probe: a study and experience in Deconstructive design

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By
Lydia Whitehead

Pam Leidig-Farmen, advisor

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

May 2002

May 4, 2002
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An exploration in Deconstruction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Rationale for Commun: an exploration in the Deconstruction of society</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

This exploration in Deconstruction describes Deconstruction in its philosophical origins, and its spread to and characteristics in architecture, design, music, and politics. It serves as a supplement to the creative work "Commun: an exploration in deconstructing society." The written rationale for the creative work appears at the end of this document.
Acknowledgments

My thanks goes to Pam Leidig-Farmen, my thesis advisor, for her inspiring nature, which brought me to this project. She helped me realize my creative ability and challenged me to take it farther than I thought it could go. Pam, thank you for believing in me when I neglected to believe in myself.

This project also would not be possible without Kris Lorenzen, whose patience and creative mind provided a great sounding board for my ideas.
Deconstruction is not the same as destruction.

It is important to note that Deconstruction has always existed in painting, writing, architecture, art and the like, and will always exist, independently of any theory or writing on it. Geoff Bennington has said that most Deconstructive painting should have happened in ignorance of any work on Deconstruction, though knowledge of it may help to talk about that painting. (Bennington 85)

Most of all, though, Deconstruction comes from and is formed by changes in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. It originated with Derrida in philosophy in the 1970s and has spread from critics to writers, poets, architects, painters, sculptors and designers. Most of those attaching themselves to the Deconstructive “movement” now fall far from Derrida’s original idea on Deconstruction, though each still maintaining a varied selection of his thoughts and perspectives apparent in their own works.

Deconstruction is many things and nothing all at once. It is complicated, and its very essence requires that it not be marked by characteristics and categories. Yet, its introduction into modern art and, more specifically, design, decades after its inception into philosophy cannot help but place it somewhere on the spectrum of style and context. To view a work and deem it Deconstructive would stray from the original Derridean idea, but to ignore its style and significance would also be a mistake.

Deconstruction is important because it has affected many areas: art, music, architecture, philosophy, society and politics, to name a few. This paper, while mainly focusing on Deconstructive design style, will discuss the history of Deconstruction in design and in philosophy, name some of its more prominent characteristics in both philosophy and design, and touch on its impact on music, society and politics.
Deconstruction in philosophy began in the late 1960s and was coined from the mind of French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Most of Derrida's work continues a line of thought that began with Friedrich Nietzsche and carried on through Martin Heidegger. Derrida argues that in Western culture, people think and express their thoughts in terms of binary opposites: beginning/end, presence/absence, black/white, speech/writing.

Another principle of Deconstruction is the idea of the delay of origins. Derrida argues that a first is only a first by consequence of a second that follows it. The first is only recognizable as a first because of the arrival of the second. The second is therefore the prerequisite of the first. It permits the first to be first by its delayed arrival. The first, recognizable only after the second, is, in this respect, a third. The origin, then, is a kind of dress rehearsal, a representation of the first public performance, which has not yet occurred. The original, in that sense, is always a copy.

If we apply the same analysis to signs and things in the "real" world we come to the paradoxical situation that the sign precedes the reference. The sign "pencil," precedes the long writing stick because it is only recognizable as that after we assign it the sign "pencil." Derrida argues that consciousness never precedes language, and we cannot see language as an accurate representation of our living experience.

This is the core of Deconstructive thinking. The graphic sign stands in for the phonemic sign. It is therefore "the sign of a sign," while the oral sign is the "sign of the thing." Writing is supplementary. Even the oral sign is supplementary, since it exists as supplement to the "real world." The graphic sign of writing is particularly supplemental since it is a supplement to a supplement, a sign of a sign.

In "Of Grammatology" Derrida argues that writing should not be subordinated to speech, and this subordination is nothing more than a historical prejudice. He argues further that to define a graphic sign is to define any sign. Every sign is a signifier
whose signified is another signifier. To look up a signifier in the dictionary only leads to more signifiers. The meaning is deferred. (8-10)

In this way Deconstructive design emerged in architecture. It became not about dismantling a structure, but rather challenging the very values of harmony, unity, and stability. The argument moved from the structure of a word to the structure of a form. Mark Wigley states “This is an architecture of disruption, dislocation, deflection, deviation, and distortion, rather than of demolition, dismantling, decay, decomposition, or disintegration...what is finally so unsettling about such a work is precisely that the form not only survives the torture, but appears to be all the stronger for it. Perhaps the form is even produced by it.” (133)

Deconstructive architecture challenges the deep-rooted stability of architecture. Where harmony and pure form is attempted, Deconstruction seeks to disturb. “It is as if perfection had always harbored imperfection, that it has always had certain undiagnosed congenital flaws which are only now becoming visible. Perfection, perhaps, is secretly monstrous.” (Wigley 132)

The distortion of pure form creates unfamiliarity in the familiar. It strips down the known structures of symbols and invites interpretation. From this practice, Deconstructive graphic design was born.

