

## BOOK REVIEW FOR AA FILES

Review of “Archeticture: Ecstasies of Space, Time and the Human Body” by David Farrell Krell, State University of New York Press, 1997

The history of the various forms of dialogue between philosophers and architects is both long and complex, and - most would agree - not yet resolved. One way of stating the problem is that both purport to be ‘master’ discourses. Philosophy often considers itself as the arbiter of all thought and theory, whilst architecture has often seen itself as the ultimate form of shaping the world. For this reason, it is seldom clear whether they should be considered as competing or complementary: does thought impinge upon and determine how the world is shaped, or does architecture have an autonomy from ‘thought’ in the pure sense? Who supplies the master-design for the world?

Given this situation, it is to be praised that a book has arrived that attempts to establish a *productive* exchange between philosophy and architecture. “Archeticture: Ecstasies of Space, Time, and the Human Body” is the latest work by David Farrell Krell, a leading American philosopher influenced by Heidegger and the European tradition in which he is situated. Krell depicts the state of play between architects and philosophers as one debilitated by specialisation. A powerful image he conjures up is that of each in their turn watching the other at work: ‘For when architects are at work they are incomprehensible to the philosopher: they are the high priests and priestesses of the design studio - in a universe made by design, where only architects can be at home and the philosopher is outside, nose pressed against the windowpane.’(4-5) As one might imagine, this situation works equally well in reverse.

In “Archeticture”, Krell attempts to restate the terms of the debate. He argues that through specific resources of the tradition of western philosophy, from Plato’s notion of “Chora” to the work of Luce Irigaray, a fundamentally different conception of architecture can be derived. The basis of this difference lies in the ‘tec’ at the core of ‘architecture’. The ‘tec’ stems from the Ancient Greek word ‘techne’. It is through questioning the translation of this word that Krell aims to rework how architecture is most fundamentally conceived. Instead of ‘tec’, which through the history of the

word 'techne' has come to refer to the production and mastery of space - to a technics or technology of space, Krell suggests that we attend to the 'tic' of space. 'Tic' comes from 'Tiktein', a word suggesting sexual reproduction and making things out of love (for instance love-making). Krell argues on the basis of etymological findings (in true Heidegger style) that just as techne and tiktein are entangled within each other's histories, so can we make the experiment of thinking the fundamental basis of architecture with tiktein in mind just as much as techne.

From this, Krell is led to ask: "What would happen if we learned to restore the rights of a different sort of making, if we turned our attention to the concealed sources of the technical, that is, to tic?" (6) His method for doing this is to embark upon a series of encounters with thinkers he considers have opened up a non-dominatory thinking of space. This series begins with an examination of the Platonic chora. He argues that in the *Timaeus*, a conception of space is developed (out of the infamous 'bastard' reasoning of the dialogue) that is neither purely ideal nor material. Choric space is the offspring of an encounter between the Demiurge and chaos, an engendered space that disturbs concepts of genre and property in its wake. Krell sees chora as an ancient directive to think the ontology of space anew. In the second chapter Krell expands upon this claim by introducing the notion of 'ecstatic' spatiality and examining how it develops from Kant, through Hegel to Heidegger. For Krell, this micro-lineage offers a way out of the confines of a cartesian grid that locks the representation of space in advance of any choric engendering. Krell argues that a tension opens up in the second edition of Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" between space as ontologically secondary and derivative upon time, and space as equiprimordial. Seen in this light, the tensions in Heidegger - as paradoxically the first great phenomenologist of space this century and yet at the same time a thinker who always seemed to privilege time - can be given their antecedents.

Although Krell does not dwell on it in this shorter text, it is Heidegger's block when it comes to thinking embodiment which prevents him from unlocking an ecstatic spatiality away from the chronocentrism of the last two hundred years of thinking. In this light, it becomes clear why Krell ends the text by looking at this century's greatest thinkers of the body: Merleau-Ponty, Bataille and Irigaray. For Krell, the 'tic' of a possible architecture gathers energy around the prospect of architects reacting to the suggestion that they have not allowed the body to be anything other than the basis of an ostensibly neutral functionality. In response to this, Krell employs the

acephalic excesses of Bataille, the intertwining fleshiness of Merleau-Ponty, and the intervallic envelopments of Irigaray to seduce architects with uncanny voluptuousities of the corporeal in a bid to subvert the dominance of technics.

In between the second chapter and the final chapter just detailed lies a chapter on the notion of the Uncanny. Or rather a series of ‘archetictural’ sections as the word crops up in Freud and Heidegger (who uncannily seem not to have been aware that the other was mining the word at more or less the same time in almost the same place). An examination of this chapter makes it possible to note what is truly remarkable in this book. Krell’s prose is a good deal more playful and poetic than in his previous scholarly studies. Indeed, the very title of the book is both playful and uncanny - after an absorbed reading of the book we find ourselves tripping over the word ‘architecture’, inserting strange ‘tics’. In short, we uncannily find ourselves with a vocal ‘tic’. Krell is evidently trying to innovate in the way in which philosophy is presented: for instance, beyond the punning textual stylistics that are strewn throughout there are strange and disturbing drawings by Leonardo Da Vinci. In one sketch, Da Vinci depicts the copulating genitals of an abstract couple with the ectoplasmic emergence of cog-like machinery to the side. In another drawing, a castrated penis is shown in section. The other sketches, unsurprisingly including various Piranesi’s as well as some of Ben Nicholson’s *esquisses*, are inserted without any textual explanation. In addition, Krell has pasted random columns of citation on many of the pages- Derrida-style- which again disturb the habitual left-right linearities of the Western eye.

