ARCHITECTURAL PROMENADE AS *SCENE OF WRITING*: THE *JUSSIEU* LIBRARY (1992) BY OMA/REM KOOLHAAS

UDC 727.8

Željka Pješivac

Independent researcher, Novi Sad, Serbia

Abstract. *This study investigates implementation of the conceptual and textual techniques associated with poststructuralism (such as the poststructuralist concepts of writing, text, intertext, discoursive practices) in Rem Koolhaas's project the Jussieu Library (1992) planned within the Sorbonne University complex in Paris. The main hypothesis of the study is that Koolhaas produces in the project for the Jussieu Library transgression of language of modernistic architecture conceiving the concept of architectural promenade as a scene of writing. In other words, from the understanding of the concept of architectural promenade as a self-reflexive, abstract and autonomous concept, we move to the understanding of the architectural promenade as culturally dependent, but also for culture and society determinant concept. How does Koolhaas embody operative ideological practices of post-structuralism in the case of the Jussieu Library? How can we understand the concept of architectural promenade as a scene of writing? In other words, how can we understand the architectural promenade as a field of lines of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of different narratives, discourses, ideologies, contexts? What role could this concept of the architecture have in a society? In a theoretical context the study draws on the investigations of: Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Joseph Beuys, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.*

Key words: *poché, derivé, scene of writing, the Jussieu Library*

1. *SCENE OF WRITING*

Scene of writing or *scene of language* refers to "the metaphorical scenes on which one presents the role, meaning and sense of linguistic and semiotics languages in the fine and visual arts. For structuralist and post-structuralist theory the inherent tendency is to show all phenomena of culture through language (linguistic and semantic) models. In metaphorical notation: (1) psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud discovered another scene, the scene of unconscious; (2) psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan opened the scene of language for unconscious pointing out

to the hypothesis that unconscious is structured like a language; (3) philosopher Jacques Derrida showed that language is a scene on which philosophy happens, that is that literature is threshold of philosophy. Derrida's presentation of philosophy as *scene of language* or *scene of writing* deconstructs the two thousand years long tradition of the Western logocentrism. He shows that philosophy arises as writing from writing and not from transcendental sphere of thinking." [1, p. 300] It is about the criticism of the Platonic tradition of understanding of the writing as external, secondary and lifeless technical writing in comparison to the living speech. Structuralism, as Derrida states tend to re-inscribe priority of spoken word and model of phonetic writing. However, for Derrida writing is not mimesis of speech, nor speech mimesis of thought, as it was in the Western logocentrism. Writing for Derrida is the permanent play of differences and differances that produce an endless dissemination of meaning. To say that language, that is writing is a scene for visual arts means to show that structural relationships in painting, sculpture, photography, film, performance, architecture, ambiental arts or video arts are defined as language/writing, and that they are subordinate to linguistic, that is textual laws. "Here we can perceive several transformations, from the concept of language as the linguistic speaking language, across the visual language of the semiotic to the general principles of structuring non-linguistic phenomena according to the linguistic rules or forms of expression." [1, p. 300] The overturn from the autonomous architectural to the architectural as linguistic or better textual signify the break with the logocentric conceptions of arts by pointing out that works of art do not arise from transcendental sphere of spirit or emotions of creator, but from inter-architectural and (inter)textual relationships of works of art and theirs historical and semantic frameworks. In other words, architectural work is not independent from culture and society, but exactly by culture and society determined and also for culture and society determinant practice.
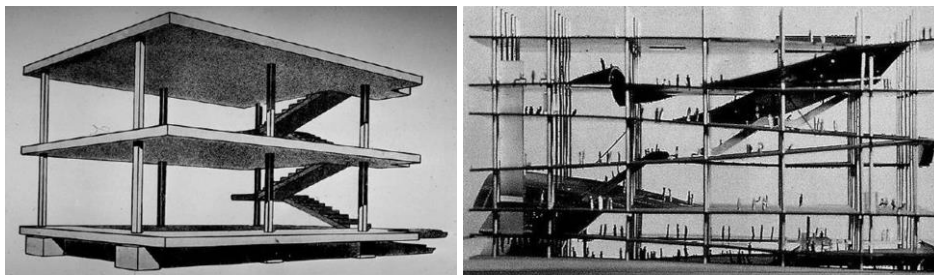
Exactly, this study explores the role of architecture of *The Jussieu Library* (1992) designed by the architectural bureau OMA, led by the architect, theorist of architecture and urban planner Rem Koolhaas (1944) in society and culture, and *vice versa*, the influence of contemporary culture and society on spatial conception of the architecture of *The Jussieu Library*. In other words, the architecture of *The Jussieu Library* is not conceived as a 'final product', autonomous, disinterested and self-referential work of art, but as a 'process', not as a form/something formed, but as something caught in a 'continuous act of formation'. The main hypothesis of this study, therefore, is that Koolhaas with the project of *The Jussieu Library* produces transgression of language of modernist architecture conceiving architectural promenade as a kind of *scene of writing*. *Scene of writing* in this context is conceived as the field of lines of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of different narratives, ideologies, cultures, discourses, as the field of directions rather than dimensions and metric determinations, the field of intensive rather than extensive borderlines, of fluid interweaves rather than final or predictable determinations, that is as the field in a continuous process of becoming. How can we understand architecture of *The Jussieu Library* (that is the architectural promenade of this library) as the field of disjunctive synthesis of different narratives/discourses/ideologies? How does Koolhaas embody operative ideological practices of poststructuralism in the context of *The Jussieu Library* as a contemporary scientific institution? What influence could this concept of architecture have on the understanding of social space, that is on the contemporary concept of society? These are the key questions of this study.

