

On the Work of Bernard Tschumi

The Concept of a Tschumi does not Transgress

Where Do You Stand? Part I

Where do you stand when you are acutely conscious of 'the paradox of architecture', which means you cannot think about it and experience it at the same time? Where, too, if you tirelessly ponder and publish about the historically-grown moral domination of thought over subjective experience which makes everything so abstract? Where, too, if all these things are so much on your mind that you have developed a vocabulary in which you can say it all so beautifully that you have become totally dependant on it? And as a result of all this you have become further than ever estranged from pure experience? So that you *propagate transgression*, sing the praises of sensory and somatic pleasure in architecture as an abstraction, making experience into a philosophical category? So that your theory becomes a burden precisely where it ought to have become superfluous?

'The Concept of Space is not in Space'

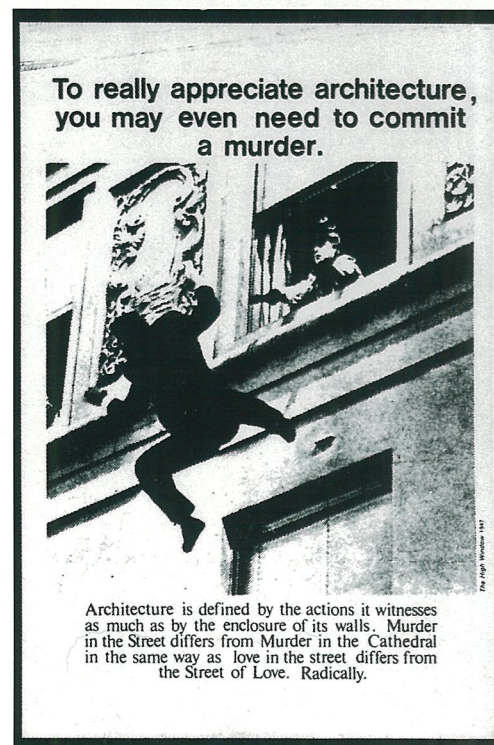
According to Bernard Tschumi, the above paradox is 'about the impossibility of questioning the nature of space and at the same time making or experiencing a real space'. ★ In other words as soon as you start thinking, it gets in the way of your own experience. This

★ Tschumi, Bernard. *Questions of Space*, London 1991, p. 27.

idea of our intellectual capacity as a burden with the implicit glorification of uncompromised experience is laden with philosophical preconceptions. In this train of thought the 'concept of architecture' is an obstruction.

'Architecture constitutes the reality of experience while this reality gets in the way of the overall vision. Architecture consists of the abstraction of absolute truth, while this very truth gets in the way of feeling. We cannot both experience and think that we experience. "The concept of dog does not bark"; the concept of space is not in space.'

For someone who is inclined to see the world in such problematic terms, discovering the above-mentioned paradox of architecture must be enough to give a sensation of transgression all on its own. In a profession that, ever since Vitruvius, has been in the habit of codifying itself in tractates and leaving the experiencing of its products to other people, it is an act of salvation to posit *experience* as the polar opposite of *understanding*. Bernard Tschumi has scrutinised this dialectic opposition in exceptional depth. It has brought him world fame as an intellectual who builds. Or, we may perhaps say, a builder who has a theory into the bargain. Tschumi the avant-gardist has seen that the world is no more than a construct of subjective thought and at the same time has succeeded in overcoming this mental stumbling-block by going into action. The kind of salon intellectual who, seated at a desk in his attic or ivory tower, understood the world but was incapable of changing it seems to have become finally outmoded in the light of Bernard Tschumi's career. His work seems to be an actual bridging of the gulf between art and life, and hence the ultimate fulfilment of the avant-garde wish. Just consider



To really appreciate architecture, you may even need to commit a murder.

Architecture is defined by the actions it witnesses as much as by the enclosure of its walls. Murder in the Street differs from Murder in the Cathedral in the same way as love in the street differs from the Street of Love. Radically.

Bernard Tschumi, Advertisement for Architecture, 1976

this: his *magnum opus*, the Parc de la Villette in Paris, was generally applauded as a breakthrough in both architecture and in cultural politics. The intellectual world was gratified by the long-awaited practical triumph of high-class thinking. The practical world, the world of architecture and politics, was euphoric over a design that appeared capable of carrying off the official approval of the vanguard of thought. Thought in Paris, naturally.

How does the Occasionally Built Reality of Tschumi look? Tenuous

Having excelled for years in the formulation of controversial theories of architecture, and blessed with a sophisticated graphic technique, Tschumi found an opportunity in the commission for Parc de la Villette to show that a complex architectonic organisation is possible without the aid of traditional means such as composition, hierarchy, order or balance. The park thus shows no traces of a synthesis. The brief was 'deconstructed' by Tschumi into three elementary principles: movement, meeting points and events. During the design process, this trinity was formalised with the concepts of lines, points and surfaces, which remain separate and autonomous. The design involves the repeated opposition of dynamics and points of rest. The architectural object obtains its identity through an interplay of mass and motion. Where the public is meant to take possession of the project there are expressive circulation structures (walkways, staircases etc.) which often float in front of the main volume. This movement is strongly accentuated by exuberant structures that remind us of Russian Constructivism. For Tschumi, strict adherence to the brief is not cardinal; the architect must comply with it, and that is all. But what the brief can do is inspire an idea which can legitimise a logistic (grammatical) invention – as in the New National Theatre,

Architecture is the ultimate erotic act. Carry it to excess and it will reveal both the traces of reason and the sensual experience of space. Simultaneously.

