Peter Eisenman

- Between method and madness -
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I - Foreword

This essay is an attempt to discover and to unravel the architecture of Peter Eisenman, the architecture that established his name as a young architect. Secondly, however of equally importance is the (possible) connection between the architecture of Eisenman on the one hand and the theoretical scheme of Antonio Monestiroli on the other hand. At first sight this comparison seems odd; a deconstructivist and a historical theorist. But as the scene plays we can see some interesting connections between the two; connections that will shed a light on the difficult matter and even proposes unexpected perspectives on the subject.

I would like to thank prof. dr. Bernard Colenbrander for the opportunity of researching one of the most interesting architects of the twentieth century - in my opinion one of the most mistaken and unexposed architects of that time.
II - Preface

It is no secret that the architecture of Peter Eisenman is difficult to grasp - let alone to see the big picture of his oeuvre at first sight. His journey through the world of architecture and philosophy is still ongoing and has seen lots of changes, twists and bends. His architecture is often - if not always - referred to as deconstructivistic\(^1\), while he initially started off on a different foot - one could say that the turn to a deconstructivistic architecture is an unseen, however, inevitably break with his earlier work.\(^2\) Due to the complex nature of his architecture and in the interest of this essay, I will mainly focus on his first works; the houses. As we will see, these houses (houses I - X) will be an intricating journey on their own.
Image 1: House II - axonometric projection

Image 2: House II - axonometric transformational diagrams
III - Placing Eisenman

III.I - Finding form

“Architecture is representation of itself as construction responding to a purpose.”

“(…) forms are no longer a ‘means toward an end,’ (…) but an end in themselves.”

The architecture of Peter Eisenman - especially that of the earlier houses (House I - IV) is based on the idea, even the conviction of an architecture that should be able to draw out the potential power from within the architectural configuration itself. This may sound complicated, but what he tries to do is to ‘unlink’ the function that architecture may represent from the appearance - form - of that same architectural object. The notion that this is a complicated and somewhat contradictory effort can be noticed in an interview between Hans van Dijk and Eisenman, where Eisenman says that it is important to conquer the function and to purposely depict the function wrongly. He also says that “without function, there is no architecture.” This struggle between form and function is of course no stranger in the architectural history, in the built environment, as well as in the theoretical architectural discourse. Finding form is one of the essential themes that one can discover in the oeuvre of Eisenman and also what distinguishes him from other architects.

In the process - in fact the process itself forms the process - he makes use of so called diagrams. These diagrams are the building blocks of his designs and his way of thinking. They are in a way the soul of a building, while remaining on the outer edge of the perceptual experience. “(...) the diagram is the possibility of fact - it is not the fact itself.”

“It can never be free of value or meaning (...) while it explains relationships in an architectural object, it is not isomorphic with it. (...) unlike traditional forms of representation, the diagram as a generator is a mediator between a palpable object, a real building, and what can be called architecture’s interiority.”

The diagram therefore can be seen as the motive for the building and at a general level, it combines the earlier described approach of form and his way of thinking in formal laws within his architecture. “In each of the stages of this process in which the goal is to arrive at a set of shapes, that may or may not be present in the final design. (...) The aim of the process is to find a law, a general rule that will combine each of the partial moves or stages into a continuous uninterrupted sequence (...) This law of development is formal and should be independent of any functional interpretation.”

This way of thinking and actually describing the architectural process as a general law, which is formal is derived from the great linguist Noam Chomsky. It influenced him in a way that further distinguishes him from other architects; when describing (the underlying symbolism of) House II, he points to the fact that one should be able to see the house as an ordered whole, by going through the process of the transformational diagrams in a reverse sequence, as to arrive at the pure, conceptual starting point of the rectangular box. William J. R. Curtis writes that Eisenman “(...) argued that such buildings as ‘House II’ (1969) were explorations of basic formal syntax and the logical structure of space.”