2. THE *JUSSIEU* LIBRARY BY OMA/REM KOOLHAAS

The Jussieu Library is the winning competition project for the *Jussieu University campus* in Paris in 1992. The project includes two libraries: the *scientific,* which is partly sunk beneath the ground level and the *humanistic* library positioned above the ground.[1] The scientific library is conceptualized on the idea of storehouse – repository of books arranged in the closed spaces connected in a linear way one after the another, while the humanistic library is conceptualized on the idea of an open space for the free usage of these books. Namely, while the space of the scientific library - storehouse is organized on the idea of a circular, linear corridor – *poché* which connects rooms, the space of the humanistic library is based on the idea of an open architectural promenade – *derivé* that, attached to the existing urban axes – streets, links the Metro station on the one side and the River Seine on the other. The architectural promenade of total length of about 1.5 km and of variable inclination 2-3%, like meandering boulevard extends thus along entire space of the upper library erasing the boundaries between public and private, external and internal, urban and architectural. This form of movement is opposed by mechanical form of movement enabled by elevators and stairways. In this way the visitor of the libraries is caught in the act of *becoming* a Baudelairean *flâneur*, being seduced by the world of books and information, but also by urbanistic situations such as plazas, park, monumental stairways, cafes, boutiques, etc., which supplement the program of the library. But, what is this all about?

3. THE ARCHITECTURAL PROMENADE OF THE *JUSSIEU LIBRARY* AS A *SCENE OF WRITING*

The Jussieu Library could be understood as a hybrid of: Le Corbusier's diagram – the network structure of *Domino House* (realized during 1914-1915), the diagrammatic structure of a garage for cars (based on the idea of a ramp) and the programmatic content of New York City's skyscrapers.

Fig. 1 Le Corbusier's *Domino House* and Rem Koolhaas's *The Jussieu Library*
   Image sources: http://www.slideshare.net/marksplendid/modernism-the-international-style-
   and-late-modernism; https://www.pinterest.com/pin/416231190533621550/, Access Date
   (12.11. 2015).

---

[1] According to the classification stated in the essay: "Koolhaas's Libraries", S. C. Mattern, http://www.wordsinspace.net/ wordpress/2012/09/07/koolhaass-libraries/ , Access Date (12.10. 2015).

Perceiving the plan of the project for *the Jussieu Library*, it is possible to notice similarities with the structure of Le Corbusier's *Domino House*. The name *domino* refers to the Latin word for house – *dominus,* and for the social game – *domino*. The structure of *Domino House*, based on six pillars equally distributed in the rectangular field of the concrete floor and roof beams, reminds on the structure of the domino elements. Le Corbusier loved automobiles, industrial facilities, purist types of objects of modern culture, that is everything that evokes precision of machine and mathematical absolutes of form, which he brought into connection with the Parthenon and ancient Greek. Combining the enduring principles of ancient Greek (the pursuit for ideals) with reality of modern industrialization and standardization (practicality) Le Corbusier made a dialectical play, one that privileges repetition of the same and reification. However, this repetition of the same, that is the standardized production in Koolhaas's language is transformed into play of repetition with difference. The static grid diagrams of *Domino House*, as infinitely linearly extensible, homogeneous and universal grid, is in the Koolhaas's project for *the Jussieu Library* 'replaced' with infinitely intensive, multidirectional, fluid field of interactions. The linear accumulation of horizontal slabs in the concept of *Domino House* is interrupted and disturbed with ramps and different forms of discontinuity (such as elevators, stairways, and an unexpected programmatic content). Namely, by accumulation of horizontal layers of different slopes and diverse content, maintaining the concept of the path, Koolhaas puts into question one of the traditional mechanisms of the composition of architecture – architectural promenade. As Samuel Flora states:

