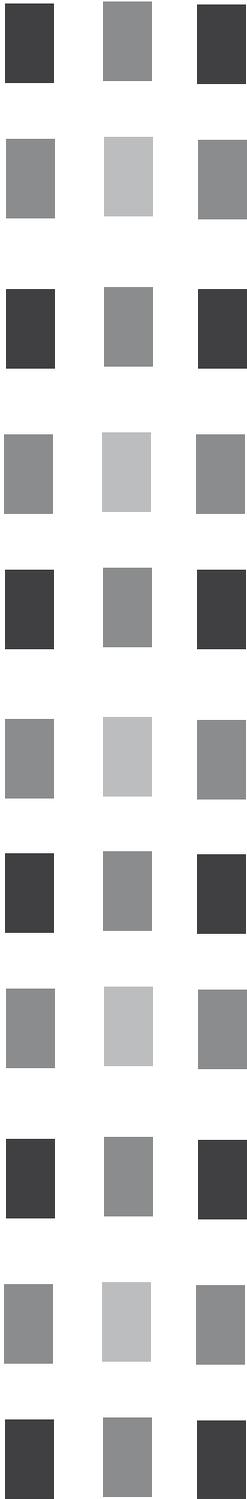


# Architecture and Association

*Kojin Karatani*



I accepted the invitation to the conference on Architecture as Media held at Bauhaus University in 2003, not so much from my interest in the theme, as my interest in Bauhaus. Bauhaus entails multiple possibilities that cannot be limited to architecture and design. I believe it will provide the key to the questions confronting us, including the question of architecture as media. Before going into this topic, let me start with the history of my own relation to architecture. I was not an architect, nor an architecture critic.

I wrote *Architecture as Metaphor*<sup>1</sup> in the early 1980s. As a result, I became acquainted with architects such as Arata Isozaki and Peter Eisenman, and became a regular member of the ANY conferences, organized by – in 1991. But when I wrote this book, I was not familiar with architecture. The architecture I targeted was architecture as metaphor, and the architects were architects as metaphor. In the Occident, since Plato, philosophers have figuratively likened themselves to architects, namely, the arche-of-techne (head of knowledge), although they made little of architects in practice, since they were handicraftsmen.

As an extension of this way of thinking, God was considered The Architect in the medieval period. In the modern period as well, architecture was used as metaphor. Descartes attempted to build a firm construction of Knowledge. Kant used the word 'architectonic' to describe his transcendental philosophical system. Marx appealed to architectural metaphors such as economic base or infrastructure and superstructure. Probably the latest example must be French structuralism, in which architecture as metaphor still functions.

In the 1970s, however, a major transformation occurred. In a certain sense, the role of architecture as metaphor came to an end. It was replaced by something else, namely text or texture. For example, in literature, notions such as creation, author or work were put into doubt. There are no such things as authors. What exists is only a text, which is intertextually woven from past texts. The meaning of a text is not determined by the author. The meaning of a text is un-decidable. If the work is made, the text is rather interwoven and becoming. Such a view was typical of post-structuralism or deconstruction.

When there was a shift of metaphor from architecture to text in literary criticism and philosophy, what was happening in the field of architecture itself? A similar thing was happening. It may be said that Modernists in architecture represented by Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier purified the essence of architecture as making. For instance, Le Corbusier thought of something like a machine for living by eliminating all ornaments. They brought the architecture as metaphor to its extremities. Against them emerged some people

who reintroduced the ornament, or rather architectural history. Then architecture came to be regarded not as construction, but rather as text or texture, woven of quotations from historical works. They called themselves postmodernists and this word postmodernism pervaded other cultural fields.

However, the fact that the notion of postmodernism derived from questions specific to architecture prevailed overall was not so advantageous to architects. For architects were influenced by postmodernism in other fields. As modernism in architecture and modernism in other fields are different, so too are postmodernisms as critiques of modernism. Nonetheless, postmodernism in architecture became identified with postmodernism in other fields, and much worse, was even confused with the critique of modernity. But it was only lately that I noticed this, as I began to attend ANY conferences.

To repeat, I published *Architecture as Metaphor*, but I did not pay any more attention to architectural questions. In fact, I turned to the question of architecture as metaphor for the following reason: I was influenced by Jacques Derrida and his notion of deconstruction in the 1970s, which prevailed mainly in the field of literary criticism. I attempted to tackle the question of deconstruction from a wider perspective, and then I came to think of it from the standpoint of construction, i.e. architecture as metaphor.

