

# Architectural Aesthetic Speculations

Michael Jasper



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## **On Kahn and Deleuze**

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# Introduction



**T**his book stages an encounter of philosopher Gilles Deleuze's (1925–1995) constructivist sensibility and architect Louis Kahn's (1901–1974) mode of creative figuration. It does this through a close reading of Deleuze's late writing alongside the formal analysis of select projects by Kahn. Kahn's project for the De Vore House is examined as a manifestation of Deleuze's idea of intensive points, and Erdman Hall, Bryn Mawr College Dormitory is shown to render aspects of the notion of lines of force. In a future study I will consider Deleuze's concept of surface event in relation to Kahn's Meeting House, Salk Institute of Biological Studies, and explore the problem of shape in Kahn's project for the Philadelphia College of Art.

Stated differently, this study is an experimental working out of an hypothesis concerning the relation between the aesthetic sensibility displayed in Deleuze's writing and a manner of architectural figuration and creation. I do this by developing a preliminary demonstration of the productive potential contained in a systematic extension of a Deleuzian approach in the domain of architecture using projects by Kahn by way of illustration. The aim is to test the viability of a speculative and formal vocabulary when extended to interpreting the meaning and effect of dynamic and free systems of relations in architectural projects, relations of

both a plastic and a conceptual nature. In other words, the buildings of Kahn are used to suggest how the generic properties of what is characterised as a Deleuzian sensibility toward works of art and aesthetic constructions generally, might manifest themselves as analytic frames and generative tools in architecture. To this end the conceptual developments include an emphasis on temporal and architectural space conceptions.

Two tendencies in the projects of Kahn are discussed in order to demonstrate the presence of a Deleuzian approach. The first is an emphasis on relations or connections as rendered in the De Vore House. The second tendency is an attempt to deal with architectural forces and not simply lines and is considered in relation to Erdman Hall, Bryn Mawr College. In a future study I plan to explore Kahn's manipulation of the vertical surface to achieve architectural effects, and the manner in which he transforms a building or building group from a functional or module generated organism into an ambiguous entity demonstrating a doctrine of shape in place of a law of form.

The first proposition of this study thus concerns the relation between aesthetic constructions and Deleuze's own theoretical project. For Deleuze modernist works of art and architecture function as models of a new manner of thinking, of thinking in a different, non classical manner, one which resists

the faults he identifies in traditional, classical thought. There is a methodological relation between Deleuze's philosophy and the composition techniques and effects of aesthetic constructions. A thematic reading is used to demonstrate the complicity between the treatment of the problematic of art, the image of thinking which Deleuze develops as a geo-philosophy, and his use of non-philosophical techniques and constructions.

Stated differently, Deleuze's system of thought can be read as both an inversion and a completion of a modern pedagogy of aesthetic constructions. His writings complete a resumption of the historical avant-garde project on a new basis, with new concepts and new constructive principles. Even if he frequently makes use of modernism's traditional artistic references, categories and terminology, Deleuze nonetheless deploys them in a new manner and with new effects. To this end his writings make a contribution to the historiography and theory of art and architecture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In order to evaluate the potential of Deleuze's contributions to the realm of plastic invention I make use of the spatial and temporal series of terms point, line, surface, and shape. I argue that these plastic elements have a correspondence with the conceptual and pragmatic elements of Deleuze's philosophy as he formulates it in *What*

*is Philosophy?* In this book there is a functioning system of terms Deleuze refers to as a geo-philosophy constructed with concepts, a plane of immanence, and conceptual personae all animated by a set of connections. This system of terms collects itself into a general methodology that shares two key characteristics of a geography, thus Deleuze's use of the label geo-philosophy. The first characteristic is an emphasis on the irreducibility of contingency over deference to necessity. The second is sensitivity for the milieu in place of a fixation with origins. This tendency toward the geo-philosophical aligns with a theory of the work of art and architecture as an aggregate of sensation. The themes of point, line, surface, and shape can be used as major elements for interpreting the functioning of any aesthetic construction according to a logic of Deleuzian terms. Chart 1.a sets out these speculative correspondences.