> The "promenade architecturale" – the observer's pathway through the built space – is a central element of Le Corbusier's architectural and city planning designs. It is the sequence of images that unfolds before the eyes of the observer as he or she gradually advances through the structure. It is the creation of a hierarchy among the architectural events, a set of instructions for reading the work – the "internal circulatory system" of architecture. With the help of the "promenade architecturale", Le Corbusier created virtuosic imbrication of indoor and outdoor space, fluid spaces that reveal themselves as the visitor progresses. [2]

However, Koolhaas's architectural promenade is not the place of establishing the hierarchy among 'architectural events' (programs, that is in this case – narratives), but the place of synchronic inter-weavement of different events. It is not a place/space of gradation between hierarchically established series of events (like moving from the garage, across the hall and the living room, to the roof terrace and the framed view on the landscape for example) based on 'extensive borderlines' (conditionally speaking), but space of unexpected and unforeseen directions, space of encounters and inter-weaves of different events of 'intensive borderlines'.

Interested in 'inner urbanism' rather than architecture, that is in 'an art of organizing urban relationships, not the styling of discrete objects in space' [3] Koolhaas bases the concept of the upper *Jussieu Library* on an 'extended boulevard'. The contents are not arranged vertically, such as the content of New York City's skyscrapers, where for example on the 20th floor we can find the general market, at the 40th a cluster of theaters, the 60th a shopping district, on the 80th a hotel, on the 100th an amusement park, roof garden and swimming pool[2], but horizontally, blurring the boundaries between them. Within the each level of

---

[2] See: R. Koolhaas, Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan, New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994, p. 91

Koolhaas's architectural promenade it is possible to notice connection of different contents that are brought into incompatible communication. It is not about mixing different activities, the cultural program with everyday elements like the shopping or the leisure activities in order to improve the typology of library but about introduction of different ways of experience of these activities (with different speeds).

Namely, the corridor – *poché*, no matter how 'open' it might be, creates relationship of singularity and iterating rhythms of entry-exit. This effectively disjoins rooms from each other since their only mode of communication is the corridor [4]. The corridor assures communication between the rooms, but of what kind? This communication is always "singular – in the sense of the Latin *singuli*, meaning one after another. It always produces discontinuous sequences that separate as much as connect". [4] The same effect is delivered by the idea of served and servant spaces of Parisian arcades (the forerunner of shopping centers and concepts of street at the intersection of architecture and the city), where the hierarchical relations is established by discontinuous separation of space (using walls) grouped in zones and defined by purely utilitarian dependence based on the subordination of 'served', inferior spaces by 'servant' spaces. "This utilitarian system of spaces – lined up along corridors, zoned above or beside servant spaces, or more often a hybrid of both – creates a linear and episodic disposition corresponding to a linear chronological concept of time. Moments exist severally and in severance, succeeding each other so that we can only be in one space at one time from one moment to the next." [4]

The architectural promenade – *derivé*, offers different kind of temporality of event/ narrative, in which we are in each moment able to exist in relation to other 'overlapping spaces' and other 'overlapping times'. Unlike therefore to the concept of spatial enclosure – *poché*, where spatial trajectory is always limited, closed and reserved, the concept *derivé* or the architectural promenade of *the Jussieu Library* offers open spatial trajectories that are always opened toward new directions, figures of movement and sequences. The experience of architectural promenade of *the Jussieu Library* is the experience not only of differing – of the present moment being differed toward past events and other places and of projecting possible future events and places that should be settled (which would correspond to the traditional concept of architectural promenade), but also the experience of a continuous process of *becoming-Other* of specific content/program/event/narrative. Basing the concept of the architectural promenade on intensive borderlines, that is by deterritorialization of content of urban boulevard in the context of library, and changing that content and its sense and meaning by lines of reterritorialization, each program/content/event/narrative is caught in the act of *becoming-Other*. For example, *agora* – former city of public debates is caught in the act of *becoming* place of private debates. Private themes and problems rise up to the level of public themes and *vice versa*, public themes/issues become subjects of private interest. Or for example, combining undetermined meandering kinds of movements of the architectural promenade with determinate, mechanical kinds of movement of elevators and stairways, the linear, determinate kind of movement and gathering of information is caught in the act of *becoming* indeterminate, *flâneurian* kind of movement and collection of information. Or further, a park as a place of leisure activities is caught in the act of *becoming* place of scientific research and debate. The signifiers of 'urban scenarios' enter into the semantic field of scientific institution of the library (deterritorialization) and make change of that semantic field with the possibility of adding new or other meanings (reterritorialization). However, it is not only about transformation of content, sense and meaning of the library as a scientific institution on the one

hand, and the urban scenarios on the other, but about the transformation of pure social relations (and in broader sense, about understanding of a social space as a topological space).

