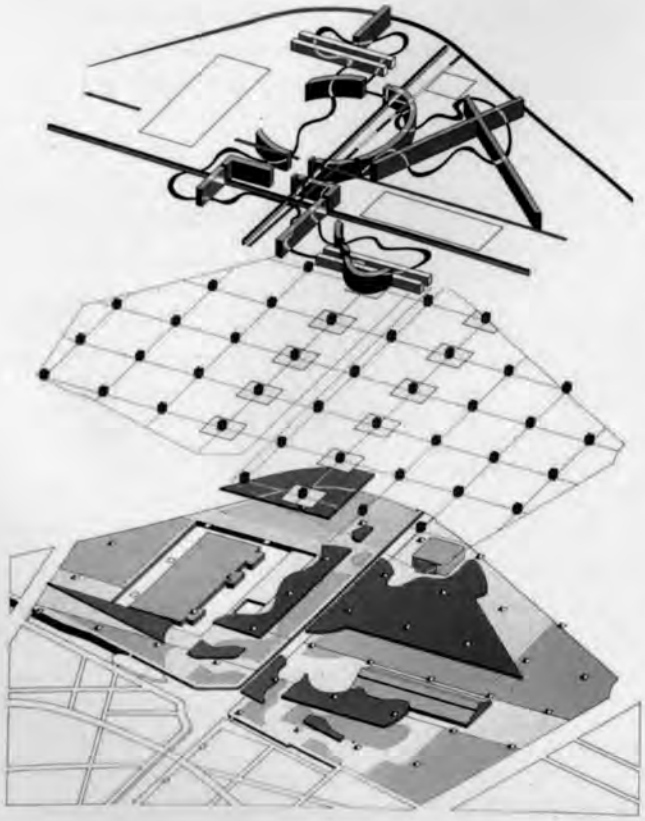
28 DECONSTRUCTIVISM 1982–1995

In 1982 the government of France ran a competition for the design of 'an urban park for the twenty-first century' on a large, semi-derelict site at La Villette in northern Paris. It was one of President Mitterrand's *Grands Projets*. The competition winner, Bernard Tschumi, had previously built almost nothing. He was a Swiss architect known mainly for his teaching at the Architectural Association in London and for his avant-garde conceptual projects. His design for La Villette was completely uncompromising. The common idea that a park should represent a natural landscape was rejected. This park would be more like an enormous, dismembered building. The functions required by the brief – playgrounds, exhibition spaces, concert venues, sports fields and so on – would be ordered by an architectural system. That system, however, would also be unusual. Spaces would not be allocated to specific functions and designed to suit them as they might be in a conventional building; instead, functions would have to accommodate themselves as best they could to an abstract, triple-layered composition of points, lines and surfaces. The points, distributed on a regular 120-metre (131-yard) grid, were little red buildings called 'follies' and, as the name implies, they were designed without any particular function in mind. Some of the lines functioned straightforwardly enough as footpaths, but others were meandering routes like random scribbles. Surfaces conformed to a different geometry of simple figures surrounded by trees. These three layers were combined with each other and with the large existing buildings on the site – a converted abattoir and a nineteenth-century market building – in a studiedly accidental way so that, conceptually at least, a folly might find itself in the middle of a tennis court and a line of trees might cross a path at an oblique angle as if it were in a different world.



An Urban Park for the Twenty First Century, La Villette, Paris, France. Bernard Tschumi, 1982. Lines, points ('follies') and surfaces, overlayed but not aligned.

The design awarded second prize in the competition was the work of an almost equally inexperienced architect, Rem Koolhaas, who also taught at the Architectural Association. Koolhaas was Dutch and his practice was called Office for Metropolitan Architecture, or OMA. If anything, Koolhaas's design was even more unconventional than Tschumi's, though it resembled it in certain ways. Instead of three layers, there were five, and the main ordering principle was not points, lines and surfaces but parallel strips, like medieval farming or like the cross-section of a skyscraper laid flat on the site.

Within a few days of the unveiling of the La Villette winner, the result of another international competition was announced, for the design of a leisure club on Victoria Peak overlooking Hong Kong harbour. Once again, the winner was a teacher at the Architectural Association, a young Iraqi-born architect called Zaha Hadid. Hadid had only recently been a student in the teaching unit run by Rem Koolhaas. Not surprisingly, despite the very different briefs, her design for the Hong Kong club showed a kinship with