Deleuze's system (geo-philosophy)	Aesthetic constructions (problem of shapes)
<i>concepts</i>	<i>connection points</i>
<i>conceptual personae</i>	<i>force lines</i>
<i>plane of immanence</i>	<i>surfaces</i>

*Chart 1.a – Parts of geo-philosophy and aesthetic constructions*

"once and for all" the death of that which is one. If there is an essential relation with the future, it is because the future is the deployment and explication of the multiple, of the different and of the fortuitous, for themselves and "for all times". (...) Repetition in the eternal return ... concerns excessive systems which link the different with the different, the multiple with the multiple, the fortuitous with the fortuitous, in a complex of affirmations always coextensive with the questions posed and the decisions taken.<sup>15</sup>

What are the characteristics of Deleuze's 'excessive' systems implied above? First, they do not establish a synthetic relation with the past but rather gather up the future, in the sense of a contemporaneous affirmation. Second, excessive systems implicitly call for innocent subjects, that type of subject which recognises its emergence in the synthesis of time, the only synthesis which can be the support for the dynamism of the system, of their forced movements. The third characteristic of excessive systems is that they occur in what Deleuze describes as a space of adjacency, of being put on the side of. He writes, 'this dark precursor, this difference in itself or difference in the second degree which relates heterogeneous systems and even completely disparate things, [is recognised as] the *disparate*'.<sup>16</sup> Acting as their differentiator, this relation or spacing is better defined by Deleuze

in *The Logic of Sense*. Here, he goes on to name these 'differential systems with their disparate and resonating series, their dark precursor and forced movements ... simulacra or phantasms. The eternal return concerns only simulacra, it causes only such phantasms to return.'<sup>17</sup> In this manner, it solicits the illusion of a logical identity and of a physical resemblance, inducing the error of interpreting the eternal return as the return of the same.

It has been necessary to turn to this earlier formulation of the system as it provides an efficient way to begin to draw out the implications of this trait of the point as regards aesthetic constructions. For such 'excessive' systems do not impose a return to the same but confirm again my argument that Deleuze creates the conditions for a manner of thinking and constructing characterised by the renunciation of the idea of a single beginning. In this way, he performs a critique of the postulates of the classical model of thought as hinged on the philosophical decision of subordinating difference 'to the supposedly initial powers of the Same and the Similar.'<sup>18</sup>

I have tried to demonstrate in what has preceded that, as regards the domain of thinking and by extension aesthetic constructions, the problematic of the concept in Deleuze can be shown to be particularly rich in teachings for contemporary thought and artistic practice. The literal and

coherent application of the principle of univocity to the domain of thought supposes, effectively, that among the different forms of immanent thought – art, philosophy, science – there is a fundamental equality. Art, philosophy, science are the grand, trans-subjective forms of immanent thought for Deleuze and between these forms or figures there is no hierarchy which would support a claim of ontological superiority of one over the other. The theory and practice imagined by the doctrines of univocal being (forms) and becoming (trajectories) do not privilege one mode of thought over another. For Deleuze, art, philosophy and science each offer, in modes different but of equal value, an intuitive 'take' on the world understood as univocal, an intuition which, as is demonstrated below in relation to the logic of architectural constructions, is at the same time a passive and inspired contemplation as well as an active and creative construction, an action and a passion of life as experimentation.

To this end, the outcome of my hypothesis regarding Deleuze's imagine of thinking could be described as a catalogue or a classification of four principles, four parallel figures and forces. This Deleuzian system of thought can be characterised as constituted by joined parts: a doctrine of being and a doctrine of thought, a doctrine of shape and a doctrine of becoming: forms and trajectories. The first allows Deleuze to renew a seemingly forgotten

project of a philosophy of nature.<sup>19</sup> The second allows for the transformation of the philosophy of intuition – that one according to Deleuze for which Bergson was the last great protagonist – into a trans-individual theory of thought as creation and of thinking as a constructivism, whether in the realm of philosophy or art or architecture.