Here one can see a surprising parallel to Joseph Beuys's (1921-1986) art installation of *7 000 Oaks* (1982, carried out for the exhibition *Documenta 7* (Kassel, Germany), based on the social application of the creative process, that is on the idea of 'social sculpture' – the term that Beuys coined in the 1960s and 1970s. Installation of *7 000 Oaks* was designed as an attempt of healing the deep psychic scars of the Third Reich and helping the renovation of German, European and Western culture. In the giant plaza at the city's center of Kassel, Beuys piled 7 000 irregular, human-sized columns of gray basalt (poured igneous rock) in a formation, exactly as thousands of bodies were piled after the bombing of Kassel in the 1943. Over the next five years, donors purchased the stones one by one. As each stone was purchased, it was moved to a different location in the heart of the city near the street, where it was placed upright, sticking at least a meter out of the ground. Next to each stone the oak saplings were planted. While the form of the stone-pillar would have remained static, the form of the oak tree would have changed and grow over time, moving from the dwarf phase, across the forms of the pillar size to eventually the form of a giant, the form that greatly exceeds the height of the pillar [5, p.2].

Fig. 2 Joseph Beuys, *7 000 Oaks*, 1982
Image sources: http://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2014/may/12/how-joseph-beuys-celebrated-his-63rd-birthday/

This play with the symbolism of death (stone) and life (oak), we could say, is similar to the Koolhaas's play with static, deadened dates of storehouse beneath the ground (or to the concept of language conceived as dead and lifeless) and active, social processing of dates in the upper library - above the ground (or to the language in social use, that is to discourse[3]); or to the play between concept of *poché* understood as predetermined, one-

---

[3] Émile Benveniste in the book *Problems in General Linguistics* (1966) establishes the difference between discourse and language. The difference between discourse and language (fr. *langue*), that is between sentence (as a unit of discourse) and sign (as a unit of language) is based on meaningful dimension of sentence, that is on the possibility that the sentence has the certain meaning that lexical units of certain language system (signs) could not have. Exactly in this meaningful dimension in relation to linguistic units Benveniste's concept of discourse differs from Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of speech (fr. *parole*). In Saussure's division language/speech (fr. *langue/parole*) the semiotic relationships have the priority over the semantic relationships (*langue* is language as a system, the sum of rules and norms, and *parole* is speech as an individual usage of this rules), while in Benveniste's division language/discourse it is *vice versa* (the semantic relationships are more important than the semiotic relationships). (See: V. Biti, Pojmovnik suvremene književne teorije, Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1997, p. 62). Meaning for Benveniste is more important,

point perspective, passive, Cartesian space and *derivé* as active, experiential, polycentric, poly-perspective, topological space. But besides this interesting play with the symbolism of death and life, the projects of Beuys and Koolhaas, are further connected through the idea of displacement of signifiers in a new semantic field with a change of that semantic field by adding new meanings. While in the Beuys's case we can speak about displacement of art from studios on the streets, that is about catching the space of the street in the act of *becoming* gallery, in Koolhaas's case we can speak about displacement of the content of boulevard in the context of the interior passages, corridors, that is about catching the space of the passage/corridor in the act of *becoming* boulevard. The main idea of Beuys's work is not the stones and the trees, but the relationship of the stones and the trees; the stones, the trees and the streets and all of them to the people and society, and *vice versa* the people and society to the stones, the trees and the street. The main idea of Beuys's project is the regeneration of society through the creative process. As the trees and stones become an integral part of the urban landscape and identity, the 'sculpture' of tree and stone stimulates the 'social sculpture' of mass participation [5, p.3]. The social sculpture becomes thus the participatory creation of the social field over time [5, p.3]. Similarly, in Koolhass's project the main idea are not the architectural promenade and the mixing of different content on it, but the relationships between these different contents of urban boulevard, the contents of library and the architectural promenade, the architectural promenade as the internal street and the exterior – urban boulevard, and all of them to the people and society. The main idea is the transformation not only of the meaning and sense of the content of architecture and the city, but the transformation and the regeneration of social relations and society of the city. In analogy to Beuys's concept of 'social sculpture', the main idea of Koolhaas's 'social architecture' is the inclusion of human activities in the structuring and shaping of society and environment, through the creation of the field of potentiality for this transformations. Beuys demonstrated that it is possible to stimulate this process, as I believe that Koolhaas would have demonstrated the same if his project for *the Jussieu Library* was built.