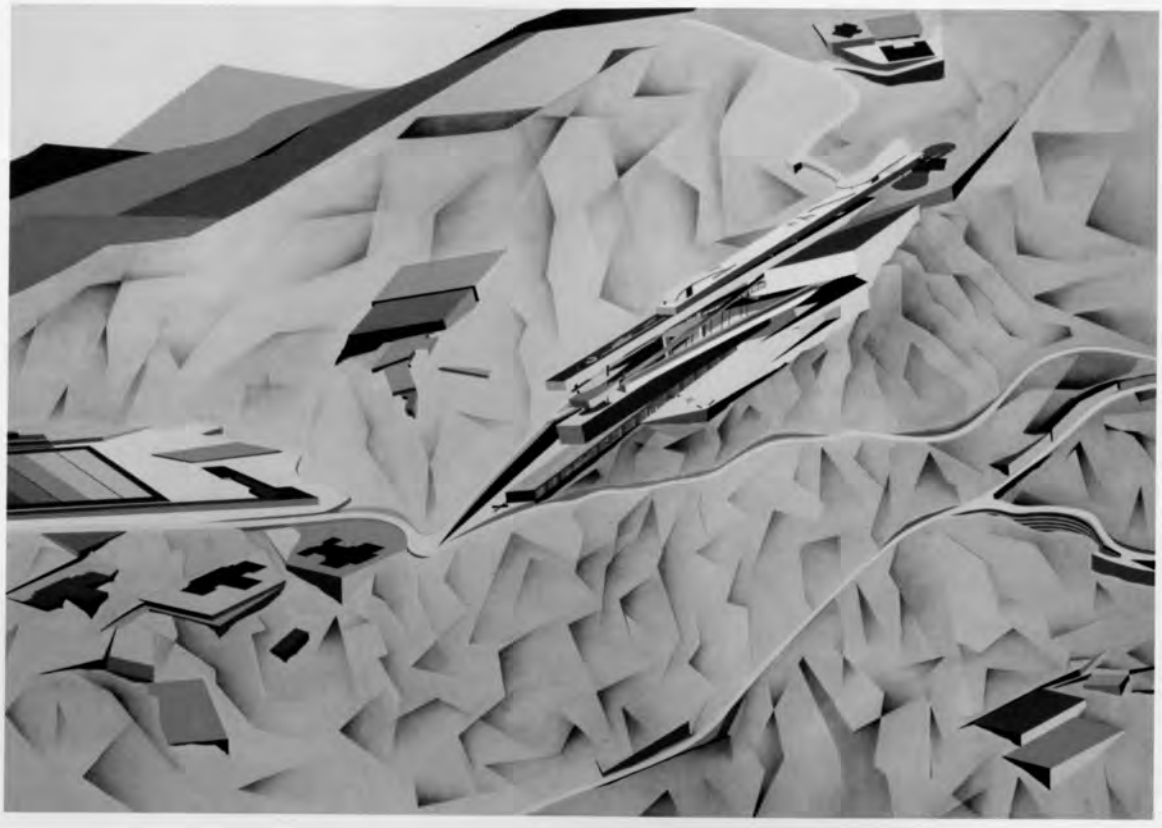
Parc de la Villette, Paris, France. Bernard Tschumi, 1982–98. One of the red, neo-Constructivist follies, not specifically designed for its function.

both of the La Villette projects. The published drawings seemed at first unintelligible. What they depicted looked more like a bunch of sticks thrown down on the hillside than a buildable building. But close scrutiny revealed order of a kind. The sticks turned out to contain rooms and corridors, and they also functioned as beams spanning long distances over the residual external voids. The voids were also functional, accommodating recognizable elements such as swimming pools and sunbathing terraces. Cut into the hillside below, service spaces such as kitchens and car parks were discernible.

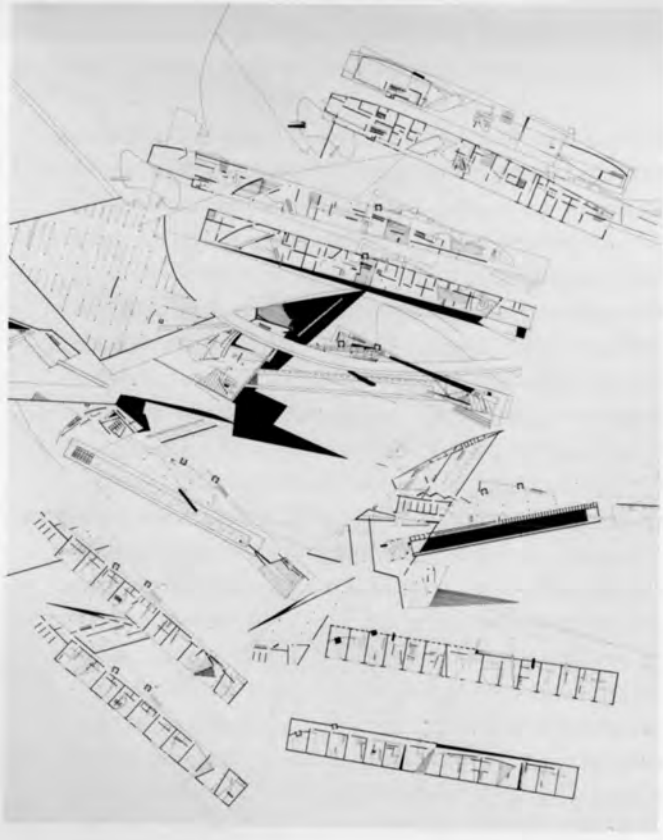
Function and form redefined

A new style was emerging among these young, London-based architects. It did not yet have a name, but certain of its features were already apparent and it was beginning to be taken seriously. Like all new styles, its first aim was to distinguish itself from what had gone before. The Postmodernism of the previous decade (see Chapter 24) was rejected as shallow and regressive, but there was no question of reviving the old Modernist orthodoxy summed up in the phrase 'form follows function'. Tschumi's conceptual projects, notably the one called Manhattan Transcripts, had essentially been critiques of the over-simplified Modernist concept of 'function', seeking to replace it with the richer, more involving concept of 'narrative'. In both of the La Villette projects 'function' was a dynamic, indeterminate concept. Those 'layering' devices (the word, and what it described, quickly became an architectural cliché) were designed not so much to accommodate settled patterns of use, such as playing a game of tennis or attending a concert, as to encourage new combinations of uses by random juxtaposition. In reality, human institutions are rather resistant to such treatment. Staging a concert in a tennis court creates certain practical problems. But the 'misuse' of functionally defined space – a picnic in a farmer's field, for example – is common enough and often pleasurable. And this was another feature of the new style. It had a hedonistic streak. In both the Paris park and the Hong Kong leisure club, unusual spaces were there not just to shock but to be enjoyed in creative, convivial ways.

The concept of form was being questioned as much as the concept of function. Modernism, in its late, decadent phase, was considered to have become mannered and formulaic. The basically classical approach to form that had always



Hong Kong Peak Leisure Club project. Zaha Hadid, 1982. One of Hadid's eccentric paintings of the building on its hillside site.



Hong Kong Peak Leisure Club plan, Zaha Hadid, 1982. On close inspection, plans show recognizable sequences of spaces, including ordinary rooms and corridors.

lurked just beneath its plain white surfaces had become tiresome. It must be subverted, taken apart, exploded. Why should all floors be flat, all columns vertical, all corners right angles? Why shouldn't surfaces be warped, columns skewed, walls fragmented? And why should scale be consistent? The tired old hierarchies – architectural and perhaps, by implication, social – must be overthrown. As we shall see, this negative, iconoclastic aspect of the new style was to become its defining feature. It was a destructive more than a constructive force.