But what about from an architectural view point? Krell asks in the preface,

For whom has this book been written? For that group of architects who have the unshakable habit of theory, and for those philosophers who, one way or another, have been shaken into an awareness of architecture.(xiii)

If we take this seriously, it is inadequate to treat “Archeticture” as simply or purely a philosophy book on architecture theory. On the contrary, Krell evidently intends his latest work to straddle the gap between a work of philosophy and an architectural work. In this light, the graphics and graphemes of the book must be read from the standpoint of an architectural critique.

To an architect, Krell's philosophical musings appear as vague and oblique as any of the most recent outpourings from theorists of the architectural. The book's playful tone can only make sense to a reader steeped in the philosophical tradition. The work presents itself as being for philosophers and architects alike, but can only be partially understood by architects without an extensive background in continental philosophy. In other words, Krell's text can only be read by architects through his very own glass window. As such, the book can be criticised as yet another appropriation of architecture by philosophy. Its cheek would be that it offers itself to architects as being in part for them – but only if they are prepared to wear the hat of a philosopher. Architects are being told to wear a hat and dance, yet again by a philosopher.

Of course, the problem that Krell gets tangled up is not one he created. The difficulty of finding a common language between philosophy and architecture lies in the fact that each has always appropriated the resources of the other for its own specific ends and purposes. A 'middle-position' between philosophy and architecture cannot be inaugurated without a prior examination of the genealogy of this dual appropriation and its effects on the present. Krell's book fails to the extent that it not only does not acknowledge this process, but also continues it. As we shall show in a moment, if Krell had resorted to specific architectural examples to substantiate his argument, the very process of appropriation (in his case of architecture by philosophy) would have become apparent. And all this is to say that the 'middle position' is itself a fantasy, supported at times by both philosophers and architects alike, for their own specific reasons.

It is important to add that the process of appropriation between the two disciplines has always been equally virulent on both sides. Architects have long colluded with the fantasy of an architecture that occupies a middle position between theory and materiality by way of appropriating (in whatever muddled way) the latest theory, if only for effect and not for real productive benefit. It is arguable that this architectural use and abuse of theory was fuelled by the marginalisation of the architect after modernism. Architects have, on this line of argument, used philosophy to sustain an image of themselves which seeks to restore their displaced mastery of the world and its designs and designations. However, the extent to which architects do this is the extent to which they misread the very processes in which philosophy is transformed as it is placed within the specific context and history of the architectural.

From a specifically philosophical point of view, at least one steeped in the continental tradition, Krell's "Architecture" could be read as merely an extrapolation or variation on a theme from Heidegger (from whom he takes the 'tec'/ 'tic' etymological knotting). One of Heidegger's themes was, as is well known, thinking through modern technology (in particular in "The Question Concerning Technology"). One of his responses came in the form of "Gelassenheit" - a word which can be translated as 'letting-things-be'. Far from rejecting technology (as a prevailing and misinformed reading of Heidegger-the-reactionary would contend), the German thinker was more interested in questioning the nature of our attitude towards and relation to the high-tech utensils of our epoch. Krell's demand to think technology differently within an architectural context fits nicely into this framework. For instance, towards the end of the final chapter, when Krell attempts, in a couple of pages, to articulate a positive and productive conception of architecture, he begins by introducing the idea of an *uncoerced* materiality. Instead of architects reducing the material considerations of the design process to the merely technical, Krell suggests, with this notion, that the architect could become more attuned to the materiality of the material itself, allowing for directives to emerge from out of this attunement. Heidegger would, without doubt, agree.

All this questioning of technology would be fine, if one's audience was a philosophical coterie. Philosophers are used to hearing about re-thinking the menace of the technological, just as they are used to concurring with the sentiments about the 'reductivities' of the cartesian co-ordination of the cosmos. But technology and cartesianism have been thought otherwise, outside of the traditions of philosophy. These alternative interpretations are valuable in that they start from what occurs, not from the high ground of the sweep of history. The interpretation of technology and cartesianism within architecture act to challenge these hegemonic themes in philosophy. As we have shown, Krell's text is not without examples (Da Vinci, Piranesi etc.) It is however short of genuinely interesting *architectural* examples. It is as if Krell writes with his nose pressed up against semi-reflective glass. He is right to think he can see the architect at work, but he does not notice that philosophy gets in the way of his vision.

