THE CONCEPT AS A CONCEPT
AND THE IMPORT OF WORDS AS IDEAS

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Concept and *conceptualization* in democracy

Concept is the key-word of the last decade in the Romanian school of architecture. It roots in Eisenman's *Conceptualism*, who took it over from the visual arts, which on its turn it sounded so good in philosophy. Dealing with such transfers is not actually a new phenomenon, as modern architecture and its criticism often adopted terms and ideas from the epistemological area of other disciplines, especially those that are sovereign in judgment and rhetoric on abstract fields. Roland Barthes asserted that the future of the art criticism consists in taking over the theories to be expired in the philosophical thinking.

So did the conceptual approach in arts and later on in architecture – but not the use of the term *concept*! While initiated during the 60's, this idea launched a new way of thinking and even managed to reorient practice. The Romanian architecture, as well as many other producers of objects containing a small amount of creativity, extracted the word *concept* from the conceptualist discourse, thus pretending with unconscious serenity as directly rooting in philosophy. Thus downgraded in that way from its superior position of product of a repeatedly distilled thinking, the term of *concept* has been subjected to an innocent and generous democratization, not to say vulgarization. And so it happens that now terms like *concept, conceptualization* or *conceptual thinking* are popping up hauntingly in any comment, jury grading, even in any small talk between architects – to the satisfaction of dilettantes, the bewilderment of pedants and the amused tolerance of the connoisseurs with a sense of humour.

However, all the straightforward and good-natured architects nowadays, who are designing different things – a gas station, a masterplan or a post office –, seek to endow their initial quests with the term of *concept*. True, they were "talking in prose" before the emergence of the magic word, but they didn't know it. Now, since they retrieved their conscience, everything that amounted to ordinary working tools – sketches, scale models, texts and diagrams – has now miraculously become "*conceptual thinking*". Students in particular, as the most impressionable professional category, are beginning to proclaim as concept any functional scheme, volumetric sketch or abstract drawing, only to turn the same "concept", in the end, into justification, by the same naïve rhetoric. And so everybody is busy "*conceptualizing*", each in his own way.

If we expand the meaning of the notion far beyond the original definition, then we would definitely include the Paleolithic artists from Lascaux, who relied on a "*concept*", and a metaphysical one, twenty thousand years ago, when they symbolized and fetishized referents on the grotto walls, in order to hunt and eat them. Furthermore, beyond its figurative appearance, this transcendent intention was so internalized, that the participants to the ritual were only able to fully grasp it in a state of trance. And then, generally speaking, what can be more "conceptual" than the intentional core of the pyramids,

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ziggurats and all temples and sanctuaries? Or the imaginaries of Boullée and Ledoux? Or even the totalitarian architecture? While taking matters further, there is no naturally genuine architecture without a "concept", if we consider beauty, purity, usefulness and aspirations to the sublime being also concepts, along with everything the history of architecture has ever produced, or if we consider nowadays that an attitude, a colour, a proportion, an analogy, a movement, a sign can also be concepts.

Could it be that way? Well, then maybe a feeling or a tactile sensation can also be referred to as a concept, just because it lies at the origin of an aesthetic intention. Or this would be abusive, because it blatantly contradicts the meaning of the term. These are, for instance, Peter Zumthor's working tools: he is interested in the sensory, not the intellectual and specialized perception of his architecture; he does not believe in the objectivity of architecture, but in architecture, starting from the real things and returning to the real things. Both his stances place him in the very opposite sphere to the conceptualist one, causing us to conclude that every great, deep, consistent and sensitive architect is not necessarily a conceptualist.

As a matter of fact, out of many objects which contain creative effort, there are some with so much intellectual content, that the viewer's conscience is exclusively engaged by this nucleus of ideas, so forceful that it neutralizes the materiality of the object. It is only at that point that we are allowed to speak about *Conceptualism*.

Is there actually any Architecture in the absence of the act of conceiving? No. And, of course, there is no architecture without a thematic substance. Does Architecture issue conceptions? Yes. But all these cannot be called *conceptual thinking*, and certainly not *conceptualism*. Not every pondering is *conceptualization*. Nor is it an intuition, an inspiration or a revelation. The germinating nucleus of any project cannot be qualified as *concept*. *Conceptualization* consists in soaring ideas to high abstract levels and this is solely the task of philosophy.