Deconstructive graphic design began in the mid-1980s with the introduction of computers as the base for production work. The new technology allowed designers more creative freedom and flexibility. Instead of cutting and pasting designs, designers could manipulate images and typography on screen with greater rapidity and ease.

Rudy VanderLans, a contributor to the beginnings of Deconstruction, started Émigré magazine in 1984 on the new Macintosh. In design “the Macintosh was creating tremendous havoc within the world of graphic design, typesetting, and printing. It was turning everything upside down...” (VanderLans)
But the Macintosh opened up a new realm of experiments. Deconstructive design became concerned with the human experience. For graphic designer and Deconstructive stylist David Carson, Deconstruction was “intuitive.” It destroyed understood signs, challenged the origin of meaning, and played with the relationships between objects, images, and words — the signifier and the signified.

Carson, once an American Sociology professor, started experimenting with his intuition in typography and the arrangement of words in Beach Culture and Ray Gun magazines. His designs, often called illegible and unreadable, did and do not start out with the intention of being illegible or hard to read. The design began as an expression to communicate the feeling or message of the article to the reader upon contact, to engage the human experience.

In a lecture and presentation titled “The Deconstruction of David Carson” Carson explained his design method. While presenting slides of his work, he paused at an image of two garage doors and discussed how we react to different types of fonts. Both garage doors were identical in color, shape, and design. The first door’s “no parking” letters were little shiny black alphabet stickers. Pulling in front of this garage door, one might read the small letters and think twice about parking there, but one still might be tempted. The next garage door was similar in every way except it had “no parking” spray painted in huge, black, dripping letters. These letters were painted in a style that emoted anger. Noting the different responses to the font or letter style Carson asked: What is our immediate reaction to these signs before we actually read them? How do we immediately respond to a style of font, or layout; color, sign, symbol? (Wright)

His answer: Intuition.

Language itself is a representation. Models in literature and art are representations. When these models are familiar, we respond with an immediate intensity. This is akin to the earlier idea of the word “pencil” representing a long
writing stick. These images engage our feelings about our world. The spark is our intuition, our emotion, and our human experience. We become involved in the representation. It is not an intellectual analysis of the "thinking which must prove its point." (Carson)

Deconstructive design presented, then complicated and fractured meaning or sets of meanings to disclose the possibility of a desirable basic meaning. It rearranged, defamiliarized, and alienated elements of one style or several familiar styles to show a different reality by which we are said to be enslaved. In the new reality, text may be "liberated from slavery to an inevitable significance." In offering a new reality, it can be creative. (Griffiths 96)

John Griffiths explains that Deconstruction derives from a perspective of ideas and idea systems with grand aims. They want to say something profound about big issues and are interested in the human being and the unity of human experience. Griffiths says "they try to interpret creations of the human mind: whether language, dream or myth; whether works of art or even social systems." (93)

Griffiths continues by explaining that the best way to understand these creations is to "isolate and decipher" the code or set of conventions the mind appears to use. "Once that code or set of codes is deciphered, we begin to uncover the human perception of reality." (94)

Deconstruction expands easily into music because Derrida's views of language transfer comfortably to music and to music analysis. Deconstruction is primarily concerned with an analysis of the text. When one reads a sentence the full meaning often does not emerge until the end of the sentence. Listening to a musical phrase is much like reading sentences. When listening to a phrase of music, its meaning is not apparent until the phrase has been heard completely. Even then, as with reading, the meaning of a musical phrase can be modified for the listener by later signifiers.
Both music and language depend on context to create meaning; meaning is never identified with itself.

James Sellars argues that "A deconstructive approach to a piece of music demands a written critique..." yet also a musical one, as demonstrated by his orchestral composition "Afterwards: Identity and Difference," a deconstruction of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. (1)

Deconstruction in music comes when an original work is altered in form and content so the purpose and familiar meaning of the original becomes defamiliarized, much in the same way that Deconstructive design and philosophy attempts to defamiliarize symbols and signs.