The destructiveness, however, was not naive or impetuous. Tschumi, Koolhaas and Hadid knew very well that there was a clear historical precedent for both the theoretical and the formal aspects of their style in the art and architecture of post-revolutionary Russia, in Constructivism and Suprematism (see Chapter 11). The bundle of sticks that was the Hong Kong club was reminiscent of the randomly positioned rectangles in one of Malevich's Suprematist paintings, Tschumi's follies at La Villette bore a family resemblance to Yakov Chernikhov's architectural fantasies of the late 1920s and early 1930s, and for Rem Koolhaas and his AA students, Ivan Leonidov was a common historical reference point.

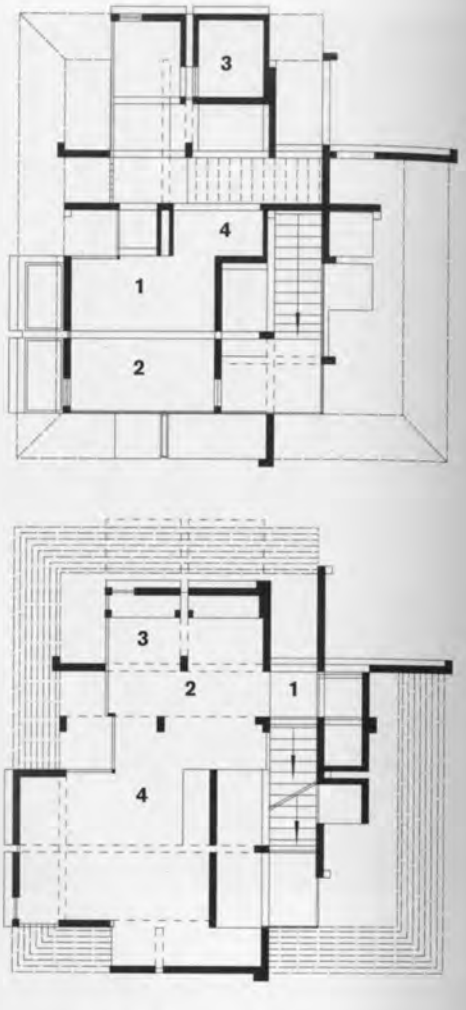
Loyola Law School, Los Angeles, California, USA. Frank Gehry, 1981. Four freestanding columns seem to signify a missing classical portico.

The new style might therefore reasonably have been called Neo-Constructivism, but there were other influences at work and other contributors to its formation. Two Americans, Frank Gehry and Peter Eisenman, had in their different ways been undermining architectural convention for some years. In Gehry's 1981 Law School building for Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, for example, a basically classical composition, appropriate for a law school, is attacked, dismembered, even mocked by its very creator. Its conventionally well-proportioned facade, with Georgian windows, is rudely pushed apart by a staircase that seems in a hurry to escape the interior. In the forecourt stands a tetrastyle classical portico, except that it has lost its pediment and its columns are plain aluminium cylinders. This might be called Postmodern, but it contains the seed of something more radical. The idea of strange forms bursting out of ordinary buildings had already appeared in Gehry's extensions to his own house in suburban Santa Monica. The tilted cube that started the destruction in about 1979 was followed by whole families of escaped forms, gathering in the garden and leaving behind the flayed structure of the original house.

Peter Eisenman's latent destructive tendencies went back even further, to his membership of the New York Five, a group of Neo-Modernist architects who had first exhibited together in 1969 (see page 382). Eisenman had always been the intellectual of the group. For him architecture was an autonomous art, a game in which what he called 'formal universals' were manipulated in various ways – division, duplication, subtraction, rotation, extension – and transformed into something new. By such means, the simple and recognizable was made complex and unrecognizable. Often these transformations had nothing to do with function in the normal sense of human use. His House VI of 1973 is a good example (see page 382).

Jacques Derrida

But Eisenman contributed more than architectural autonomy to the new style; he contributed the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. Derrida was the hero of French critical theory. His philosophy was called Deconstruction. Bernard Tschumi too was a follower of Derrida. It is hard, if not impossible, to sum up the philosophy of Deconstruction in a few words and it originally had nothing whatever to do with architecture. But there were perhaps crude parallels to be drawn between, for example, Deconstruction's questioning of the relationship between language and reality, and the new style's questioning of the relationship between form and function. Whether or not such parallels were valid, just the name 'Deconstruction', with its obvious architectural overtones, was enough to entice architects like Eisenman



House VI, Cornwall, Connecticut, USA. Peter Eisenman, 1973. The composition, including an upside-down staircase, is the outcome of a sequence of formal transformations.

First floor plan (top)
1. Bedroom
2. Slot in floor
3. Bathroom
4. Wardrobe

Ground floor plan (below)
1. Entrance
2. Dining space
3. Kitchen
4. Living room

and Tschumi who were looking to justify their practice by reference to real philosophy. In 1988 Eisenman even went so far as to collaborate directly with Derrida himself in a project, never realized, for a small, themed park to be incorporated into Tschumi's master plan for La Villette. The theme was, approximately, the questioning of representation in architecture.