However, what I implicitly thought of under the name of architecture as metaphor was the question of designing society, namely, Marxist-Leninist socialism. I was not an exception. I suppose that the same is true of Derridian deconstruction. Derrida appears to discuss the Occidental tradition of theology and metaphysics primarily, but he implicitly targeted the contemporary ideology of Marxists or the Communist Party. I am not saying that political motive lurks behind profound thought. Conversely, I would like to claim that there is no profound thought that has no roots in the actual situation. Deconstruction was meaningful under the binary opposition of the Cold War regime. It may be said that when the Soviet bloc collapsed, deconstruction lost its political meaning, and more often than not resulted in rhetorical techniques for equivocating.

In *Architecture As Metaphor*, I did not touch upon actual architectural matters, with the exception of the works by the two persons who critiqued city planning: Christopher Alexander and Jane Jacobs. It should be already evident why I focused on the question of city planning, in which is compressed the question of the architect as metaphor, from Plato's philosopher-king to Lenin's vanguard party.

In his famous essay titled *A City Is Not A Tree*<sup>2</sup>, Alexander calls cities that have formed over the

course of many years natural cities, in contrast to artificial cities, which have been deliberately planned by designers and planners. He argues that artificial cities lack the essential ingredients of natural cities. Many designers have attempted to enliven modern-style artificial cities by introducing the ingredients of natural cities. But those attempts have so far been unsuccessful because they have failed to grasp the inner structure of the natural city itself and have instead imitated the appearance or image of the natural city.

Alexander maintains that the natural city is organized in the form of a semi-lattice, whereas the artificial city is organized in the form of a tree. According to Alexander, both city and social organization would be devastated if the tree structure were followed too strictly; contemporary city planning has essentially followed this course, and the consequences are well-documented in cities like Brasilia. Alexander writes, "In any organized object, extreme compartmentalization and the dissociation of internal elements are the first signs of coming destruction. In a society, dissociation is anarchy. In a person, dissociation is the mark of schizophrenia and impending suicide."

Alexander's paper reminded me of an essay by French poet and critic, Paul Valéry, titled *Man and the Seashell*.<sup>3</sup> Observing the seashell, Valéry asks, "who made this?" But this question – "Who made this?" – should not be 'answered'. It is a rhetorical question that in reality suggests the absence of the author. Valéry says, "Whenever we run across something we do not know how to make but that appears to be made, we say that nature produced it."

Here, Valéry is not comparing man and nature, but is instead provisionally proposing the name 'nature' to identify the limitations or impossibilities that are encountered in the course of the exhaustive pursuit of making. Nature, therefore, is not restricted to ostensibly natural objects such as the seashell; it also includes things that are made by man but whose structure – how they are made – is not immediately discernible. Valéry remarks that the structure of a thing made by nature is more complex than that of a thing made by man. Instead of describing 'what nature makes,' Valéry exposes it as something that is irreducible to the structures that we construct in our thinking: Needless to say, that is what Alexander pointed out, by saying that a natural city is not a tree-structure.

In my book *Architecture as Metaphor – Language, Number, Money*, I applied this observation. Namely, I observed natural language, natural number and natural money, from this viewpoint. As for number, logicists such as Frege and Russell tried to base natural number on the artificial number, say, set-theory. But as you know, Gödel proved that it was impossible, because the attempt to reduce natural number to artificial number engenders a

self-referential paradox. I thought the same could be said not only about natural language, but also about natural money, so to speak.

Money is man-made, of course. But we don't know how it was made. As Marx points out in the beginning of *Das Kapital*, it is a spontaneous social product. Money is not simply a symbol to denote the value of other commodities. Money as gold can be a commodity at any time. A monetary system is a system of value relations of commodities including money itself; hence it is a kind of self-referential system. In this regard, I wrote as follows: "The self-referential formal system is dynamic because of incessant internal slippage (self-differentiation). It cannot maintain a definitive meta-level or center that systematizes a system. Rather, like the 'multiplicity of subjects' that Nietzsche once proposed, it is multicentered – in short, the self-referential formal system is always disequibrated and excessive." (*Architecture as Metaphor*)