Bernard Tschumi

The game of architecture is an intricate play with rules that you may break or accept. These rules, like so many knots that cannot be untied, have the erotic significance of bondage: the more numerous and sophisticated the restraints, the greater the pleasure.

Bernard Tschumi

Transgression. An exquisitely perverse act that never lasts. And like a caress is almost impossible to resist.

Bernard Tschumi

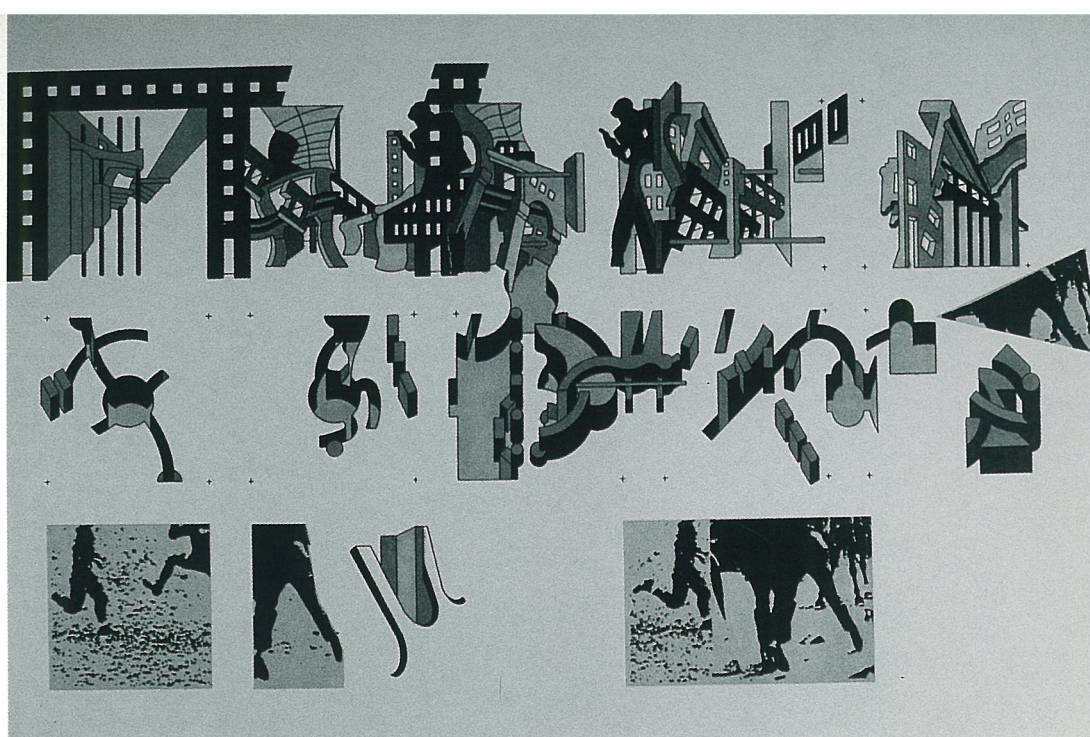
Architecture only exists through the world in which it locates itself. If this world implies dissociation and destroys unity, architecture will inevitably reflect these phenomena.

Bernard Tschumi

La Villette's 'programmatic deconstruction', its insistence on intertextuality over contextuality, its indeterminate textual systems, its combinative *folie* production, and its insistence on the contamination of architecture by film, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and literary theory - all subvert and rewrite Modernism's post-fordist ideology of the plan and the programme, and thus their inherently conservative distinction between architectural theory and architectural practice.

Michael Speaks

Hailed as 'A Park of the twenty-first Century,' La Villette is truly an 'architectural thinking' which has become detached from all referents, as the future present, dissolving itself, like Hans Haacke's productions, precisely as part of the circuitry and modulation of contemporary capital. Tschumi has thus remarked of La Villette and architecture in general that 'Architectural is not about the spatial illustration of theoretical or philosophical propositions at any one time; rather it participates in them, accelerates and intensifies them. With La Villette, then, we are no longer in a situation in which there is an architectural theory, in the form of the plan, or the programme, juxtaposed to a practice as realised built form; no longer a situation of an inside where complex models based on philosophical concepts are devel-



Manhattan Transcripts, Part 4, excerpt, 1981

Tokyo (1986), where the need to accommodate musical activities gave Tschumi the idea of structuring the building in analogy to the lines of notation in a musical score which can represent every kind of tone, melody and rhythm. To Tschumi, all functional spaces are essentially interchangeable and fulfil specific functions only in the given configuration. Tschumi stages the ground plan and the main volume of a design at a conceptual level and barely attends to the actual programmatic function. At points where the function involves movement, he surprises us with a flourish of expressive Constructivism. His real interest is in the dynamics of the moving subject and in the mass and articulation of the plan. In the designs for both the Très Grande Bibliothèque (Paris, 1989) and the station in Kyoto (1991) we can see how Tschumi confiscates the circulation spaces even before starting on the allocation of the main functional areas.