By this time, certain critics had begun to apply the name 'Deconstruction' to the new architectural style. But there was an alternative designation, 'Deconstructivism', in which historical and philosophical affiliations were neatly combined and it was this name that was finally sanctioned in a major exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1988. The exhibition included buildings and projects (but mainly projects) by Tschumi, Koolhaas, Hadid, Gehry and Eisenman, plus Daniel Libeskind and Coop Himmelb(l)au. It was endorsed by Philip Johnson as co-curator, which prompted comparisons with the famous International Style exhibition of 1932 (see page 108). But the guiding light of the Deconstructivist exhibition was the critic Mark Wigley, who, five years later, was to write an influential book called *The Architecture of Deconstruction – Derrida's Haunt*. Wigley's essay in the exhibition catalogue was packed with all those negative words that seem unavoidable in any description of the style: devious, deformed, distorted, disturbed, disquiet, uncanny, uncontrollable, unsettled, unfamiliar, uneasy, angst, nightmare, alien, slippery, subverted, suppressed – all these from the last three short paragraphs.[1] One would imagine from Wigley's essay that the Deconstructivist architects were all earnest intellectuals who despaired of any joy in human life. In fact they were nothing of the kind and, apart from Tschumi and Eisenman, they were not much inclined to intellectualize their work. Wigley's essay was a determined attempt to find a retrospective theoretical justification for a style that had arisen spontaneously on both sides of the Atlantic.

Daniel Libeskind

Libeskind was represented in the exhibition by a competition-winning project for the Tiergarten district of Berlin. Its most prominent feature was an enormous inhabited beam that reared up out of the ground to a height equivalent to ten storeys so that it could look over the Berlin Wall. Symbolically the beam *was* the Berlin Wall, freed from gravity and, by implication, freed from political oppression. The interior of the beam was represented as

Jewish Museum, Berlin, Germany. Daniel Libeskind, 1999. The zig-zag plan is notionally part of an enormous Star of David inscribed far beyond the boundaries of the site.

City Edge project, Tiergarten, Berlin, Germany. Daniel Libeskind, 1987. An enormous inhabited beam lifted up to look over the Berlin Wall.

an unintelligible jumble of straight lines and circles that looked very like the abstract pen-and-ink drawings for which Libeskind was at that time mainly known. The combination of literal symbolism with out-of-control geometry would continue to characterize his designs in later years. His first major commission also came in 1988 when he won the competition to design a Jewish museum for Berlin, though the building was not completed until 1999.

The symbolic programme of the Jewish Museum is complex. The zig-zag plan, for example, is conceived in relation to an enormous, distorted Star of David notionally inscribed on and beyond the site and extending over the Berlin Wall, which still stood at the time of the design. The Holocaust is signified by a linear space or void that penetrates the whole building and that visitors must cross repeatedly in their progress through the museum. Among the other themes mentioned in Libeskind's own account of the design are Schoenberg's incomplete opera *Moses und Aron*, the *Gedenkbuch* (memorial book), which lists the names of all those people deported from Berlin during the Holocaust, and Walter Benjamin's essay 'One-Way Street'.[2] Libeskind is himself a Jew who was born in Łódz in 1946. Many members of his family had perished in the Holocaust. He is also an accomplished musician. The building has been widely acclaimed, though it is in some respects a disappointment. Its built form, with level roof and vertical walls, is a simplification of the original design, which had sloping walls, and the domestic displays that it houses look out of place in its strenuous architecture. Most of the available architectural photographs of the building show it before the exhibits were installed.

Coop Himmelb(l)au

The Austrian practice Coop Himmelb(l)au (the name means either Blue Sky Co-op with the 'l', or Sky Building Co-op without it), led by Wolf Prix and Helmut Swiczinsky, exhibited three projects in the Deconstructivism exhibition, the most interesting of which was a steel-and-glass, insect-like structure settled apparently insecurely on the roof of an ordinary Vienna apartment block. Its fragmented, asymmetrical form obeyed no obvious logic and might have been the result of a blind drawing exercise, but it was built, it stood up and it served its purpose in both an ordinary practical sense, as the office of a law firm, and in the sense that it brought this once-fringe practice, established in 1967, to the attention of clients with money to spend. In the years that followed, Coop Himmelb(l)au built substantial buildings in various European cities, sometimes taming their style to suit budgets and client expectations, as in the bent tower of their Gasometer B apartment building in Vienna, designed in 1995, and sometimes maintaining a degree of wildness, as in their museum building at Groningen in the Netherlands, completed in 1994.

(Above) Rooftop remodelling, Falkestrasse, Vienna, Austria. Coop Himmelb(l)au, 1988. The insect-like form might have been the result of a blind drawing exercise.

(Right) Gasometer B apartment building, Vienna, Austria. Coop Himmelb(l)au, 2001. The distorted tower is an early example of a form that later became commonplace as computer modelling spread.

Le Fresnoy Art Centre, Tourcoing, France. Bernard Tschumi, 1997. A new umbrella roof over an existing leisure complex creates an ambiguous intermediate space.

The Deconstructivism exhibition boosted the careers of all its participants. Eisenman and Gehry were already well established in practice and Koolhaas had built a handful of buildings, but Tschumi and Hadid had achieved fame solely on the basis of paper projects. Their aim now was to build. Tschumi's Parc de la Villette project went ahead: the follies were built (looking no more real than they had as drawings), the surfaces were laid and the trees planted without departing too far from the spirit of the original design, but the public's attention was more drawn to the real buildings on the site – the City of Science and Industry in the converted abattoir and Christian de Portzamparc's City of Music – than to the virtual building of the park itself. Tschumi pursued an academic career, becoming dean of the Graduate School of Architecture at Columbia University in 1988, but continued to practise in the United States, France and Switzerland. In his Le Fresnoy contemporary arts studio at Tourcoing near Lille in France, ideas of layering, accidental juxtaposition and unpredictable use are kept alive in an economical design that covers an existing 1920s leisure complex with a shed-like umbrella roof. The space between the old and new roofs becomes a zone of indeterminate use accessed by elevated walkways. Tschumi compares this combination of new roof and old buildings to the Surrealist image of 'the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table' but from the client's point of view it was probably more attractive as a money-saving strategy. Tschumi's most important commission was to come in 2001 with the Acropolis Museum in Athens.

Vitra Fire Station, Weil am Rhein, Germany. Zaha Hadid, 1993. Reinforced concrete stretched to the structural limit in Zaha Hadid's first important building.