## Architecture

When multiplicity displaces essence as the object of philosophical creation, what are the implications? In this transformation, how do we recognise the aesthetic reply in general and the architectural response in particular? As the starting point to the formal analysis, and with the notion of multiplicity in mind, I turn to Wölfflin who provides an especially useful introduction to the aesthetic operations at work. In the opening comments to the chapter on multiplicity and unity in *Principles of Art History*, he calls for a special privilege to be accorded to the case of architecture. 'It is just in architecture that the concepts [of multiple unity and unified unity] attain an unusual lucidity.'<sup>20</sup>

The Baroque sensibility for Wölfflin is found in constructions which have achieved an 'ideal lucidity'.<sup>21</sup> They display a complex multiplicity distinct from the simple multiplicity of

the Renaissance in which the parts retain their independence. The Baroque smooth mode of shapes is distinguished from an articulated composition characteristic of the Renaissance manner. As examples of these two modes of unity, complex versus simple multiplicity, Wölfflin considers that the Palazzo della Cancelleria shows a self-contained 'system with independent parts' by which he recognises a Renaissance manner.<sup>22</sup> This is distinguished from a system of 'unified arrangements,' the signature of the Baroque minimalists.<sup>23</sup> He considers the Palazzo Odescalchi an example of this later manner of unified arrangements, its elements 'fused in a mass effect'.<sup>24</sup>

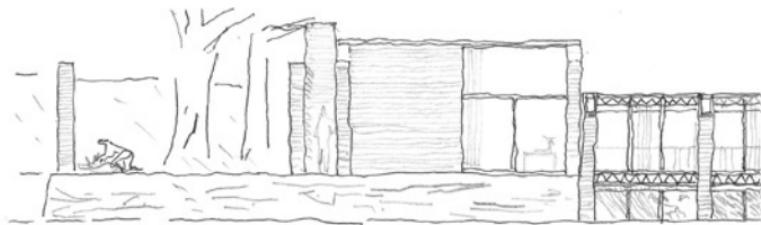
Kahn's architecture differentiates itself in its deployment of an articulated construction which resists the subordination of the parts to a multiple unity of the Renaissance, classic type. Equally, the buildings and projects of Kahn do not display the mass effect discerned by Wölfflin in the Palazzo Odescalchi and more forcefully in the Palazzo Madama in Rome in which the 'detail is swamped in the whole'.<sup>25</sup> It is a question of a different type of order. Clues to the sensibility at work can be found in Kahn's tendency to separate. The practice of distinguishing between things referred to by Kahn's collaborator Anne Tyng<sup>26</sup> perhaps resulted in this disposition toward gaps and crossings, of

things pulling away from any apparent overlapping as a sign of a tendency to the closed. This strategy leaves a point of intensity in its wake, one that emerges at different levels of invention in Kahn's work, whether at the scale of a detail, a plan, section or a larger building grouping. In the demonstration which follows, I consider the deployment of an architectural response to the problem of point.

### **Demonstration: De Vore House, Montgomery, Pennsylvania (1954-55)**

Kahn was commissioned to design a house for Mr and Mrs Weber de Vore in Montgomery, Pennsylvania in 1954. I believe that Kahn's project for the house presents an architectural response to the question of a Deleuzian non-originating point. The analysis that follows sets out the material and formal conditions which support this interpretation.

I read the De Vore House as setting up a systemic investigation into and deployment of a number of specific architectural constructive devices. In so doing, the project displays an open, abstract unity. This concept of unity can be contrasted with the multiple unity of the Renaissance and the unified unity of the Baroque.<sup>27</sup> Its abstract unity approaches a state consistent with Deleuze's own experiments with the concept of multiplicity in thought.