A central issue for Tschumi is the recognition of the imagination as a coequal element in the designing and experiencing of architecture. In his view this aspect has been chronically undervalued in Western architecture since the Renaissance. Thinking was marked by principles such as order, harmony, demarcation and purpose. It was always insight and practical knowledge that were responsible for the unity of the plan. Every question that fell outside the limits of comprehension was out of order. Architecture was invariably made the alibi for totalising thought and was thus never itself. It was at the service of a metaphysical system, either divine or rational.

Since the imagination was not to be trusted, it was invariably worsted by truth, understanding or common sense. The imagination was volatile, unbounded, imponderable and was hence seen as a perturbation of the rational process that led up to a building: from the clearly defined programme without any white areas, via the planned design process, to the defined use and agreed meaning. But for Tschumi, attention to what

falls outside the rational process, the absent and implicit, the neglected and the repressed, is precisely what will save architecture.

Metonymic Tschumi

The unprecedented debate around Parc de la Villette arose from an interplay of social forces for which the architect found an intriguing form at exactly the right moment. The site on which this multifunctional leisure park was established, alongside the Boulevard Périphérique, was previously the location of the abattoir. It thus automatically occupied a place in the widespread discussions on the reallocation of industrial and semi-industrial zones. Moreover, it formed part of the universally resurgent interest in the city periphery as an ostensibly chaotic but no less important location for building projects. Further, with Tschumi as the chosen architect, the project complied with the flourishing trend of granting commissions to internationally active architects, thereby further boosting the maverick's star status. Finally, here was an opportunity for architecture to come forward with a cultural standpoint of the first order. Architecture figured visibly in both the sociopolitical and philosophical discourses and hence accrued an enormous social prestige. Parc de la Villette is a sign of the rebirth of architecture as a constituent of society after years of a languishing existence as a function of economy. Tschumi has become a metonym for the revival of architecture. But pioneering architecture is no longer the precursor of a new society, as the Modernists preached. This time architecture is deployed as a mask for a society that frantically puts up a show of change while in fact largely disabled by massive stasis. The forms may well recall the revolutionary élan of the Russian Revolution, but the content is drawn from an apolitical theory of deconstruction.

oped, and an outside where they are implemented. Instead, via *folie La Villette*, a whole series of 'architectural thinkings' become possible - Jameson's cognitive maps, Baudrillard's simulation scenarios, Foucault's heterotopias, Deleuze's smooth spaces, Derrida's aporias. No longer to be understood as mediatory spaces invested as Althusser's 'post-stations' in the empty space between theoretical principles and the concrete, nor as occupational sites between 'architectural thinking' and architecture, between theory and practice, these 'thinkings' are *folies* - in this, my *La Villette* - heterotopian sites, to be read, written and abandoned in a constant negotiation.

Michael Speaks

To a certain extent, Tschumi remains faithful to his early research. Heterogeneity and resistance are still dominant themes in his work, although their early activist political edge has today given way to fragments of French antihumanist philosophy. In proclaiming the end of utopias, Tschumi seemed to adopt Tafuri's project of demystification. Like so many other aspects of his work, however, this is only a façade; for Tschumi's ascension in the academic and professional worlds of architecture may be attributed to

his ability to play on the most persistent of contemporary myths. Perceived as a European intellectual by Americans and as an American architect by the French, Tschumi has profited from both the prestige of French theory in America and the legend of American pragmatism in France. Judging Tschumi by his actions rather than his rhetorics, one discovers that the eroticism of the borders is not just a playful game.

Louis Martin

When an architect invents a new theorem, or an architectural culture invents a new theorem, it is a very important moment in architecture.

Bernard Tschumi

I'm more interested in the mechanisms of film than in the movie itself.

Bernard Tschumi

It was in this precarious situation that Tschumi set to work. Heavily over-conscious of the social and philosophical determinants that limited him, he produced a design that above all else was about 'the event'. But what event? And why?