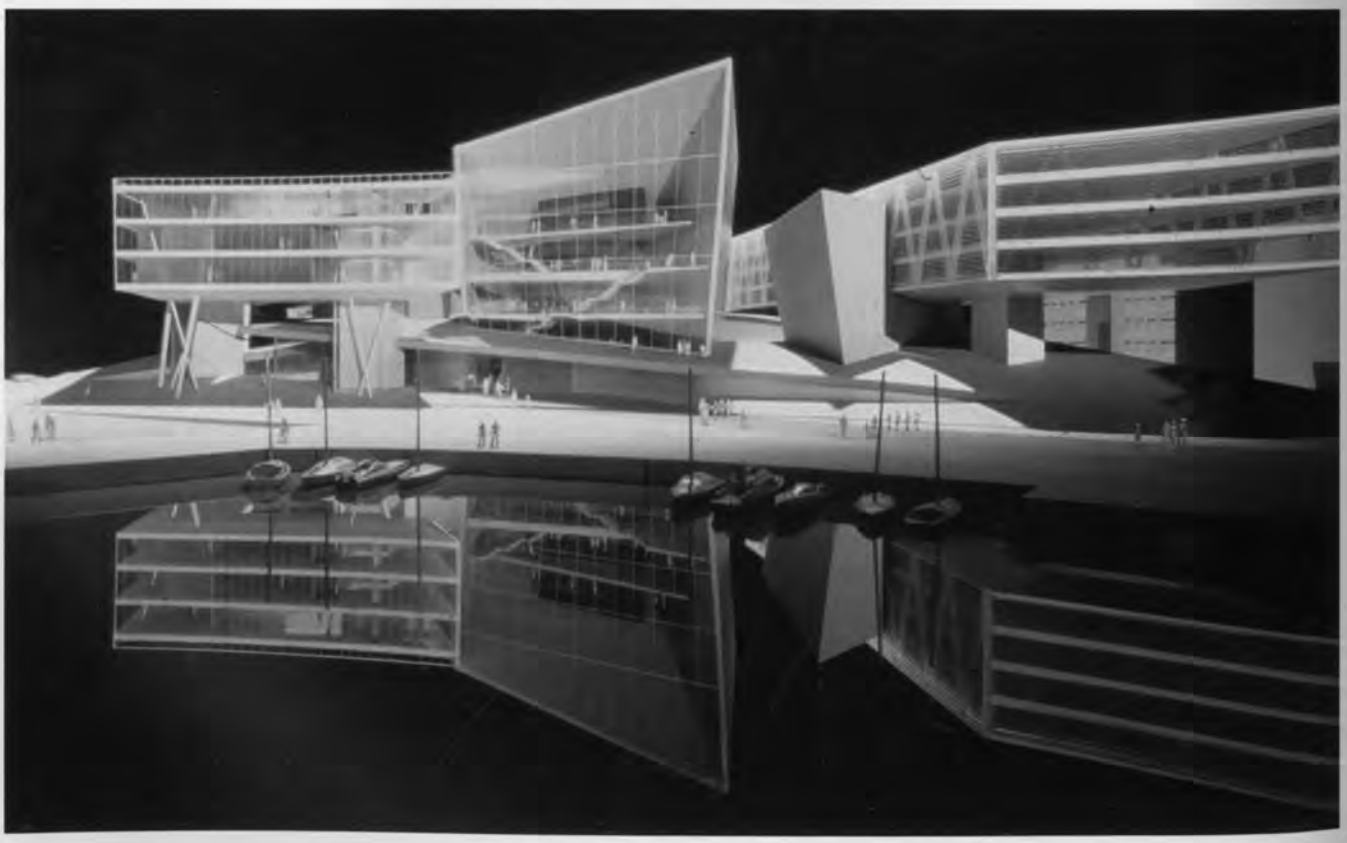
Zaha Hadid had to wait until the turn of century before large commissions came her way and by then her jagged Deconstructivist style had turned into something smoother, slicker and more accommodating to corporate clients (see pages 448–451). Her influence on architects all over the world, and especially on architectural students, should not be under-estimated, however. She was an artist/architect of astonishing vision and her drawings and paintings form an impressive oeuvre even though most of the buildings they depict were never built.

In a Hadid painting, such as those that accompanied the Hong Kong club design, gravity has been abolished and buildings can fly. This essentially simple vision is the whole message of her early work. The sort of architectural drawings – plans, sections and elevations – that are normally used to fix and record the form of a building are boldly combined with the sort of drawings – perspective views – that are meant to give a visual impression. And both are slanted and foreshortened as if seen from a spaceship in low orbit. Real buildings, unfortunately, are subject to gravity, so weightlessness has to be simulated. In her only real building of the 1990s, a fire station for the Vitra furniture company at Weil am Rhein in Germany, ordinary reinforced concrete is stretched to the limit, as if straining to take off and almost succeeding. In 1994 it seemed that for Hadid the breakthrough to building had come with her winning of the Cardiff Bay Opera House competition against a field of 267 architects from all over the world. A traditional opera house is the last building type that one would associate with an architect who is deeply sceptical about customs and laws, even the laws of nature, so this was a surprise result. But it was also an impressive demonstration of Hadid's ability to master a complex brief and inspire the confidence of an expert jury. The project had a stormy ride. It was distrusted by the local authorities, sniped at by the press and, amid accusations of elitism on one side and philistinism on the other, eventually it foundered. Hadid's reputation, though, suffered no harm.

