Peter Eisenman: Critical Review

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Introduction
In 1983 a brief article by Peter Eisenman described a break from the role of function, which had been of integral importance in modernist architecture. He sought a difference between what was building and what was architecture, claiming that architecture should “transcend function”\(^1\). This was the beginning of an architecture that was not designed to hold or embrace people, but to actively engage them and make them constantly aware of its presence\(^2\). Ironically this presence, later described by Eisenman as “presentness” was instigated through the use of “absence”\(^3\). Eisenman has had a profound influence on deconstructionist architecture and also in semiotics in architecture.

The Argument
A central idea to Eisenman’s theoretical rhetoric is the idea of “absence”. He believed Classicism and Rationalism were both creating a motivated history or dialect with which to view the subject of Architecture even though they claimed to be vastly different. Eisenman asserted that the only difference was their origin on an historic timeline, and an aesthetic or decorative difference, but that their language and programming was shared. Eisenman sought to remove the “origins” of architectural form with the desire to achieve an end that had not been predefined by the historic forms of classicism or rationalism. In essence Eisenman perceived both classical and modern architecture as form created through systems of belief, motivated through a linear progression of time and entirely based on function. He disputed Venturi’s notion of the “duck” or “decorated shed” believing that it was motivated by his own bias toward the notion of the “decorated shed”.\(^4\)

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Eisenman was fascinated by the work of Noam Chomsky, and believed that syntax in buildings had become apparent during the Romantic Era. He explored the idea of "cardboard architecture" due to the precise replication Le Corbusier could achieve through his models, and his own desire to use them as a testing point for abstraction of the build form. Eisenman explored what he called "fictions" of representation believing that buildings we no longer truths but representation of truths that had existed before them historically, and were as such, fictitious objects. This perceived "fiction led him to explore the concept of a pure "idea" and that rationality and function could only be embodied "honestly" through abstraction or reduction. But Eisenman felt that this reduction in itself was merely just a form of the previous classical era but in a more simplified format and thus not any more "real" only stylistically different.

Jacques Derrida debated Eisenman's attempts to remove context and trace implying this effectively resulted in the construction of ruins. The impact of absence was that buildings were created as if they were an end rather than as if they had no origin. Absence left instant trace rather than removing trace. Rather than instigating architecture without origin this was the creation of an architecture that was predicting its own end. Eisenman argued that this "absence" was architectures search for an "aura". In the way a painting ceases to become the sum of its parts, such as paint, a timber frame and canvas, and achieves an "aura" which transforms it into something more, i.e. art, Eisenman felt that this was also the pursuit of architecture as opposed to building. He was searching for meaning not based on nostalgia or the "presentness" of familiar forms. Eisenman was not interested in voids or the removal of forms but rather an "absence" of traditional concepts or paradigms that he perceived as ingrained in architectural forms.

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6 Preceding 3 sentences: (Eisenman, The End of the Classical: The End of the Beginning, the End of the End 1984)
8 Preceding 4 sentences: (Eisenman, Post/El Cards: A Reply to Jaques Derrida 1990) pp. 14-17
The Influence
In Eisenman’s own work an attempt to conceptualise and deconstruct the elements of scale, and materiality occurred. His exploration of finding the essence or an architectural form influenced many architects including Frank Gehry who was seen by some as the first deconstructionist and said to be beating the “overly philosophical” Eisenman at his own game. Gehry’s work often plays with the notion of reversal through structures or objects by choosing materials or placement that subvert ideas of classicism. He will use plywood in place of stone and remove visual balance and symmetry intentionally.


The Wosk House addition, in Figure 1, is a demonstration of Gehry deliberately defying the classical conventions of symmetry with this vertical addition.

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9 (Benjamin 1989)p. 50
Another architect influenced by the theory of Eisenman is Lars Lerup, whose work seeks to serve the explicit nature of an emotion or idea through architecture, rather than desiring to achieve a form that is functional. His exploration of “Love/House” specifically explores the idea of waiting for a lover and through diagramming/illustrating the deconstruction of the house a particular emotional connection can be achieved. This is a house of imagination and transformation rather than a physical place and as such gives Lerup, the ability to explore the essence behind both emotion and structure.\textsuperscript{11}

\begin{figure}
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\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure2}
\caption{Larup, Love/House (1987) \cite{source: Larup, Lars. \textit{Planned Assault}. Quebec: Centre Canadien d'Architecture, 1987].}
\end{figure}

\textbf{The Importance}

This shift opposing modernist and functionalist architecture heralded the end of the “orthodox Modernist Movement”. Symbolism and allusion were now becoming as important as composition function and constructional logic. The emerging paradigm was the creation of buildings that communicated an idea or a story through their design\textsuperscript{12}. This deconstruction of functional architectural elements with a focus on semiotics and signs in architecture meant that architectural theory became more influenced by linguistic theory, communication and language\textsuperscript{13}. This focus on language and semiotics has ironically led to a shattering of syntax

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\textsuperscript{13} (Bloomer 1987) p. 8
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in some ways with the intended purpose of place no longer clear\textsuperscript{14}. Eisenman stipulated that his use of “absence” was to transcend function and order to create a higher form but it is questionable whether this is an indulgence in art without architecture, rather than architecture as art since it resulted in the creation of ruinous places akin with labyrinthine or heterotopian elements\textsuperscript{15}. Eisenman’s work acted to instigate a rethinking of the relationship between philosophy and architecture. This conscious observation of their inherent connection led to their rethinking in isolation, and in the case of architecture, a search for the “essence” of what architecture is. Architecture was essentially struggling to decipher its identity as separate from historic conditioning and making efforts to separate itself from the intrinsic confines of its physical nature\textsuperscript{16}. In other disciplines this exploration of a deeper truth resulted in “post structuralism”. In architecture and in Eisenman’s own work the resulting movement was deconstruction, recognised largely as a post-modern form of architecture\textsuperscript{17}. Although building could no longer purely base itself on function alone, in many ways the absolute transcendence of function was not practical or possible to uphold\textsuperscript{18}. We are currently seeing this dialogue continue in the form of codex and index\textsuperscript{19}. Eisenman is still highly interested in hidden meanings within the constructed form seeking code as a means of communication selectively for those, who like himself are, specifically interested in communication through the built environment\textsuperscript{20}.

**Conclusion**

Although the idea of exploring what the true essence of architecture is and finding meaning through signs and inference is a worthy philosophical journey, in general architecture is a habitable space and as such deconstruction and the use of semiotics and sign was not practical. It is not correct to assume that architecture that is purely designed for function is any less transcendent or able to hold the “aura” of fine art since there is an intrinsic beauty in elegant design. Eisenman’s work explores important questions as to why we create the forms we do and whether they are historically motivated and thus presently irrelevant. This

\textsuperscript{14} (Eisenman, Site: The Meaning of Place in Art and Architecture 1983)p. 16


\textsuperscript{17} Preceding 2 sentences: (Patin 1993) pp.88-100

\textsuperscript{18} (Patin 1993)p. 92-94


has had valuable and lasting repercussion on aesthetics and our understanding of what forms and structures tell us about how we create places.\textsuperscript{21}\textsuperscript{,} \textsuperscript{22}

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\textsuperscript{21} Preceding paragraph (Agrest 1980)p. 8-13
\textsuperscript{22} Preceding paragraph: (Patin 1993)p. 88-100
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References