4. CONCLUSION

Erasing the *poché* and suppressing the motivated relations between form and function, form and meaning by deterritorialization of urban content and scenario in the context of the library and changing the semantic field of the library by reterritorialization, Koolhaas performs transgression of the language of modernistic architecture understanding the architectural promenade as the field of transformation of different events/narratives, sense and meanings, that is as a *scene of writing*. The architectural promenade of *the Jussieu Library* is not thus positioned and conceptualized as an autonomous, self-referential, disinterested element, but as an element that enters into (inter)textual relationship with its cultural and social

---

because discourse imprints to linguistic units eventness, that is spatial-temporal punctuality. (Ibid.) This eventness results from the triple contingent act of utterance: the first directed toward the given subject, the second toward the given collocutor and the third toward the given situation. Sentence thus exists only in the moment of its utterance and immediately disappears after that. It is an event in disappearance. Discourse is tied to reality, and exactly that reality (signified) makes him susceptible to identification and repetition. We could say that in opposition to the language that does not make reference to the practice, discourse is constructed by the practice: discourse is the language that circulates within the social formations.

environment, being determined by them and also determinant for them. The infrastructural element (architectural promenade as the ramp of the Fordist society and the culture of mass production) is caught thus in the act of *becoming* space of different social, scientific and cultural activities and *vice versa*, different social, cultural programs are being experienced in the act of *becoming* 'infrastructural elements', that is transit spaces (of the post-Fordist society and the culture of information). The lines of processes of *becoming* do not take place only on the relation between the infrastructural utilitarian function and cultural content, but on the relation between different cultural and social activities, between social relationships themselves, as well as between 'hallway/corridor' and 'boulevard', that is the architecture and the city. In other words, Koolhaas's architectural promenade becomes the field of potentiality of multitude of transformations and delirium of interpretations, that is the special kind of *scene of writing*.

REFERENCES

1. M. Šuvaković, Pojmovnik moderne i postmoderne likovne umetnosti i teorije posle 1950. godine, Beograd: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti; Novi Sad: Prometej, 1999.
2. F. Samuel, Le Corbusier and the Architectural Promenade, http://www.degruyter.com/view/product/202382, Access Date (10.11. 2015)
3. H. Muschamp, New York Times, February 25, 2001, p. 42, in , S. C. Mattern, "Koolhaas's Libraries", http://www.wordsinspace.net/wordpress/2012/09/07/koolhaass-libraries/, Access Date (10.10.2015)
4. M. Tawa, Agencies of the Frame: Tectonic Strategies in Cinema and Architecture, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, p.192
5. J. Barnum, "Social Sculpture: Enabling Society to Change Itself", http://reospartners.com/wp-content/uploads/old/Social_Sculpture_J_Barnum_2010.pdf , Access Date (11.01.2016)

ARHITEKTONSKA PROMENADA KAO *SCENA PISANJA*: BIBLIOTEKA *JUSSIEU* (1992) OMA/REMA KULHASA

Studija istražuje implementaciju konceptualnih i tekstualnih tehnika asociranih sa poststrukturalizmom (poput poststrukturalističkih koncepta pisma, teksta, interteksta, diskurzivnih praksi) u Rem Kulhasovom projektu Biblioteke Jussieu (1992) planirane u okviru univerzitetskog kompleksa Sorbona u Parizu. Videća teza studije jeste da Kulhas u projektu Biblioteke Jussieu vrši transgresiju jezika modernističke arhitekture razumevanjem koncepta arhitektonske promenade kao scene pisanja. Drugim rečima, sa razumevanja koncepta arhitektonske promenade kao samo-refleksivnog, apstraktnog i autonomnog koncepta, prelazi se na razumevanje arhitektonske promenade kao kulturalno zavisnog ali i za kulturu i durštvo određujućeg koncepta. Kako Kulhas utelovljuje operativne ideološke prakse poststrukturalizma na primeru Biblioteke Jussieu? Kako se da razumeti koncept arhitektonske promenade kao scene pisanja? Drugim rečima, kako se da razumeti arhitektonska promenada kao polje linija deteritorijalizacija i reteritorijalizacija različitih narativa, diskursa, ideologija, konteksta? Kakvu ulogu bi ovaj koncept arhitekture mogao da ima na društvo? U teorijskom kontekstu studija se poziva na istraživanja: Žaka Deride, Mišela Fukoa, Jozefa Bojsa, Žila Deleza i Feliksa Gatarija.

Ključne reči: *poché, derivé, scena pisanja, Biblioteka Jussieu*