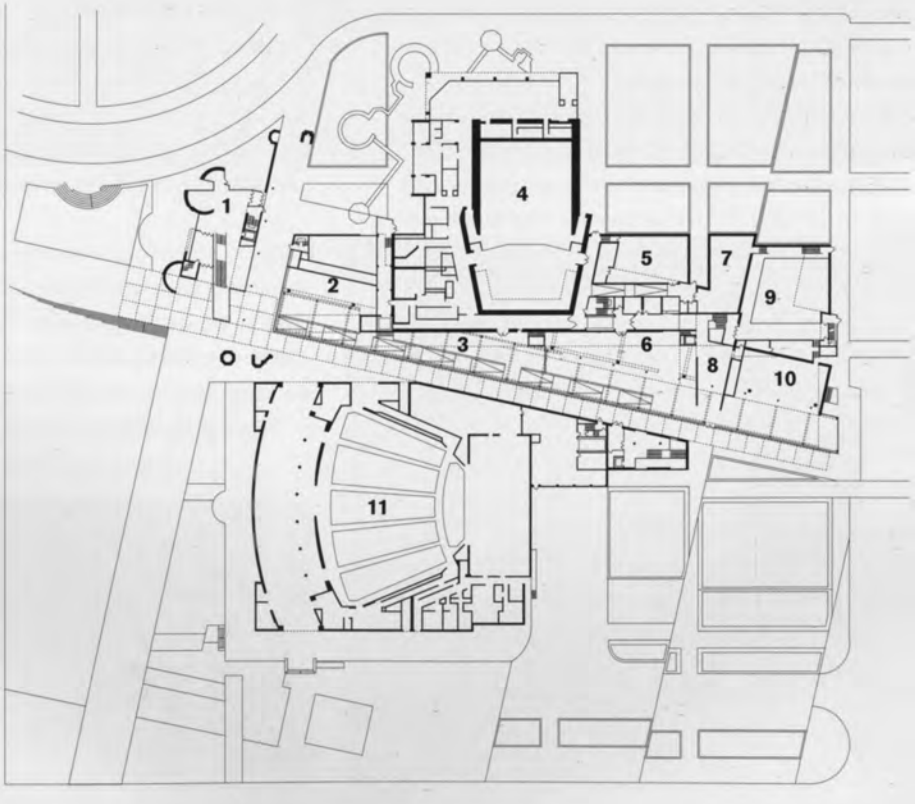
Colliding grids

At the time of the Deconstructivism exhibition, Peter Eisenman's academically orientated practice was already beginning to tackle larger projects. The Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University in Columbus might reasonably be thought of as the first large-scale Deconstructivist building, although, like Gehry's Loyola Law School, it also shows some affinity with 1970s Postmodernism. One simple way to achieve the kind of disjunction and disorientation that Deconstructivism demanded was to overlay one controlling grid on another at a slight angle. Building elements like walls or floors might

Cardiff Bay Opera House (unbuilt). Zaha Hadid, 1994.
The competition-winning project eventually foundered after encountering opposition from the press and local authorities.



Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus, USA. Peter Eisenman, 1989. Campus grid and city grid overlap and combine to create unexpected, deconstructed forms.



Ground floor plan
1. Upper lobby
2. Open to Ohio gallery below
3. Permanent collection gallery
4. Weigel hall
5. Instrumental hall
6. Main gallery
7. Choral hall
8. Performance space lobby
9. Open to performance space below
10. Experimental gallery
11. Mershon auditorium

obey either grid and clash satisfyingly with their neighbours of the other allegiance. At the Wexner the grids came with the site: one corresponded to the street plan of the city of Columbus and the other to the plan of the university campus. The new arts centre, which obeyed the city grid, was sited between and under two existing auditoriums that obeyed the university grid. To make the clash apparent, Eisenman introduced a new public walkway through the middle of the complex marked by an open framework like a pergola. The Postmodern element was the rebuilding of the old castle-like university armoury to form an entrance to the walkway. The new armoury roughly resembled the original except that its turrets and arches were sliced through – deconstructed – in an apparently arbitrary manner.

Greater Columbus Convention Center, Ohio, USA. Peter Eisenman, 1993. The street front reveals the ends of train-like roofs, though the space below is a simple hall.

Checkpoint Charlie housing, Berlin, Germany. Peter Eisenman, 1985. A very early deconstructed facade in a still-divided Berlin.

Eisenman had already explored the potential of overlapping grids in his Checkpoint Charlie housing in Berlin, completed in 1985, and he continued to explore it in buildings like the Aronoff Center for Design and Art in Cincinnati, Ohio, completed in 1996. But his restless intellect was moving into fresh conceptual territory in its search for a radically new architecture. In the Greater Columbus Convention Center, completed in 1993, he explores the curvilinear forms of roads and railways, the in-between spaces of the city. The site was an old rail yard and the exterior of Eisenman's building looks like the trains that once stood in it. Inside, though, the space mostly consists of a vast open area, ready to be configured for almost any combination of events.

Frank Gehry

If Eisenman soon moved on from Deconstructivism, it is doubtful that Frank Gehry ever really inhabited that territory in the first place. A Jewish Canadian working in Los Angeles, Gehry has always described himself as an outsider. His buildings are as much sculpture as architecture and are strongly influenced by artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Claes Oldenburg. Gehry has always been alert to the surreal potential of large objects in city streets. His California Aerospace Museum building of 1984 is unambiguously signposted by the real Lockheed Starfighter bracketed off its facade, and in his 1991 headquarters for the advertising agency Chiat/Day in Venice, Los Angeles, a giant pair of binoculars serves as an entrance porch. But there are also subtler, more sophisticated influences. The Winton Guest House of 1987, for example, is said to have been inspired by the art of Giorgio Morandi, who obsessively painted bottles and jugs on tabletops. Only one of the objects that combine to make the house looks like a bottle, but the composition is unmistakably a still life nevertheless.

Painting and sculpture inspire Gehry, but so does nature, especially fish, which are something of an obsession. For Gehry, the writhing, silvery forms of fishes represent an image of what architecture might become if only it could be freed from its traditional rectilinearity. Fish first appear in his work as simple signs or totems, like the grey scaly

Chiat/Day offices, Los Angeles, California, USA. Frank Gehry, 1991. The binoculars, designed by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, frame the entrance to the car park.