Consequently, there are some questions to be asked. Is the sin of using terms empirically and improperly so serious or do the benefits exceed the effects of mystifications by degrading them? The excessive resort to "*conceptualization*" might not be harmful, but a harmless bragging or possibly beneficial, i.e. motivating. Even the architectural ideology referred to as *Conceptualism* has not achieved its very declared goal. However, in an oblique and belated fashion, it ultimately managed to put an end to the inertia of the traditional architectural culture, to revitalize it by ascribing new meanings to it and to open new horizons. All this, while running the predictable risk of deviations. But did the trivial circulation of these noble words produce any change in creative design within the Romanian school? Or was it just euphoria around the import of fashionable words that vainly parasite the architectural rhetoric?

It is too late now to be rigorous when it comes to terminology, so we cannot be but tolerant, it is only highly recommended to make it with full knowledge.

Installations

As early as 1913, Marcel Duchamp introduced the *bicycle wheel* as the world turned upside down. It probably was the first form of non-art and one of the last consequences of the Avant-garde, issued avant la lettre. Duchamp was thus the one who paved the way for the future conceptualists. He had ruled out not only the artist's craftsmanship, but any other subjective involvement on his part as

well, any personal means of making an idea expressive, and all this, to the glory of the object *per se.* It was his way of protesting against the formalism of the bourgeois art.

It was then during the 60's when the *conceptual art* was launched as a sort of Duchamp-Revival trend. It also jetted the traditional aesthetics of the work of art, favouring the *"idea art".* The conceptualists considered the *conception* and the very *process* of creation as more significant than the ultimate material form. Sol Lewitt defines conceptual art as: ""*I will refer to the kind of art in which I am involved as conceptual art. In conceptual art the idea is the most important aspect of the work. … It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore usually he would want it to become emotionally dry. … Conceptual art is made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions...* (Duchamp, too, aimed to save the traditional art from being simply "retinal" and to put it in the service of the mind.) … *The idea becomes a machine that makes the art… When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair.*"[1]

One thing is clear. Visual arts as well as architecture hijacked the term in order to give an intellectual name to the most cerebral artistic trend of all the times: *Conceptualism.*

The *Concept* as a concept and noodles packaging

When searching *conceptual art* on Wikipedia, you find first a note: Not to be confused with *philosophical conceptualism*! Apparently, Wiki has its experiences as well.

The general temptation of innocently confusing the terms was big and proved to be irresistible. After the elegant use of terms like *conception, conceptualization*, *conceptualism*, and after Eiseman's *Conceptual architecture*, a wave of ponderers ruminated on such terms thereafter. After all, uttering them with noble easiness makes you feel so clever! Why not adding to the repertoire the term *concept* as well? It is a simple derivation and it does not hurt anyone.

Image 1, 2. "The most insolent… we are the creators of concepts!" (Deleuze)

Could that ingenuous finicalness have moved Deleuze to deal, in *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie[2]*, with the issue of concept – so that it may become clear for everyone, once and for all? Or could it have been the fact that Peter Eisenman had actually taken over to the field of architecture some concepts from his writings, unleashing thus the dilution and the degeneration of the ideas among visual artists? The sure fact is that in 1991 the philosopher stated that the production of concepts was a process pertaining exclusively to the sphere of philosophy. They are not products for sale, as some might think, he said. "*The most insolent are the information technology, marketing, design, advertising and other disciplines from the field of communication, which have granted themselves the prerogative of handling the notion of concept, saying: it is our business, we are the creators of concepts!*"[3] The inflationary use of such term practically deprived it of any meaning. "*It is hallucinatory how noodles packaging has become a notion or concept, and its designer, a philosopher!*" Deleuze defines philosophy as knowledge through concepts and says that no idea becomes a concept without the intervention of the philosopher. Art, which departs from social needs, cannot even handle concepts, let alone produce them. The concepts are imagining of the spirit, solely produced by thought; abstract projections, intellectual units, theorems...much like meteorites. The same thesis has been promoted by Nietzsche, according to whom thought is a creation of notions. Philosophers do not receive the concepts as gifts from an enchanted world, but produce them through thought; otherwise, any gift would be suspicious. The truth exists only when it is produced by thought, stated Nietzsche.[4]