For instance, had Krell examined the contexts into which cartesian geometry had been inserted in architecture, a quite specific set of discontinuities would have been uncovered. Instead of being a by-word for metaphysical reductionism (as it often is taken in continental philosophy), the cartesian

has a separate history in architecture to which Krell does not refer. He could, for example, have referred to the appropriation of cartesianism by architecture as the ‘traces regulateurs’, and how this background geometry becomes its own object in the first two decades of this century in le Corbusier’s facades. Moreover, he could have explored this process further to show Corb’s Ronchamp reverses the structure-ornament relation, with its free-form structure with applied and superficial cartesian references amongst other totemic references to more ‘primitive’ geometries. And from this, Krell would have been in an ideal position to approach the work of Peter Eisenmann, who can be seen to complete the process of reversal as he takes the now liminal cartesian order of le Corbusier and Terrani and aestheticises its proliferation both inwards and outwards to infinity. In addition, he could have referred to the important essay by Colin Rowe, ‘The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa’, in order to show how it is oversimplistic to attribute a simple linear relationship between the prevailing geometries of the present and the way in which contemporary architects appropriate them.

Philosophy’s masterful attempt to narrate the time of technology as the history of a reduction fails in the face of real architectural examples. Along with Heidegger, Krell can be accused of over-homogenising ‘our’ attitude towards the technological. Both philosophers define their task as salvific, against the menace of the prevailing attitudes towards technology. But this constructed view-point can only work in the ‘masterful’ way it does by concealing the different ways in which technology has already been taken up. ‘Modern technology’, if this term means anything, does not enforce its meaning upon us, as if we needed the help of philosophers to correct and challenge our subjection. It is clear to almost everyone that each new mode of the technological is subverted the minute it is introduced into the culture. Technology means only in terms of the cultures in which it is inserted (otherwise it becomes the basis for a cargo-cult). And as cultures always display diversity within themselves, this embedding of technology within the frame of the socius entails that technology becomes automatically different to itself. In short, “technology” has no essence. It is easy to think of examples here of how technology multiplies and breeds (and gets inverted and subverted in the process). Apart from the obvious examples from the so-called ‘military-industrial complex’, one need think only of the pentiumed html gadgetry of the contemporary eco-warrior, or the way in which technology is being used to develop new ways of generating power without the ecological damage of previous technologies (and the way these

technologies are implemented - for instance as 'intermediate technology' in developing countries) in order to become clear that the introduction of new technologies always takes place through contestation of their very meaning and impact upon our lives.

What would happen if we were to pursue architectural examples in this manner? What if we set out with the expectation to find 'tic-nological' architecture (to coin a phrase of our own)? To begin, we will argue that the development of new technologies provides the horizon for emergent forms of the aesthetic. Again, the obvious example in this direction is the computing power that in part enabled the development of complexity and catastrophe theories. It is again contestable whether these theories have enacted a purely scientific paradigm shift. Since this time, the introduction of CAD in design and architecture ought to be seen as another site of technological contestation. One can address this issue by asking the following question: is the introduction of CAD, and more contemporarily still, the virtual materiality of engineering packages, a tec-nology or a tic-nology? If only Krell had stuck his neck out in this direction! Of course, there is no answer to what is a continuing struggle. It is possible however to suggest ways in which Krell's thinking could have developed itself in this direction. This we shall now attempt.

As was mentioned above, Krell spends two pages expounding a positive conception of archeticture. At one point, he writes,

For Merleau-Ponty, sedimenting leaves of experience; for Bataille, limbs stripped of their glory; for Irigaray, one fluid seeping into another fluid by the porosity of the membranes between them(171)

Although Krell reaches his poetic zenith in these lines, they are, as he notes himself, 'cryptic' in terms of their productive effects for an 'archeticture of the future'. If Krell had researched the effects of computer technology on architectural 'representation', this vagueness might have been dissipated. He could, for instance, have developed a parallel between the emergent return to phenomenology (both in architecture and philosophy), in particular a phenomenology of the corporeal that is critical of all phenomenology's previous universalisms, and the nascent disruptions to traditional practices of drawing wrought by computer technology. In other words, a re-valorisation of the desiring, love-making body in architectural discourse through the

phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray, implying as it does a shift outside of dualistic thinking, could be brought together with the challenges to conventional modes of representation in architecture engendered by CAD and engineering software. In this way, Krell would have his ear to the ground of the contemporary, instead of his nose to the glass of the philosophical and untimely. Moreover, Krell would escape the homogenisation of the technological that is almost a sine-qua-non of its being though philosophically. If this line of argument had been developed, the technology of our times would be shown as always already contested by a tic-nology.

In sum, to a philosopher, Krell's book is striking in its combination of a poetic style with clarity of argument. Its appeal is that of challenging conventional modes of philosophical presentation in an attempt to open philosophy up to one of its more elusive and illusive outsides. However, this exploration of what is both external and internal to philosophy is ultimately always inscribed within the compass of philosophy itself. By not engaging with the specific ways in which architecture takes up theory for its own ends, Krell allows himself the deception that philosophy and architecture can meet in the fantastic high ground of theory. But then this possibility can only exist *within* philosophy, as one of its monumental chimeras.

As an architect one is left too much in awe of the book's range and erudition. That our practice should rename itself in order to find its productive force seems like an unnecessary displacement activity - when the real work is to engage with the problem of contemporaneity in architecture and extend its range through poetic and productive means. In terms of the name of our practice - let things be.

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