Winton Guest House, Wayzata, Minnesota, USA. Frank Gehry, 1987. A composition inspired by Giorgio Morandi, obsessive painter of bottles on tabletops.

specimen that stands in front of the Fishdance Restaurant in Kobe, Japan of 1987 or the more abstracted fish-form that adorns the seafront of the Vila Olímpica in Barcelona. But soon they begin to be inhabited. At one stage in the ten-year-long and ultimately fruitless gestation of the house he designed for Peter B. Lewis, a wealthy American businessman, the design was dominated by a large, whale-like form.

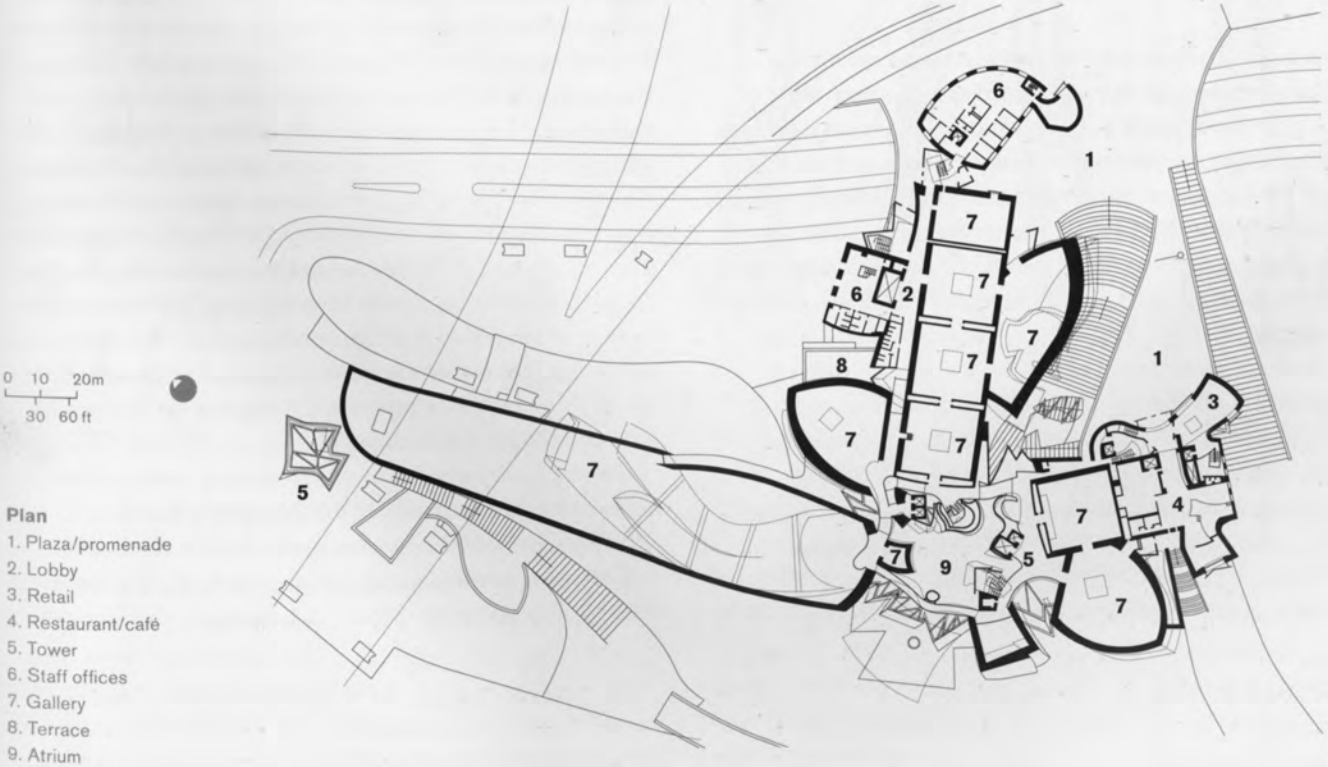
It is tempting to follow Gehry in his obsession and begin to interpret all of his later work in terms of fish. One begins to see the fish influence in even relatively (for him) straightforward multi-storey buildings like the Cinémathèque Française in Paris of 1994, or the well-known 'Fred and Ginger' (Astaire and Rogers) building in Prague of 1996. Gehry can't construct a straightforward office building without giving it a biomorphic twist. His

Fishdance Restaurant, Kobe, Japan. Frank Gehry, 1987. One of several fishes and fish-like forms in Gehry's idiosyncratic oeuvre.

'Fred and Ginger' building, Prague, Czech Republic. Frank Gehry and Vlado Milunic, 1996. Gehry's nickname is now deemed inappropriate in this culturally independent city.

clients would be disappointed if he did. But if the building is a museum or an art gallery – a one-off rather than a representative of an urban type – then biomorphism takes over completely and the dream of a liberated architecture is almost realized. The Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, completed in 1993, seems to be tripping over itself in its anxiety to struggle free, but in the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, completed four years later, the scale is more generous and the composition more assured. It has been hailed as one of the greatest buildings of the twentieth century. When Philip Johnson first stood in the atrium of the Bilbao Guggenheim he was moved to tears, comparing it to Chartres Cathedral.[3] The comparison is hardly apt. This atrium is Gothic only in its height. Limestone, steel, glass and white-painted plaster are combined with the freedom of an action painting rather than in conformity with a strict

Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain. Frank Gehry, 1997. A filleted, titanium-scaled exterior but there are traditional, square, top-lit galleries inside.



Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota, Minnesota, USA. Frank Gehry, 1993. Deconstructed to an extreme degree, like a Cubist sculpture.