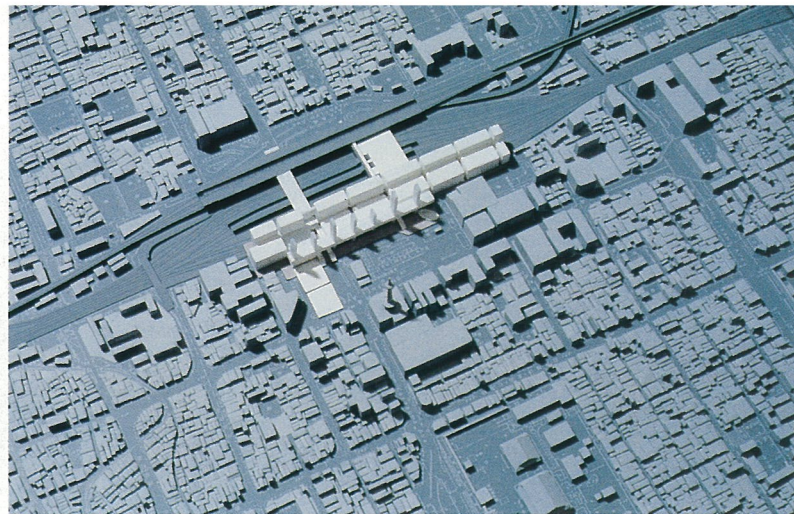
The real paradox lies not in the architecture but in Tschumi's own programme. It is the paradox of the avant-garde. Realising that life can be understood backwards but only lived forwards, Tschumi has to choose between thinking and doing. If he thinks, then he is bound to get bogged down on the periphery of the world stage. If he does something, then he runs the risk of being totally irrelevant on the world stage. For an architect with the intellectual standard of Tschumi, the paradox of architecture is an inevitable fate. But once you look deeper than the pretty things this has achieved for philosophy and architecture, there remain the following questions to be answered:

Where Do You Stand? Part II

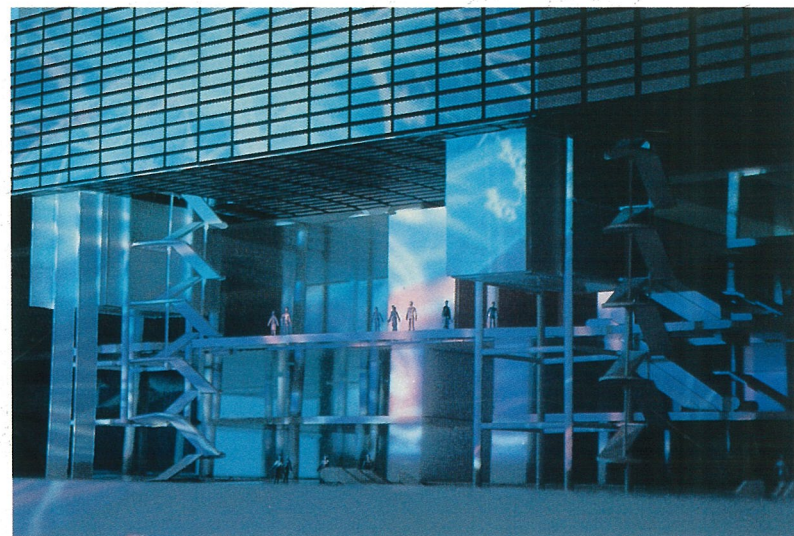
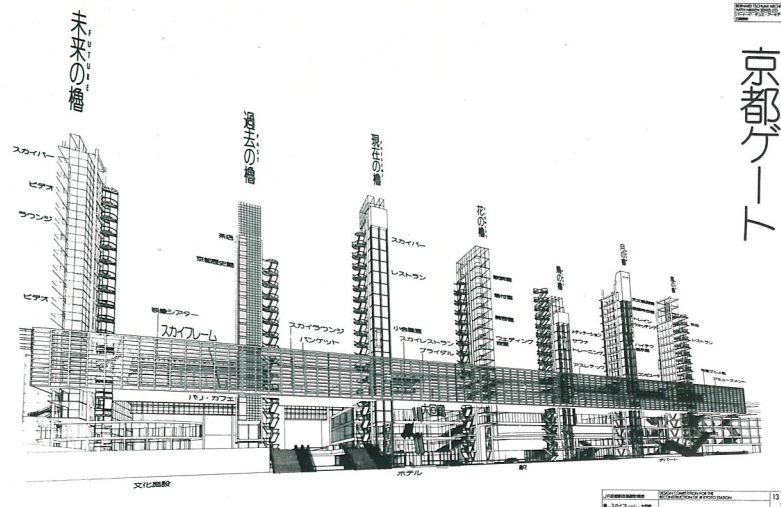
Where do you stand if, as an architect, you wish to jettison the principles of order, balance and harmony? If you wish to throw over functional planning and the unity of content and form in favour of a game of fragments played with brittle signs with no agreed meanings? If you want all these things while you have a concrete commission, a programme and a goal? And while you will ultimately have to commit yourself to a design that will travel the world on computer screens and in four colour printing, a design of which countless people get no more than a fleeting impression? While there are so many people eagerly looking forward to the completion of your project?

What is the role of the architect if you no longer believe in pioneering projects by pioneering architects, nor in heroes who intervene in history? If you wish to debunk that whole idea? If you no longer believe in charismatic personalities, in individuals who achieve things by strength of will, but in a world dictated by signification systems? If you no longer believe in the present but in the absent, in that which is forever unstated and remains between the lines, which resists capturing in language: the imagination, the experience, the unconscious? If you lose your faith in all that at the very moment you are elevated to the gallery of honour of architecture, the moment you are appreciated for your perspicacity and become a public figure?