What I wanted to say is that it is impossible to control the capitalist market economy with the intervention of state-planning or something like that. Please keep in mind that I wrote this in the early 1980s, when I had no hope about the socialist nations and rather ironically counted on the deconstructive power of capitalism which would deconstruct itself. On this point, I have to admit the following critical comment by Slavoj Žižek, a Lacanian thinker in Slovenia, who quoted the above passage from my book and added the following remark: "So, when Kojin Karatani, in his otherwise admirable Derridean reading of Marx's *Kapital*, claims that capitalism is already its own deconstruction, that it is no longer a stable self-centred system disrupted by excesses and interferences, but a system which, precisely, maintains itself through incessant self-revolutionizing; a system whose instability is its very strength; one which is, in a way, in excess with regard to itself (this, incidentally, is ultimately just a deconstructionist rephrasing of Marx's formulations from the Communist Manifesto), he ultimately arrives at a purely formal definition of capitalism as a self-referential system sustained by its very structural imbalance."<sup>4</sup>

Žižek wrote this in his afterward to Lenin's papers, which he edited in 2001. He criticized my deconstructive stance and advocated reevaluating Lenin. But he seems to ignore the fact that my book was written in the early 1980s. I have changed my stance since 1990. For when the socialist blocs collapsed and global capitalism began to expand at will, it became meaningless to ironically underscore capitalism. Meanwhile, I would not recuperate Lenin as Žižek does. As I will mention later, such a reevaluation of Lenin seems to be nothing but another type of irony.

At any rate, the above is a question of architecture as metaphor, not that of architecture proper.

As a matter of fact, I did not know what was happening in the field of architecture. I started to think of architecture today only since I began to participate in the ANY conferences in 1991, when I learned that modernists in architecture are considerably different from Architects writ large since Plato. Walter Gropius pronounced the idea of integrating a variety of arts under architecture in his Bauhaus Manifesto in 1919<sup>5</sup>. Yet, it is different from or rather opposite to the idea of deeming architecture as arche of arts, which entails a philosopher-king or vanguard party. While philosophers since Plato who enthroned architecture disdained architects in practice as handicraftsmen, Bauhaus gave priority to the very handicraft.

In fact, Bauhaus is the restoration of the handicraft and artisanship. Gropius proclaimed the formation of 'a new guild of craftsmen' by abolishing the hierarchy between artisans and artists in his Bauhaus Manifesto in 1919. It should not be overlooked that this new guild of craftsmen was thinking on the basis of industrial capitalism. Before them was the polar opposition between commercialism and art for art's sake, or industrial art technology and art.

What Bauhaus aimed at is called the unity of technology and art. But this signifies that they aimed to abolish the historical social conditions that necessitate the rupture between the two. In this respect, modernism, while accepting the technology and industrial products brought about by the capitalist economy, is simultaneously a counter-movement against the capitalist economy. Therefore, it was a necessity that modernists were more or less socialists. The question is what kind of socialism theirs was.

After the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1990, social democracy came to be considered the only alternative – to retain the capitalist economy, while dissolving the evils caused by it, with state regulation via parliamentary democracy. That is not a new idea; Bernstein, a real heir to Engels, insisted as much in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In a sense, Bernstein's idea was more or less an extension of Engels' thinking late in life. In contrast, Lenin and Trotsky objected to it, quoting from Engels to justify the violent takeover of state power under the name of proletarian dictatorship. And the 'success' of the Russian revolution made the latter a legitimate inheritor of Marxism, but their 'failure' brought about the abandonment of Leninism in 1990 and a return to Bernsteinian social democracy. And on the one hand, those who refuse to concede the latter would stick to a cynical (post-modern) view that depends upon the deconstructive power of global capitalism as such. On the other hand, some would try to revive Lenin, like Žižek, while knowing that it is impossible. This is another type of irony.

However, is there any other alternative? The clue to this question can be found in none other than Bauhaus. What was the socialism of Bauhaus like? It was not only different from Bolshevism, but far from social democracy. Today it is said that Bauhaus encompassed multiple contradictory ideas within it, incessantly making itself complex; that is to say, it included many other elements than socialism. But this is nothing but „socialism“ as associationism.<sup>6</sup>

In this regard, take a look at William Morris, who influenced Bauhaus with his arts & craft movement. He was one of the first Marxists in Britain. Needless to say, he was critical of Fabian socialism, but no doubt was against Bolshevism. Today it is common to see a kind of utopianism in him which differs from Marxism, but we should see something close to Marx especially late in life; for example, as is clear from *The Critique of the Gotha Program* and *The Civil War in France*, Marx was rather close to Proudhon's associationism, despite his harsh critique. It is evident that so-called Marxism, either social democracy or Bolshevism, was shaped by Engels after Marx's death.