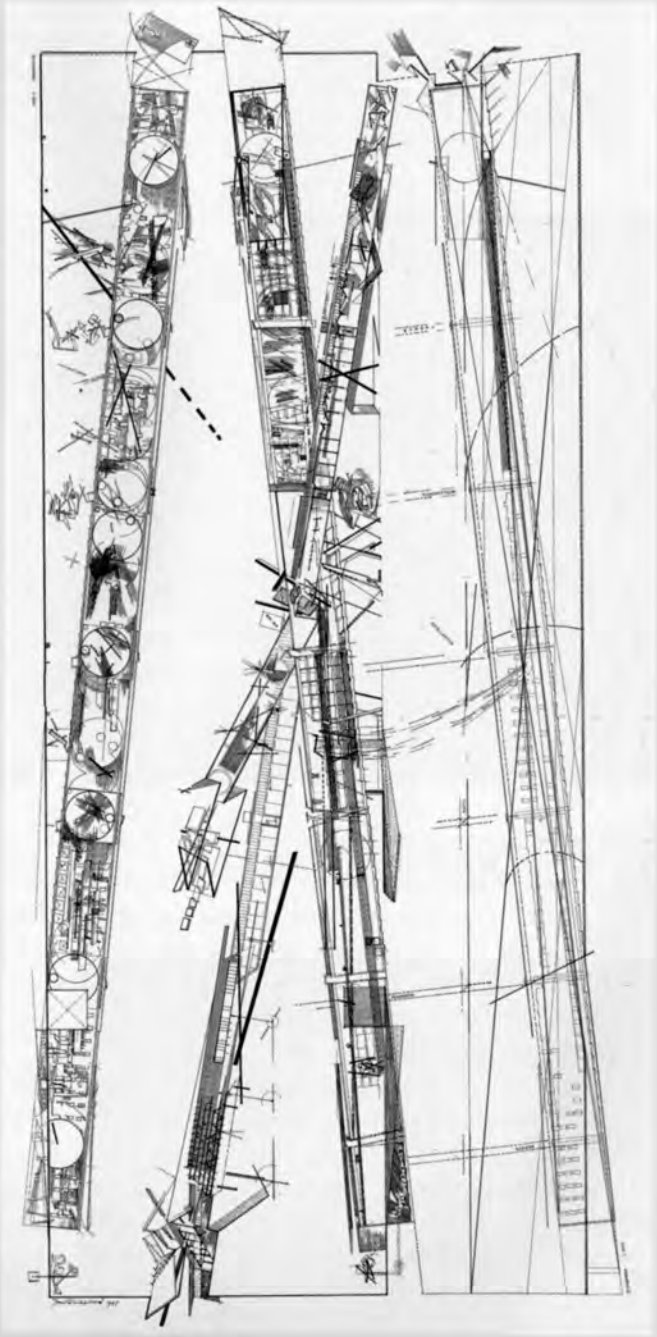
geometrical and structural system. And the atrium is a special space even in this extraordinary building. Most of the galleries in which paintings and sculpture are displayed are perfectly conventional – square on plan and top lit. It is as if the building occasionally goes quiet, suddenly aware of its duty to step back and display the art, but then can no longer contain itself and bursts out again, demanding attention. Some of its most extravagant flourishes are pure sculpture. The long East Gallery, for example, looks like a three-storey structure but its fish-like upper levels are floorless voids. Computer-aided design, in this case the CATIA (Computer-Aided Three-dimensional Interactive Application) system developed by the French aircraft company Dassault and adapted for architecture in Gehry's own office, has made geometrical discipline a thing of the past. The rigid steel nets that support those writhing, titanium-scaled bodies would have been almost impossible to fabricate on such a scale before the coming of CAD/CAM technology. It is important to note, though, that the forms originated not in a computer but in Gehry's imagination. The computer merely speeded up a design process that originally involved repeated modifications to physical sketch models. The forms are human inventions and their exuberance delights architects, critics and the general public alike. In the history of modern architecture such agreement is extremely rare. Whether Gehry's personal method has any future as a style to be developed and continued by others and applied to building types other than art galleries is doubtful. But the Guggenheim can be said to have engaged with twenty-first-century urban reality in at least one respect: it 'put Bilbao on the map', attracted droves of tourists and stimulated the city's economic regeneration. It may not be Gothic, but symbolically it is a cathedral.

Of the seven participants of the Deconstructivism exhibition, only Rem Koolhaas remains to be discussed. But his work and influence must be examined in more detail in a separate chapter.

Deconstruction

Deconstruction is a linguistic theory or method invented by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004). Despite its obvious architectural overtones, the word originally had nothing to do with architecture. Derrida was what is now known as a Poststructuralist; that is to say he continued the semiotic and Structuralist tradition founded by Ferdinand de Saussure but disagreed with certain important aspects of it. In general terms, the idea is that every human communication, no matter how urgent or immediate it might be – a cry for help, perhaps – depends on an arbitrary, abstract system of 'differences' that exists independently of the communicating person. Language, especially written language, is such a system. Writing depends neither on the presence of the person that creates it nor on the presence of what it refers to. The meaning of a text is always provisional and approximate, always 'deferred'. And since human beings can only understand their world by means of language and other sign systems, which are kinds of text, they can never attain complete knowledge of anything in that world. Signs signify other signs, which in turn signify other signs in an endless chain. There can be no fixed, permanent, 'transcendent' reality to which language refers.

When Deconstruction is applied to the sign system called architecture, the argument becomes even more convoluted. Architecture and philosophy are, it turns out, related in rather fundamental ways. Often architecture provides metaphors for thought itself. We talk about the 'structure' of a philosophical system, about opinions that are 'well founded', about the 'embellishment' of an argument. It is as if architecture were itself a kind of philosophy – a set of ideas about the fixed, logical, stable relationships between things. It is the architectural aspect of philosophy that Derrida objects to most, the idea that it is possible to take an overview of reality, to see how one part relates to another and thereby to understand it. Even that word 'understand' has faint architectural resonances. Deconstruction dismisses all such notions as mere comforting illusions. It sounds like something architects should steer well clear of but in the 1980s certain architects, notably Peter Eisenman and Bernard Tschumi, adopted Deconstruction as the theory of a new kind of architecture that would question the 'common sense' notion that the form of a building might 'represent' the reality of its construction, its function, its context or the traditions of the society that produced it.



City Edge project, Berlin, Germany. Daniel Libeskind, 1987. The drawing depicts a building proposal but is also designed to be appreciated as an abstract composition.