What are you if formal and programmatic conflict constitutes the *Leitmotif* of your work? If you have had your fill of harmonising your work with mankind, the environment, the commission and ideology? If you prefer to be vague, undefined, uncoordinated and inconsistent, just as imagination is? If you can only see the opposites of these, order, fixity of purpose and efficiency, as the attributes of repression, and if you find ideological consensus nauseating? If you then feel yourself to be suffocating in that soft blanket of pluralism, in the democratic gum where everyone sticks to his opinions but nobody knows what grounds there might still be for stating them? And if you then observe that conflict and complexity are a comfortable pose in a world full of opinions that nobody listens to?



Kyoto Station, competition entry, 1991



The logic of words allows you to apprehend certain concepts better than, let's say, the logic of materials. There is an abstraction, there is a conceptual dimension to architecture that is inevitably part of architecture and that, not surprisingly, can be mastered more precisely through the conceptual means of words. The fascinating thing about architecture is that we are constantly in a tension between the conceptual and the material; thus we can never reduce architecture to a single mode of inscription. Architecture is never just the building. It is also the discourse about the building. It is also the representation of the building, the 'mediatisation' of the building.

Bernard Tschumi

I find it fascinating that La Villette is read differently by French architectural culture and, let's say, Anglo-Saxon architectural culture. They read it differently; they perceive different things. "Plurality" or heterogeneity of discourses means that there is no precedence; it means that there is no such thing as a dominant discourse. And I find that quite fascinating.

Bernard Tschumi

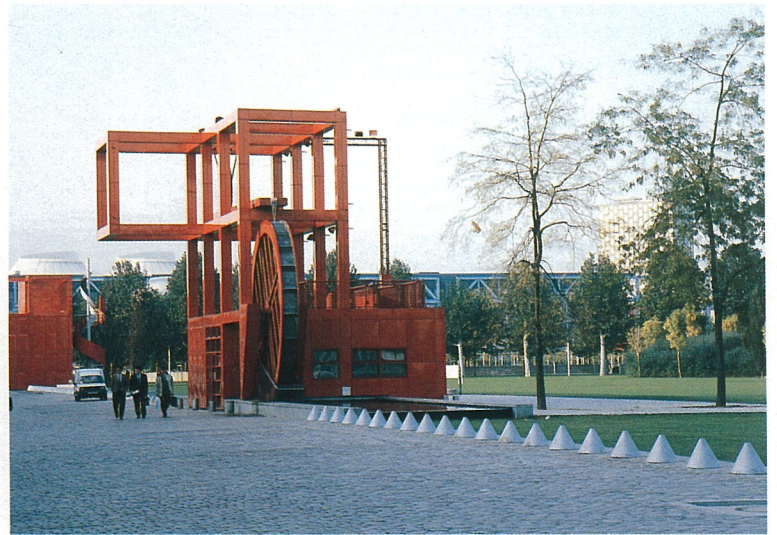
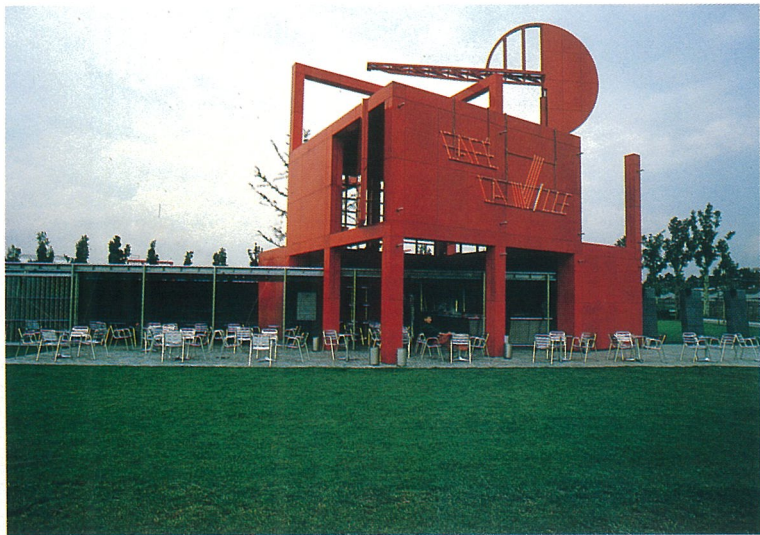
I find it fascinating that the architecture culture in America uses words, language, and literature and is fascinated by them. The architectural culture in France dismisses this completely. There is a complete split between architects and writers in France.

Think of that paradox; it is probably due to the importance of the university and the architectural discourse here in America. Nearly everyone has a level of familiarity with Foucault, Derrida, Levi-Strauss, Barthes, and so on, and is able to articulate certain parallels, rightly, wrongly, misleadingly, it doesn't matter. Well, it does matter, but this adds a certain dimension. I guess I used to spend more time in America with the word and more time in France with the image.