Deconstruction in politics comes from Derrida's ideas in his book "Politics of Friendship." He aims to show that the entire Western tradition of thinking about politics has been distorted by our philosophy's concept of identity. Derrida attempts to open up a new future for democracy, a democracy to come, which would break with the patriarchal and nationalist model we have inherited, and which would develop a "universalizable culture of singularities," cultivating a hospitality towards the "arrivant," the other or the stranger who comes from outside. (37)

Because our metaphysical tradition teaches that man is identical to himself, a coherent personality free from internal difference, we have been encouraged to seek our identities through membership in undifferentiated, homogenizing groups such as families, friendships, classes, and nations. All such natural categories, as well as the derivative concepts of community, culture, nation, and borders, are dependent on language and therefore are conventions. The problem with these conventions is not simply that they cover up differences within the presumably identical entities. It is that they also establish hierarchies among them: between brothers and sisters, citizens and foreigners, and eventually friends and enemies. (Lilla)
One problem with Deconstruction is its paradox. We can define Deconstruction and give it meaning, but the very purpose of Deconstruction is to show that things have no definable meanings and determinable missions. If we try to bring it all together and construct what makes Deconstruction, we place ourselves in opposition of the idea of Deconstruction. It is complicated because it really cannot be summarized. It is the relentless pursuit of the impossible.

Helene Cixous believes that in modern society Deconstruction seems to be far removed from the Derridean thought. It has become a trend, a novelty. Cixous says Deconstruction “has become a term that adds a ‘commercial’ mark, a surplus value of ‘modernism’ to domains totally unforeseen by the author of the thinking of deconstruction. Here is a word derived from philosophical thinking, that of Derrida, which no longer resides in philosophy, but ‘launches’ fashion products, bathroom items, sports equipment, political attitudes. In brief a word which, having left its native shore, henceforth circulates in the world’s blood.” (xx)

It is still important to remember that although Deconstruction cannot be strictly defined, its critique is ongoing and is above all an activity, an open-ended practice for artists and critics alike to utilize.
Works Cited


Written Rationale for the Creative Work:

Commun: an exploration in deconstructing society

While “probe: a study and experience in Deconstructive design” is the title of my thesis study, Commun is the title of my creative exploration in Deconstructive design. To create the 12-page book, I took the fundamental principle of deconstructive design style, the human experience, and went from there. I used my intuition, as David Carson would suggest, to express my human experience and creations of my mind.

The core of the subject, community, is a summary of my environmental perceptions. Humans seem to tend toward creating groups and experiencing things communally. In tragedy we form support circles to strengthen ourselves and endure the trauma. Similarly, we gather together to celebrate triumph. Community occurs in nearly every aspect of our human experience. We live in a community. We look for commonalities between us to form groups. Our world is a collection of societies and cultures with their own symbols, signs, and experiences.

But even as our communities strengthen, they are fragile. We attack other communities in many different ways. These attacks can be as obvious as a protest or as subtle as a whisper. To attack a symbol of a society (the World Trade Center towers, a Jewish synagogue) only reinforces the Deconstructive notion that we are enslaved by symbols.

The photographs in this project attempted to approach and defamiliarize those symbols and signifiers and create a new world. They all came from downtown Muncie because Muncie was once “America’s Hometown” and, therefore, is in itself a good “symbol” for the American society. I chose photography as a medium instead of, for example, drawing because I was modeling my design after the works of David Carson, who uses photography most, if not all, of the time.
The quotations I selected all comment on society or community in some way. I felt it was important to include an opening essay at the beginning of the book to introduce the idea of our societal tendencies and how it is imperative that we take care to note that by joining together, we all become connected. Therefore, we must use caution in how we deal with each other. This essay stems from my own human experience and intuition, again, an important feature in Deconstructive design.

The book and design are also a metaphor for the human need to commune. Each page of the book was designed to stand separately, yet when the pages come together, the work is strengthened and unified, much like a society of people. Each individual has his or her own characteristics that exist singularly, but when that individual joins a community, those characteristics added to other individuals' characteristics equal a much larger, more complete entity.

In short, this creative work is meant to reflect my human experience. My hope is that upon viewing it, the audience will gain a new perspective on reality and it will become part of their own human experience.