What are then the notions and concepts doing in art and architecture? Are they forbidden to enter it? Under what conditions are they allowed to cooperate with philosophy? Deleuze explained: all arts can intersect with philosophy, and successfully so. Philosophy provides the concepts, which the arts transform into ideas that are very beneficial for the production of objects. No synthesis here; each idea remains a unique creation in its discipline, and in order to process it, the discipline uses its own means.[5]13 In the art object, the idea and even more so its conceptual kernel remains connected to the specificity of that art. Thus, a concept expressed in an art is completely different from the same concept expressed in a different art or in architecture, and, naturally, something completely different from the philosophical concept.

Maybe, then, conceptualism could give us a Deleuzian, or a Derridian, sometimes a Kierkegaardian art – just thinking.

Finally, working with concepts entails cooperation between artistic disciplines, also says Deleuze, and gives an example: a writer turns a philosophical concept into an idea for a novel, and the filmmaker follows the idea of the novel and makes a movie. But beware: ideas are not concepts. Therefore, some architects, like Campo Baeza, are right to avoid the term *concept* and to replace it with *idea*. It is wiser on our part to remain friends with the vain philosophers. Aren't we just like them, anyway?

From Conceptual Architecture to playing games with concepts

The adventure of the concept in architecture probably began with Eisenman's speculation titled *Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition*[6] and a few experiments, unconvincing, but interesting as intellectual exercises.[7] Who would have thought back then that those bizarre entities conflicting with the traditional logic of architecture would trigger an architectural trend, cause us to read postmodern philosophers and launch the extraordinary career of the concept of *concept*? Two were the declared origins of Eisenman's speculation: the conceptual art of the 1960s, which had just about run its

course, and the philosophical theories still fashionable in Paris.

Thus, forty-five years ago, *conceptual architecture* was launched with a very clear meaning in the world of theoretical architecture: "*A conceptual structure is that aspect of the visible form, whether it is an idea in a drawing, or in a building, which is intentionally put in the form to provide access to the inner form or universal formal relationship. … In order to approximate a conceptual intention, the shapes which are perceived would have to contain a structure within their physical presence which would have the capacity to take the viewer from the sensed (immediate) perception, to a conceptual attitude, and at the same time requiring of this structure a capacity to suppress the possible primacy of a sensual response.* "[8] And thus, one hundred years ago, art historians discovered the soul of the work under the influence of psychoanalysis, while in 1970 an architect by the name of Eisenman tried to discover the hypostasis of an object's "being" (Sein) following the suggestion of philosophy.

Then, quite surprisingly for an ultra-elitist, meta-disciplinary, sharp and extravagant ideology, it produced a small earthquake. The earthquake was followed by aftershocks and aftershocks to aftershocks, which caused its dissemination. The debates went beyond the circle of the initiated, thanks to those who translated it to the understanding of architects, mitigating its pointed intellectualness and endowing it with more plausible readings. Finally, its increasingly diluted reverberations reached our old

mundane architecture which nurtures on reality and hopes, satisfies needs and produces emotions, as we have known it for thousands of years. It was still strong enough to shake some of its certainties though and to trouble our thoughts of good-natured architects. What I mean by that is that it troubled our "vertical thinking", logic, linear, school-trained, formed in the left part of the brain, and forced us to shift our efforts to the right side of the brain, to the "lateral thinking", the quicksand, harbouring creativity and heuristic solutions. What followed was the generalized popularization of the *concept*, as I said, with deviations and misunderstandings, so that the term ended up gaining as many meanings as there are architects on Earth. Things finally settled and a sort of compromise was thus reached, by each architect in turn, according to his possibilities, between the good side and the naughty side of his brain.