Bernard Tschumi

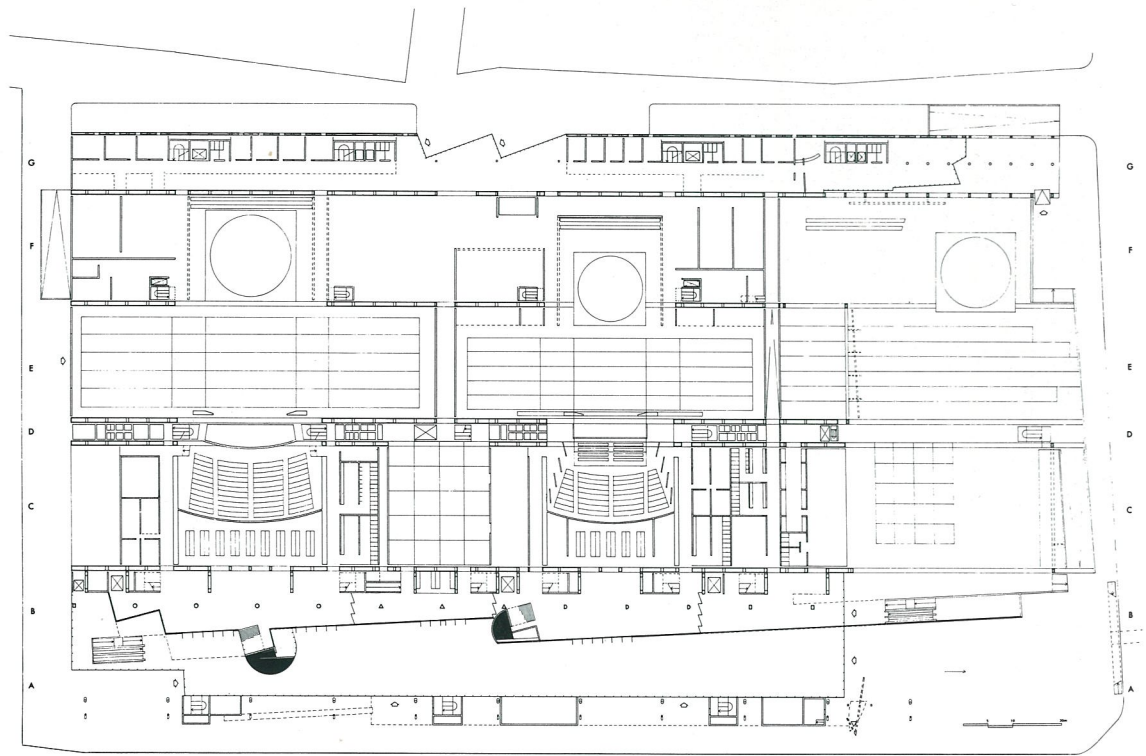
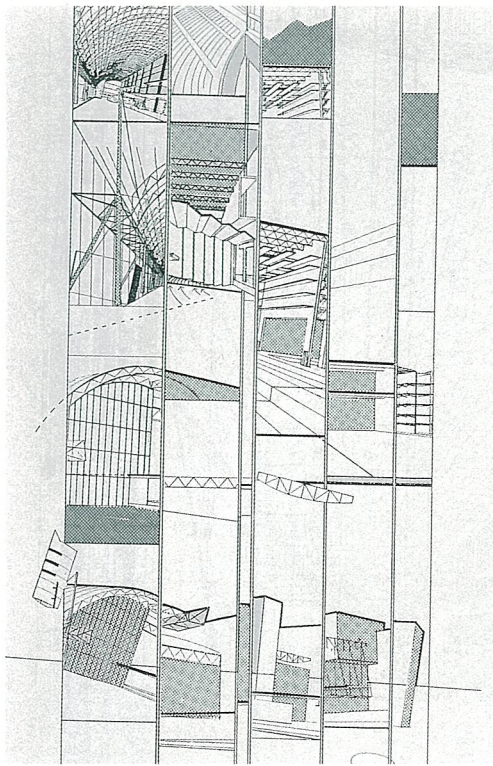
I think something very important has happened in terms of the American architectural discourse. It is incredibly sophisticated and is actually reasonably well-informed and able to deal with a variety of conceptual dimensions. Going back to the notion of the mode of inscription, the current architectural discourse can deal with modes of inscription that have to do with writing or drawing or with computer-generated images or with, of course, actual building, but without considering that one mode has a superiority over the other. I find it reassuring that others are exploring conceptual devices that are at the same time direct images.

Bernard Tschumi



Parc de la Villette, Paris, 1987





New National Theatre Tokyo, competition entry, 1987

What do you do if you imagine that by your subversive ideas you are crossing swords with the dominant power, which relies as ever on control, repression and the mental straitjacket of unitary meanings? If you think that your inverted world, that cunningly contrived carnival, really gives the authorities their comeuppance? That you are engaged in a guerrilla war against the totalitarian temptation? If you are convinced of this while prominent officials, presidents and city councillors, bureaucrats and technocrats – that whole herd of independent spirits – support your plans, while the powers that be are mightily satisfied with you?

What has got into you if you sincerely believe you are dismantling the worn-out clichés of the architectural discipline? If you do not flinch at smashing taboos, and want to reinstate simple pleasure. If you seek immoderation, rising above your functional brief in order to give ecstasy a chance again? And if you then observe not the expected resistance, repression and isolation but thundering applause?