The explicit and repeated use of his ‘formal language’ and the application of the diagram makes Peter Eisenman an interesting case when seen through the eyes of Antonio Monestiroli. Monestiroli makes a hard case for the application of the term ‘language’ and accompanying with it ‘style’. He defines language as the “simple elements of architecture and their use in construction.” He goes on and says that “the language is constructed as a system of representation (...) of the sense of buildings; we can say that it defines their identity, and at the same time it is a system of representation of a world of forms that has its own unity.” Surely the architecture of Peter Eisenman qualifies for the ‘correct’ application of the term language; analyzing the houses results in distinct usage of particular architectural objects, or elements, such as the beam, the column, the wall, the stairs and the window. Also - as pointed out earlier - Eisenman makes use of forms that have their own unity. However, Eisenman’s architecture doesn’t pass the test for the usage of the term ‘style’. Monestiroli says that “Style and language are distinguished from each other by their varying degree of generality. Language can be based on a personal viewpoint, while style cannot. Style is shared language (...) In order to become style it must be recognized by a society.”

In The Metope and the Triglyph he writes “The style (...) should not be confused with language; it should not be personal. Style, (...) has to become a collective legacy in order to exist. Therefore the architect must aspire to define a style, but (...) It is the community (...) that recognizes whether he has achieved a style in his work.” This is precisely the point where Eisenman’s architecture becomes difficult, or complex, however Eisenman doesn’t want to be recognized as a ‘style’; instead he continuously denies to be part of a style.
III.II - Diagrammatic matters

The use of the diagram is a matter of a different kind; it involves much more aspects than there can be distinguished at first glance. The application of the diagram in the design (process) as well as defining the design process itself is something that is distinctive about Eisenman. However this statement does not have much content when compared with the history of the use of the diagram in architecture, especially in classical times. It seems that the use of the diagram is something that is perhaps as old as the history of architecture itself. Famous examples are - of course - the application of the diagram by architects as Vitruvius, Palladio, Cesariano and Serlio as well as the writings on architecture from philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. They - as well as Eisenman - have used the diagram as a “formal taxis, or pattern, with its obsessive consistency, [it] is one of the means of making the world orderly, set apart from the universe where anything goes.” Here two aspects stand out; first the strikingly similarities between the earlier described method of Eisenman, where he uses the diagram as a generator for the (initial) design and the description from the former quote. Also we found a resonance of the ‘formal language’ - as seen typical for Eisenman’s work. What happens is unexpected and ambiguous; Eisenman has stated in The end of the classical: the end of the beginning, the end of the end that modern architecture did not succeed in breaking with the tradition of architecture where architecture always referred to something outside architecture itself. “(...) simulacra (representations of representations)” accordingly he is initially drawn to concentrate his attention on the only objective material provided by architecture, that is form itself. Considering form in its syntactic capacity, Eisenman sees it to be ordered accordingly to specific laws internal to architecture and not derived from notions outside itself.” Eisenman (...) attempts to enclose all meaning within the form, so that the meaning becomes intransitive.” Thus we can see a clear statement of the (forming) Eisenman of his supposed ‘break’ with history. However, I think that in using a diagrammatic approach - let alone let the diagram be the generator for the entire process - one always inevitably implicitly opens up the door for speculation. In this light a clear reference to the very era he wanted to distinct from emerges; the use of the diagram or grid has always been intricately linked with (the elements of) nature. This is also an important moment seen from the perspective of Monestirollo, who claims that architecture should contain analogies within its language; nature, technique and history. Here we find - although implicitly - all three! (Where the use of the diagram or grid clearly can be understood as a (form of) technique). This is a remarkable effort since it basically goes against the mainstream of Eisenman’s own intentions.

The second aspect is the different approach to the actual meaning of the use of the diagram. Eisenman does not use the diagram in order to create orderly patterns or in other words, ‘readable’ patterns for the untrained eye. Instead he creates somewhat of a chaos or disorder. This clearly becomes apparent when we dig deeper in his oeuvre where he makes a sudden change, although he continues his line of thought.

III.III - Estrangement

Even though I won’t go into (all) the people who have influenced Eisenman or played a (sometimes major) role in his development, I want to name one in particular; Michel Foucault. This philosopher has had a great impact on the personal development of Peter Eisenman as well as on the houses. When Eisenman talks about his inspiration(s) for House X, he says that “Michel Foucault has said that when man began to study man in the 19th century, there was a displacement of man from the center. The representation of the fact that man was no longer the center of the world, (...) no longer controlling artifacts, was reflected in a change from the vertebrate-center type of structure to the center-as-void. That distance, which you call alienation or lack of feeling, may have been merely a natural product of this new cosmology. The non-vertebrate structure is an attempt to express that change in the cosmology. It is not merely a stylistic issue, or one that goes against feeling, or the alienation that man feels. When man began to study himself, he began to lose his position in the center. The loss of center is expressed by that alienation.” Even five years earlier (1977) he stated in the interview with Hans van Dijk that estrangement or alienation is the central theme in his work. This is the third point where we can draw an interesting parallel between Eisenman and Monestirollo; the perspective on nature and the forces of nature.