Damn the utility and the Overcoming of Metaphysics in Architecture

Eisenman took over ideas from Duchamp and from the conceptualists adapted them to architecture. Since the architect does not manufacture his own objects, he caused him not feel any empathy, to the glory of his intellectual contribution to unveiling the object *per se*. He did so because the closer the object, as receptacle of the idea, gets

Image 3. Marcel Duchamp, 1913: the world turned upside down

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to a relative transparency, the purer and more deprived of subjective attachment it becomes. Moreover, because the purpose of art was to elevate the artist's work from manual production to intellectual production, Eisenman abolished the only manual artistry personally produced by the architect, namely the beautiful drawing. The diagrams, axonometries, scale models, naïve sketches were accepted. Further, in order to underline their objectuality, the rough, conceptualist artworks floated in an atemporal space. It was a natural thing for the 20th century, which had marked the victory of space over time.[9] In their turn, to underline the same objectuality, Eisenman's objects were axonometries deprived of a context. Where Duchamp denied the conventionality of art spaces (galleries or museums), Eisenman denied the actual site and its relationship with the object. Where Duchamp despised the public's shallow admiration, Eisenman released architecture from the terre-à-terre claims of its clientele.[10] He was thus liberating architecture from function, disjoining it from the reality which had once determined it and from the future in which it was destined to function, from causality and social effects, to anchor it in an isolated, freestanding present. Where Sol Lewitt had said that the artist's sole contribution lies in the creation of ideas, Eisenman's belief was that the principles of design should not be provided by constructive logic, as had been the case for millenniums, but by a number of abstractions: ideas disseminated through texts, diagrams, scale models, art installations. "Damn the utility", as Rem Koolhaas would have put it.
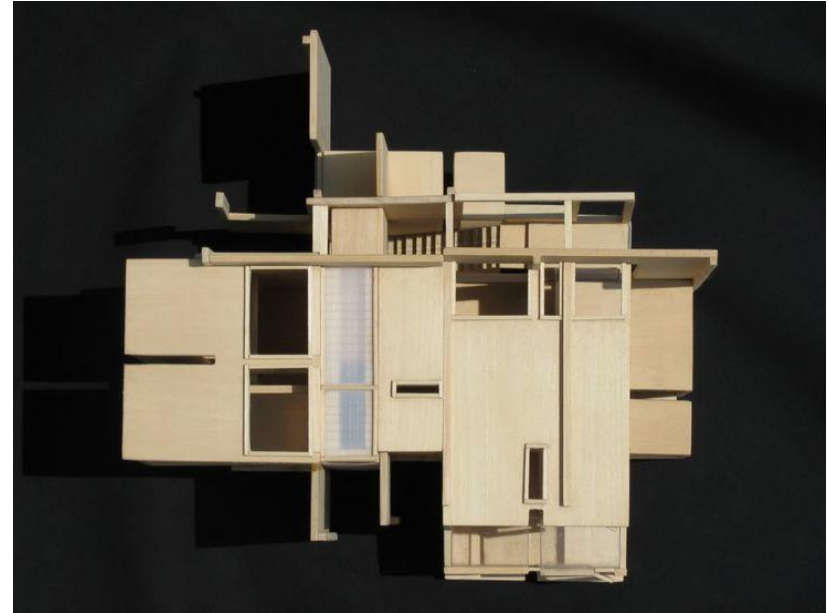

Image 4,5. Peter Eisenman, House VI:
Pillars hangigng from the upper floor, beams carrying nothing, and the red stair that cannot be climbed and leads nowhere

The Idea as Model.

Eisenman has been working on overcoming metaphysics in architecture ever since. In his trans-disciplinary discourse, he commented, among others, the truly modern architects. He criticized modernism because it has only changed the language, but as far as its intimate relationship with reality is concerned, has merely continued a millennium-long tradition. Since it started from real needs and not from concepts, modernism has never managed to formulate a theory, he said. A pertinent theory of modernity would have been a mental construction, which would have confronted the entire set of problems pertaining to modernity in relation to its architecture. Yes, it is true, Gropius aspired to fuse the architect with the craftsman, while Eisenman was now aspiring to fuse the architect with the philosopher. He also talked about how architects worked with the media tools and the alternative materials, about performance as present action, communication, objects in space with preeminently conceptual attributes. His discourse recalls Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, implicitly Nietzsche, occasionally Chomsky and Vattimo.