What do you achieve if you see your designs as scenarios that offer a continuous sequence of experiential incidents? If you intervene in your brief by inserting unexpected confrontations with the historic conditions in which the users of your projects are located? And if you are then forced to admit that experience has been overtaken as a historical fact by spectacle, by simulation? That the inspiration you draw from a filmic syntax is insufficient for the staging of a significant experience? And if you are forced to accept that architectural dramaturgy does not necessarily produce drama?

What do you cause, finally, if your striving towards a decentering of the subject, your wish to create a heterotopia, a centrifugal network of non-hierarchically performed interventions, turns out to attract masses of fans, dignitaries in search of 'socialist' environmental planning, an amiable Sunday public with a well-defined longing for relaxation? And your 'dis-place' turns into a touristic monument?

What are you, then? You are your own *'concept Tschumi'*. You feel in your element and take the credit for the most prestigious project of 'the park for the twenty-first century' and beyond.

Transgression by assignation, tomorrow in the park; forever professing the unexpected while at the same time having to work for years on a single project; basing yourself on intertextuality and becoming a superstar; being an acclaimed 'anarchist'; breaking new ground in an art form that, philosophically speaking, is only just beginning to discover the disenchanting world; staging spatial and filmic happenings while the end of history is being declared; becoming a world famous architect just when architecture has relinquished its revolutionary force; etcetera. All this is the fate of a tragic hero, lost in a *fin de millennium*. The concepts of Tschumi do not bark. Nor do they really bite, alas.

This is also an incredibly abstract talk, but it is very reflective of a contemporary architectural reality, which is extremely abstract, far more abstract than it has been ever, I think. I don't know of any period in architecture that has been as abstract, as nonrepresentative, as nonillustrative as this one. The abstraction of the Modern Movement was a tale for children compared to now. The fascinating thing is, the current abstraction allows a whole variety of architectural attitudes including the ability to transform things that are not abstract at all, such as everyday life.

Bernard Tschumi

Architecture has always been as much about the event that takes place in a space as about the space itself. The hall where I give a lecture might have been used for a banquet the night before; next year it could be a swimming-pool. I am not being facetious: in today's world where railway stations become museums and churches become nightclubs, we must come to terms with the complete interchangeability of form and function, the loss of traditional or canonical cause-and-effect relationships sanctified by Modernism. Function does not follow form, form does not follow function, or fiction for

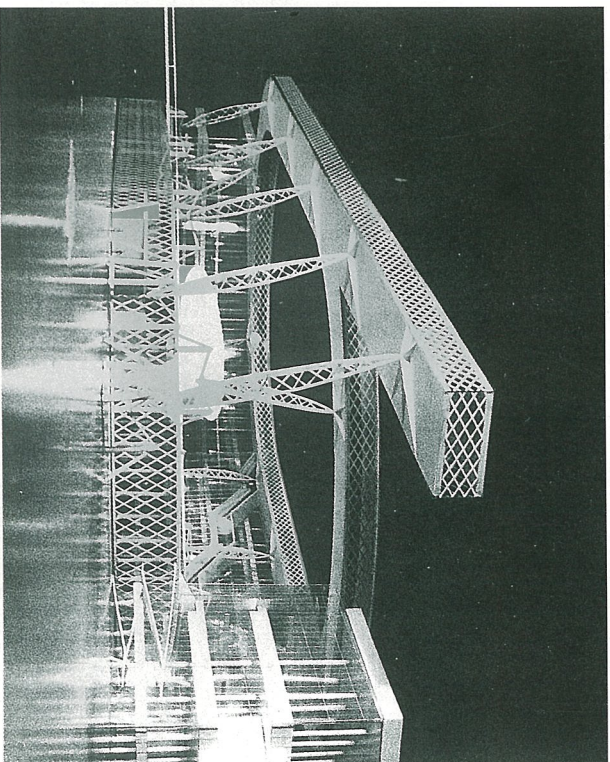
that matter. However, form and function certainly interact, if only to produce a shock effect.

If 'shock' cannot be produced by the succession and juxtaposition of façades and lobbies anymore, maybe it can be produced by the juxtaposition of events that take place behind these façades in these spaces.