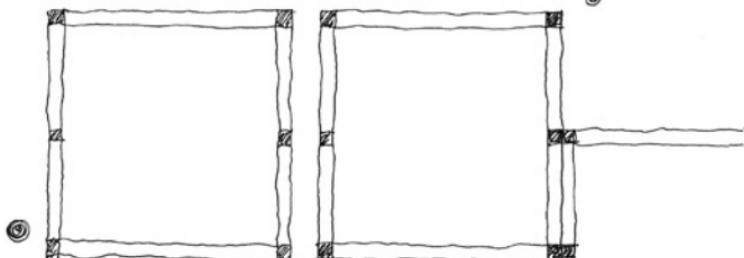


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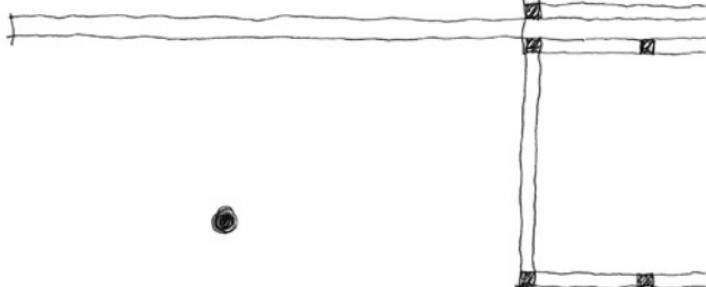
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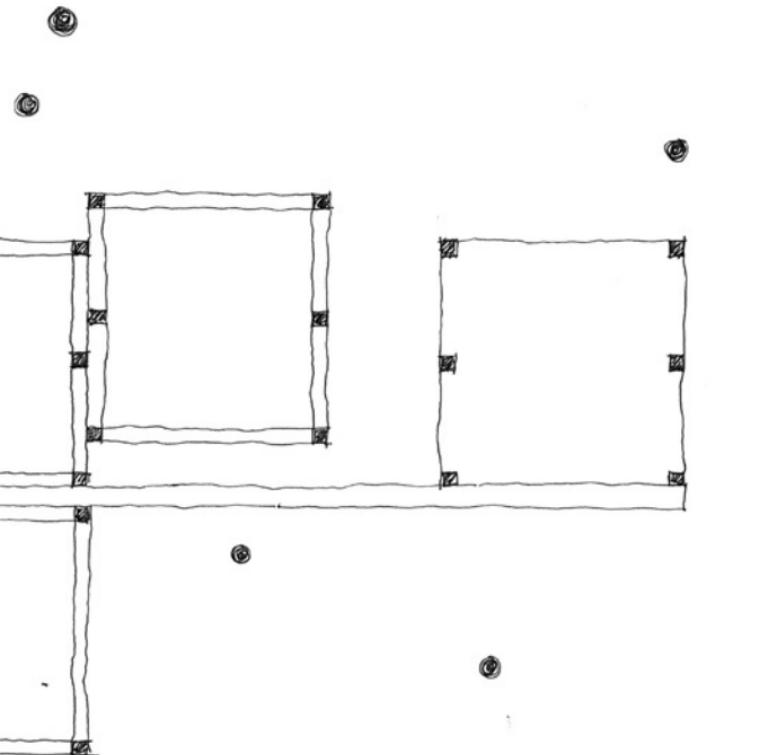
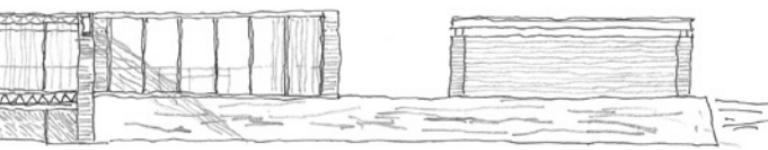
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Kahn, in his development of the site, indicates an initial choice of a scheme assembled by a linear system of rooms. What differentiates Kahn's project for the De Vore House project from his other houses, such as the Weiss or the Fleisher House, is the transformation of the basic unit. The room is not treated as an element of a more complex whole, nor does it function as a generative cell, two options readily available to him in that period. The base spatial model is used in such a manner as to display another kind of sensibility, one of simple assembly. This constructive manner is found in other projects by Kahn of the same period. In the unbuilt Fruchter House, the spatial differentiation between the main building blocks provides the primary ordering device.<sup>28</sup> The Fisher House provides another illustration of this theme, this time translated as a hinge. At the junction of two volumes, Kahn constructs a place hinged around an internal layout that resists a reading of the two volumes as generative units. In the De Vore house, Kahn develops an architectural response to the problem of an abstract unity according to a number of orders: the formal response to the site and functional brief; the volumetric order;

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*Images p.56–57: Louis Kahn, De Vore House. Top: Elevation, Bottom: Plan diagram. Illustrator: Michael Jasper, 2016, after original drawings by Louis Kahn. .*

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*Architectural Aesthetic Speculations* expands our understanding of the role of formal aesthetic criteria in twentieth-century artistic practices and reveals new and transformative aspects of architectural composition. It does this through a staged encounter of philosopher Gilles Deleuze's (1925–1995) constructivist sensibility and architect Louis Kahn's (1901–1974) mode of architectural figuration.

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