such contemplation allows us to forgo the combative stance of self-assertion and begin to understand and work constructively within other cultural mores and structures to more seamlessly achieve our individual ends and those of the greater community simultaneously. It is a choosing of a path or an entering into a perpetual discourse that allows well-informed value systems to be continually formulated as the contexts encountered change. Such paths or dialogues must remain fluid and perpetually formulated. They must never become a static set of preconceived notions, never allowed to emerge as fixed normative views that are mechanically materialized in the realm of the pragmatic.

In architecture today there are far too many preconceived agendas, both theoretically and practically that many adhere to without question. If we are to conceive of design in the spirit of philosophical discourse, then fashionable theories, movements, and styles perpetuated by the mass media must be set aside. By this every architect should undertake a critical thought process to discern the potential of his or her value system in the realm of architecture. Like philosophy, this should be a life-long process that values every project as another attempt, a better one for exploring the possibilities of that system in relation to the task or project at hand. Within both architecture's professional and academic community, there seems to be a loss of this ability to critically think about and discern opportunities in everyday situations. Much is blamed today on developers and planners, clients and city governments. However, it is incredibly difficult to convince one of these individuals expend more resources on innovative architectural concepts when they have been borrowed uncritically from other sources. When this occurs, the advocate does not have a true understanding of their potential impact either socially, politically, tectonically, or economically. Thus, it is difficult to make a convincing argument other than the concept is fashionable. Many times a capitulation of principle takes place before a confrontation of any type has even been encountered. This occurs because the architect has no meaningful theoretical position to reference, or original perspective to argue. It is the development of such perspectives that is sorely needed and it is the philosophic mode of enquiry that could systematically inform and allow such agendas to be constructed, tested, and confirmed.

NOTES

[1] Russell, Bertrand, *The Problems of Philosophy*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 1912), Pg. 93-94.

[2] Wigley, Mark; *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt*, (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1993) pg. X.

[3] Wigley pg. XI.

[4] Russell, Pg. 89.

[5] Ibid., Pg. 90.

[6] Plato: ''The feeling of wonder is the mark of the philosopher; philosophy has no other beginning than this.''

[7] Heidegger, Martin. What is Philosophy?, (Vision Press, Plymouth., 1989) Pg. 79.

[8] Russell, Pg. 92.

[9] Heidegger, Pg. 21

[10] Allen, Stan. ''Practice vs. Project'' in *Praxis: Journal of Writing and Building.* Issue Zero, Volume One, Pg. 112-113.

[11] Allen., Pg. 113.

[12] Ibid., Pg. 116-117.

[13] Ibid., Pg. 119-120.