For instance, Eisenman takes over from Michel Foucault the thesis of the de-centered subject, according to which the absence of the subject is a pre-requisite for the object to disclose part of its essence, as otherwise the subjective language would render the object's intention unrecognizable.[11] He also criticizes anthropocentrism, saying that man, who had been positioned at the center of the world by Renaissance, needs to take a step back. Thus, the objects must be freed from man's omnipresence and from the obligation of referring to him continuously, in order to be let to talk only about themselves and their objectuality. This is how we can attain an architecture similar to a self-referential sign, to a conceptual structure, an architecture about architecture and not one conceived by man for himself, to embody him and his needs. Such an architecture goes beyond its function, constructs and geometric logic. It is an architecture deprived of the meanings ascribed by subjects through introspection, following their imagistic or aesthetic experiences, which are derisory anyway compared with elevated thought. Here we come across Derrida's thesis of the presence of the object as text, beyond which there is nothing.[12]

Consequently, Eisenman wishes to separate architecture from function, history, beauty, reality, visions and other creative drivers, to reach an object-per se - which can exist independently from man. It is only in that art/architecture conceived as text that the concept can be read. The rest is commodity. Since Malevich, Mondrian, Joyce, Schönberg and others had successfully pulled this off in painting, music, literature, photography, film and mathematics; he tried on his turn to achieve it in architecture as well, organizing an exhibition where he only exhibited models with roles of concept-objects. "*It seemed that models, like architectural drawings, could well have an artistic or conceptual existence of their own, one which was relatively independent of the project that they represented*", he commented.[13]

Image 6. Peter Eisenman, Memorial for the Murdered Jews, Berlin, 2004

Theory and Practice

The conceptualist "theory" is unrealistic when it comes to architecture, and this was obviously known by its creators: Archigram, Superstudio, Bernard Tschumi, Peter Eisenman, Diller + Scofidio, John Hejduk, Daniel Libeskind (each with his own contribution). Colin Rowe, a level-headed man, described Eisenman as a *radical formalist* and *post-humanist*. Nor can there exist in architecture self-referentiality, un-historicity, non-functionality, non-contextuality, anti-constructivism, or autism. An abstract architecture, impossible to perceive through the traditional systems of subjective significances, cannot exist. An architecture deprived of memory and visionary future, floating freely and serenely like a fiction in a sterilized present, an architecture independent of reality, which it ignores and does not represent anything, would be a failure. However, the concoction of this story about an architecture which can only be philosophically inquired flattered the architects and revitalized the architecture itself.

It has certainly flattered the Romanian architects, too, and set about thinking in the school of architecture. So far, this is all.

However, in other places, the idea of interdisciplinary borrowings, for instance, which can be found in the definition of conceptual architecture, expanded the borders of architecture. The professed intention of the introduction of ideas from linguistics, philosophy, biology, physics, literature, mathematics, film, music, photography, sociology, psychology, plastic arts, digital technique or dance

was to liberate the object of architecture from the dictatorship of the beneficiary and also from the sufficiency of craftsmanship and technology. Now elevated to the rank of an autonomous, pure and elitist existence, architecture could only be fertilized epistemologically, in vitro. For whom, in fact? It doesn't matter. What matters is that in this refined way, conceptualism functioned as a gateway towards other fields of knowledge.

Although a little arrogant, conceptualism was an elegant and open trend. It acknowledged ab initiam what it owed to systematic thinking and artistic ideologies. Eisenman owes a lot to Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, to Chomsky, Foucault and Vattimo; Tschumi owes to Guy Debord, Diller + Scofidio to Lacan and everybody to Nietzsche, Heidegger and Benjamin. It was also a nonchalant trend: so what if an experiment with a Deleuzian blob or a deconstructivist theory were, in reality, less interesting than their "theories"? We criticize the building, but we retain the theory and try it again. It would be nothing, if there were just projects. However, Mark Kingwell was concerned[14] with the costs of such an attitude, when the star architects constructed big "I-con's"[15] following ideas by Heisenberg or Gödel, using a lot of public money, and asked the rhetorical question: what shall we do when the circus leave town and the commotion is over? Shall we have to live and work in and among the concept buildings? But time has appeased its worries. The time of the big star architecture is over.

What would be the conclusion? Conceptualism, neither in its ethereal, nor in its vulgarized version, has destroyed the traditional notion of architecture as functional edifice, as creator of emotions and aesthetic experiences. Because the ethereal one remained only in theory; the vulgarized one was distorted and adapted. All they did to our architecture was to shake it a little, so as to prevent it from falling asleep, and to shock the architects also to stop them from falling into a deep sleep, comforted by their usefulness and their beneficiaries. And it also opened up some new paths.