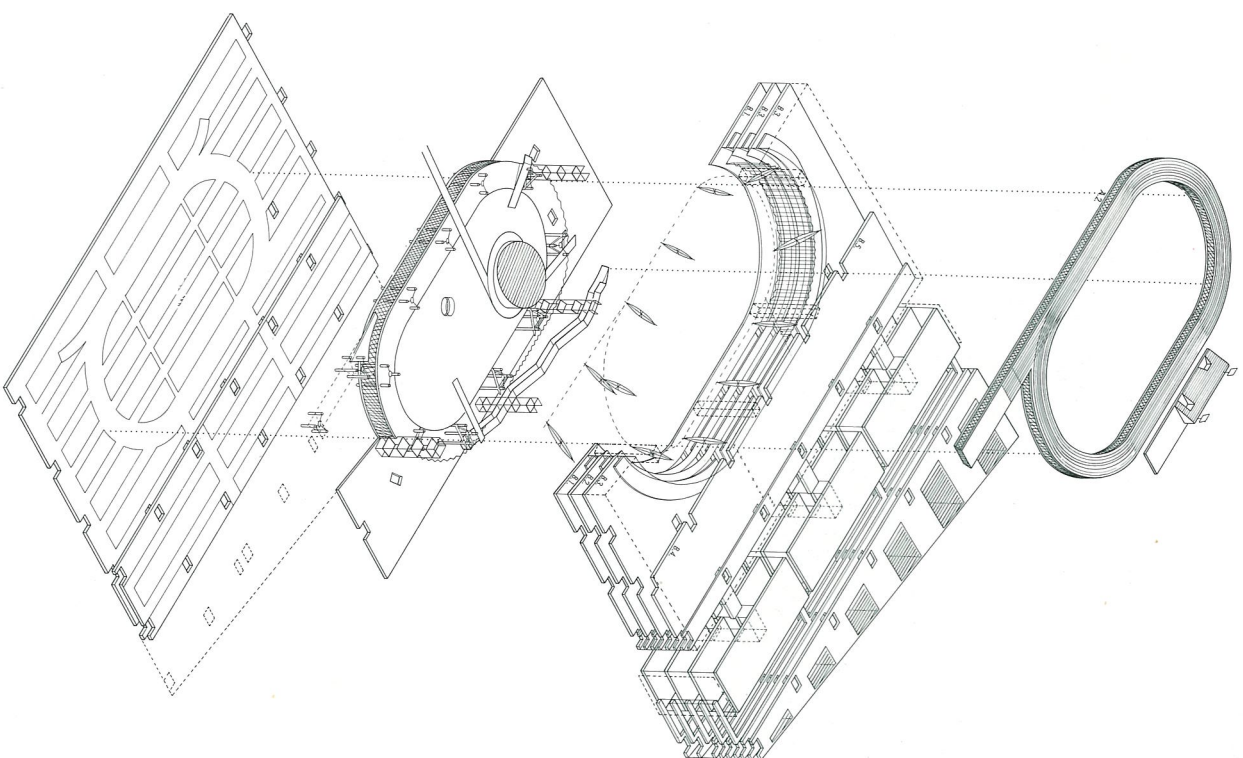
If 'the respective contamination of all categories, the constant substitutions, the confusion of genres' as described by critics of the right and left alike (from Andreas Huyssens to Jean Baudrillard) is the new direction of our times, it may well be used to one's advan-

tage, to the advantage of a general rejuvenation of architecture. If architecture is both concept and experience, space and use, structure and superficial image (non-hierarchically), then architecture should cease to separate these categories and should merge them into unprecedented combinations of programmes and spaces. 'Crossprogramming', 'transprogramming', 'disprogramming': these concepts stand for the displacement and mutual contamination of terms.

Bernard Tschumi



This is a new type of library combining the pursuit of modernity with the pursuit of knowledge: the athlete with the scholar. Opening simultaneously onto the Seine, Paris, Europe and the rest of the world, it enjoys at the same time internal 'circuits' of library culture. The building will act as an urban generator of a new area of the city. Inside there are multi-media 'circuits' for the public, circuits for the books and visible architectural circuits of the most up-to-date information technology. A main 'circuit' offering both excitement and architectural permanence is combined with reading 'trays' offering maximum flexibility. The fact that the library is not located in the historical centre of Paris is considered to be an important and positive factor. Its very eccentricity allows it to break away from static concepts of libraries. It is not a frozen monument, but must instead be turned into an event. Hence the concept of open circuit, where the endless pursuit of knowledge is matched by the pleasure of physical effort. Locating a running track over the library is more than a dynamic convenience. It embodies the library's complex role as the generator of a new urban strategy (the open circuit). Within the new library, five interrelated sets of circuits can be identified: the visitors' and administrators' circuits, the book circuits, the electronic circuits and the



mechanical circuits. While each circuit has its own logic and its own set of rules, the circuits interact constantly at strategic locations. In order to comply with the inevitable evolution of the programme, first during the planning stages, then over many years of use, we have devised a free and flexible system of 'trays'. By placing public circulation on one side and storerooms on the other, we have obtained the free space on the 'trays' only rhythmmed by the grid of the structural columns and the grid of stairs. Throughout the history of architecture, some of the most significant works have been library programmes, for example those of Boullée, Labrousse, Carrère and Hastings, Asplund and others. The new library should be compared to such illustrious precedents even though nostalgia for outdated spatial forms should be avoided. We have therefore displaced the traditional central reading room towards the exterior. The space of the Great Hall inside, and the Esplanade outside, is the revolving circuit of the project. The architects have searched for dynamic circuits of the future, whereby the concept of library revolves around movement: movement of people and movement of ideas. *Bernard Tschumi*

Location Paris, France Assistant L. Merlini Client President François Mitterrand Design 1989 Completion unbuilt project

Bernard Tschumi Architects **Très Grande Bibliothèque**