It is no secret that Eisenman always pushes the envelope and thereby going as far as he can in alienating the dwellers of his houses - in fact he even goes as far as to refer to them as intruders of the house. Also his way of dealing with the forces of nature i.e. the application of columns and stairs is distinctive to say the least.
When we consider the Wexner Center (1989) we can see a column hanging, instead of standing firmly on the ground - a clear disregard for the force of gravity, thereby estranging the visitors who are confronted with this distorted image of reality. Also the use of the red stairs in House VI - of which the client, Suzanne Frank has written a book, commenting on the house - is somewhat odd; it is an upside down stairs, marked red, which functions only as to divide the building and provide the house with symmetry. These - and other - acts characterize the conception that Eisenman has about architecture - or at least what architecture supposed to be - and in fact his ideas about the world and reality of things.
IV - Concluding remarks

IV.I - In-depth study?

As becomes clear, the architecture of Eisenman had many different angles and difficulties when analyzing it and trying to describe it in general terms. I have started out saying that this essay will (mainly) focus on his earlier work; his houses (House I-X). I implicitly made the assumption that this would be a fairly demarcation of the study at hand, however I came to the realization that even this demarcated area is a lot to discus in such a short time. It can therefore be said that this analysis, or study, is just a first survey where we have been able to see the big changes in his work, his central themes and the connection(s) between Eisenman and Monestirollo. A further in-depth study is essential to fully understand the oeuvre of Eisenman.

IV.II - Some generalities

Some remarks that can be made however, function only to illustrate the generalities of this study, in a somewhat simplistic overview.

The application of the terms language and style is not without assumption; the correctness of the usage of the terms, individually as well as collectively is of course debatable. Next to that it is also important to realize that the use of the terms are also bound to assumptions made by the theorists who refer(red) to them. What style is for the one, can not be understood as the same for the other. The same goes of course for language. One thing this is general though, is that most theorists often refer to certain use of style to place a certain architect or architectural movement in a general frame (for comparison). It is (therefore) vital in the best interest of this essay to realize that the use of both terms is based on the assumptions made by Monestirollo.

Nature, history and technique are also just frameworks to work in. The difference between language and style on the one hand and nature, history and technique on the other, is that the latter (sometimes) directly can be seen and actually understood when one looks at an architectural object or configuration, while the former are (mere) abstract schemes. Nature, history (and technique) are therefore more susceptible to interpretation and can be paralleled to art, where interpretation is perhaps all there is. To use a quote from the philosopher David Hume, “Beauty in things exists merely in the mind which contemplates them.” I think this can also be said about architecture and the references towards nature, history (and technique) where it is up to the spectator of the architectural stage to see these analogies and to interpret them in a way Monestirollo does.
Notes

II - Preface

1 A term that refers to an architectural movement where architects such as Peter Eisenman, Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, John Hejduk and Daniel Libeskind are ‘part of.’ A term that is originated by the philosopher Jacques Derrida, who obviously inspired and influenced Eisenman.

2 The emerging complications within his own theory and his formal system are well pointed out by Hans van Dijk; Dijk, Hans, van, “eisenmans huis x. het afscheid van de klassieke rede,” wonen-TA/BK, no. 21/22, (november 1980), p. 15-16.

See also: Eisenman, Peter, House X, New York, Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1982 p. 22. (‘(...) a number of contradictions gradually emerge in the later work (...) which finally result in the ‘explosion’ of the system itself. (...) the communicational notion of vertical layering, a one-way linear concept (...) with the more traditional notion of centrality: it develops aspects of both a sequential progression of space but it at the same time an investigation of centrality.’)

III.I - Finding form


9 Noam Chomsky is known as the founder of the so called generative grammar, which has had a profound influence on linguistics. One of his major works is his Syntactic Structures: Chomsky, Noam, Syntactic Structures, London, Mouton, 1957.


12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.


III.II - Diagrammatic matters

15 It is only in order to name the design method(s) of John Hejduk, who also used the nine-square grid as an underlying principle for his transformations.


19 Ibid.

III.III - Estrangement

20 The 1982 debate between Christopher Alexander and Peter Eisenman.


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