It also meant a step forward in the development of the architecture's self-awareness. As proof, we have the development, since then, of its theoretical and critical mechanism, albeit taken over from professional thinkers.

There is pnly a couple of variants of conceptual architecture that have remained nowadays. One of them is focused on design as a heuristic and research process. The project begins with an idea, the idea is processed through experiments, and the outcome is a lesson, expressed in forms which are not meant to be used for construction. What matters are the intention and the endeavour, which questioned old and new values such as mobility, context, communication, the space-time relationship, typology and archetypes, inter-and trans-disciplinarity, formal aesthetics, sensory perception, complete reception etc.

Another field opened to conceptual architecture or whatever is left of it is Microarchitecture and any experimental architecture, mobile or ephemeral: pavilions, temporary facilities, installations, exhibitions, performances, shelters. Mona Mahall calls these reactions to what she names "globalization in a mobilized form"[16]16, i.e. a reaction to star architecture of the Guggenheim-Bilbao kind. All these small, innovative objects are almost self-referential, thus responding to one of the basic claims of conceptualism; they are individualized. This architecture is able to probe the unexplored facets of the discipline and entails niche specializations and extra-disciplinary specializations of the authors. The research relating to this architecture does not revolve around the classic architectural values, but explores unusual perspectives, uses unconventional, often cheap and unpretentious materials and systems, new or borrowed from industries and unrelated to architecture.

In the meantime, the reality of life has managed to soften Eisenman as well. The Memorial of the Holocaust in Berlin, for instance, definitely allows, in my opinion, a "conceptualist" reading – if it must have it – only there are so many things "beyond the text"! Evocation, emotion, haptic experience, response to subtle social needs. And none of the provoked sensory perceptions or the suggested analogies contests its intellectuality. And so it happened that he, the very patriarch of abstract architecture, has proven to all of us that at least here, during our life on earth, the spirit cannot be severed from the matter.

Illustration Source

3,   https://ro.pinterest.com/pin/349310514824845774/
4,   http://www.archdaily.com/63267/ad-classics-house-vi-peter-eisenman
5,   https://ro.pinterest.com/pin/428404983285304148/

Endnotes

[1] Sol Lewitt, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, Artforum vol V, Nr.10, 1967.

[2] Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie*?, les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1991.

[3] Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *Was ist Philosophie*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1996, quoted by Claudia Perren in *Dan Graham/Peter Eisenman, Positionen zum Konzept*, PhD thesis at the University of Kassel, 2005.

[4] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, in Ecce Homo, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, quoted by Claudia Perren in *Dan Graham/Peter Eisenman, Positionen zum Konzept*, PhD thesis at the University of Kassel, 2005.

[5] There were hybrid geniuses who were able to vacillate between plans, and Deleuze quotes Hölderlin, Rimbaud, Kleist, Mallarmé.

[6] Peter Eisenman, *Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition*, in *Design Quarterly* 78/79, 1970.

[7] *House I* (Barenholtz Pavilion), *House II* (Falk House), *House III* (Miller House) etc.

[8] Peter Eisenman, *Notes…*

[9] Michel Foucault, *Des espaces autres*, 1984. The 19th century was concerned with history, development, time, evolution, cycles, while the 20th century was confronted with space. To build as much space as possible (possibly in the shortest period of time, author's note). Michel Foucault would call it the modern obsession with space.

[10] The peak of his contempt for function, House VI from 1973, with its red staircase which cannot be mounted, leading to a floor which doesn't exist, is merely a complex geometrical system. It does not answer any needs or expectations of its beneficiaries, being merely a game of the representation of a unique reality: the reality of the object's presence.

[11] *La désubjectivation/décentralisation du sujet*, key terms in Foucault's thinking, quoted by Claudia Perren…

[12] Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie, 1967*. "*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*".

[13] Peter Eisenman, *Idea as Model*, Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, New York, 1976.

[14] Mark Kingwell, *Monumental/Conceptual Architecture, the Art of Being Too Clever By Half*, in Harvard Design Magazine, 2003/2004, No.19.

[15] As Charles Jencks called them

[16] Mona Mahall, *Eupalinos and the Duck: Conceptualism in Recent Architecture*, in Journal #28, Oct. 2011. The mobility in architecture means to mobilize plenty of cash in the name of the immovable.