Meanwhile, what I noticed since I began to attend the ANY conferences is how architects were affected by philosophical discourses and how they were blinded by it to what they were doing in reality. Outside architecture, postmodernism is defined as the end of grand narrative (Lyotard), and it is translated into the end of grand narrative-Architecture writ large-socialism. However, it is no more than an analogy irrelevant to modernist architecture in reality. Nonetheless, such an analogy became predominant under the hegemony of philosophical discourse.

The ANY conference was initially centered around so-called deconstructionists, and was attended by Jacques Derrida himself. In due course, their interest shifted to Gilles Deleuze. Especially the younger architects presented virtual architecture, philosophically supported by the thought of Deleuze. But in their discourse, the ideas of Derrida or Deleuze were only used as flamboyant accessories. Thus one trend after another was introduced for a decade, but bore no fruit. Eventually, it seemed to me that a cynical architect who did not need any accessory stood out consistently throughout the conferences for a decade; Rem Koolhaas.

He is noted as an architect who attached importance to the metropolis. And his postmodernism appeared in this concept of metropolis, which is too „big“ for city planning. But what Koolhaas saw in terms of the metropolis is simply the nature of the uncontrollable capitalist economy, which incessantly deconstructs itself. He did work in New York, Tokyo, and Shanghai. According to the criteria derived from the traditional cities of Europe, these metropolises look chaotic and hideous.

Koolhaas praised them as fundamentally deconstructing such an old European aesthetic. He insisted on accepting what the capitalist economy engenders, however horrible it may be.

Thus Koolhaas affirms capitalist globalization, but it is not necessarily because he wants to affirm capitalism in reality. Rather, it is the other way around. He is against capitalism. But he despairs of any attempt to control the capitalist economy, and rightly so in the 1980s. It seems that he got the idea of accelerating the movement of the capitalist economy to the point of implosion. Such an irony lies behind his admiration of the metropolis and construction booms. I understand his irony. For as I mentioned before, I myself thought the same way in the early 1980s.

But since the 1990s, I came to be disgusted with such an irony or cynicism. When Soviet Russia collapsed, I suddenly recognized that postmodern thought such as deconstruction and the archaeology of knowledge could have a critical impact only while so-called Marxism actually ruled the people of many nation-states. In the 1990s, this tendency lost its impact. It has become mostly a mere agent of the real deconstructive movement of capitalism. Also in the 1990s, skeptical relativism, multiple language games (or public consensus), criticism of intellectuals and appreciation of subcultures (or cultural studies), lost their most subversive potencies that they had before and hence became the dominant, ruling thought. Today, these have become official doctrine in the most conservative institutions in economically advanced nation-states.

Now it is quite clear that if we leave things to the capitalist market economy, we are sure to find

the human environment totally devastated. Can we just wait and see until the world comes to the extreme point of debacle brought about by capitalism? In fact, we have no such leeway. We have to do something, but what countermeasures can we take against the Capitalist-nation-state? That is what we ought to think of. The ANY conferences lasted from 1991 to 2000, that is to say, from just after the Gulf War to just before September 11. From our vantage point, it is quite clear that this conference failed to present any countermeasure against world trends, except for an ironical affirmation of the globalization of capitalism.

However, this does not mean that architecture or architects are impuissant, let alone that something should be expected outside of architecture. I would rather think the precious model we should refer to now still lies in modernist attempts like Bauhaus. Of course, we belong to a historical context different from that of the modernists. Modernism in architecture took place in the stage of heavy-industrial capitalism. Simply put, their task was how to co-opt concrete, steel, and glass into art. Today we are faced with cutting-edge information technology in the stage of post-industrial capitalism. It is natural for young architects to be inclined to virtual architecture. No doubt it will provide us new possibilities. Yet, it does not seem to give us any impact of the sort that the modernists used to bring about. Why? Because they fatally lack morality and a vision of social change, which modernists used to possess.

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Notes:

- 1 Karatani, Kojin: *Architecture as Metaphor*, Cambridge/Mass. 1995.
- 2 Alexander, Christopher: *A City Is Not A Tree*, in: *Architectural Forum*, no. 1, April 1965.
- 3 Valéry, Paul: *Man and the Sea Shell*, in: *Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, vol. 1, selected with an introduction by James R. Lawler, Princeton 1956.
- 4 Zizek, Slavoj (ed.): *Afterward from A Selection of writings from February to October 1917*, by V. I. Lenin, with an introduction and afterword by Slavoj Zizek, 2002.
- 5 Gropius, Walter, *Bauhaus Manifesto*, 1919.
- 6 For closer observations, see Karatani, *Transcritique on Kant and Marx*, Cambridge/Mass. 2003.

