

# Appraisal of the works of Bernard Tschumi

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***Abstract: "Any relationship between a building and its users is one of violence, for any use means the intrusion of a human body into a given space, the intrusion of one order into another." Tschumi in Architecture and Disjunction***

***This paper discusses the works of Swiss architect Bernard Tschumi, commonly associated with deconstructivism –on the basis of his philosophies and presents a general analysis of the role of concept, context and content in architecture.***

***This paper also looks in detail, at the role played by Tschumi in overcoming the site constraints by infusing them in the concept of the buildings designed by him. Two projects have been selected under the similar approach for deeper analysis to get a better understanding of his thinking.***

***Keywords: Bernard, Tschumi, deconstruction, concept, context, content, museum, Athens, New Acropolis Museum, Museum of African Art, competition, works, Event-Cities 3***

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Born in 1944 in Lausanne, Switzerland, Bernard Tschumi comes from a French and Swiss parentage and is the son of the well-known modernist architect, Jean Tschumi. He studied in Paris and at ETH in Zurich, where he received his degree in architecture in 1969.

In the 1970s, while he was teaching at the Architectural Association School in London, he came up with a ‘strategy of disjunction’, which was based on his belief that architecture and contemporary culture can be best explained through fragmentation and not through unity. Inspired by the linguistic theories of Jacques Derrida, he began to deconstruct the various elements of architecture. He expanded and carried forward the ideas of thinkers like Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault when he combined film and architecture to explain and reexamine architecture’s responsibilities in implementing the unquestioned set notions.

Tschumi was also inspired by the structural diagramming and theories used by Russian cinematographer, Sergei Eisenstein and implemented those ideas to understand the relation between elements like space, event and movement in terms of architecture. Over time, he has

discussed and published elaborate theories on defamiliarization, de-structuring, superimposition and cross-programming.

Often criticized for being a better theorist than an architect, Tschumi's works remain in the extremes while reviewing. Unfamiliarity is a common theme in most of his works and we can clearly see that they reflect the critical understanding of architecture. He is known for his designs where he reinvents the conditions of living, rather than following the established aesthetics. He talks about architecture with strong interchangeability for the functions of the buildings designed in the new age.

## **2. THE THEORIES**

Tschumi has argued that there is no fixed relationship between architectural form and the events that take place within it. Architecture's role is, not to express an extant social structure, but to function as a tool for questioning that structure and revising it. He has exclusively talked on topics like

*Technology of defamiliarization-* where Tschumi focuses on the pattern that architects of the current generation approach to gain popularity and attention. He says that no significant discovery has been made in the recent era; the improvement of energy rating of an air-conditioning system can never surpass the historic change seen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the invention of steel and elevators.

*De-structuring-* where Tschumi emphasizes on the recent trends of neglecting and repeating the same structure over and over again while focusing on the skin and aesthetics of a design. He condemns the predominated mindset of critiques that only focus on the architectural aspect of a design and expose faults in the architectural elements. Structure of the building is rarely ever questioned and scrutinized, even now.

*Superimposition-* Through his fascination with Derrida's works, Tschumi learned the importance of anti-hierarchy, anti-structure and anti-form –the opposite of all that architecture stands for. He implements these odd theories in his own works fearlessly and hopes that architects will not be afraid to question the structure and will not base their design on the public opinions and mundane sense of visual comfort.

*Cross-programming-* Tschumi strongly believes in designing for various purposes. He does not believe in the aging of a structure. A building that was used as a hospital in late 19<sup>th</sup> century could just as easily be converted into a museum in the later centuries. A building must be capable of

sustaining and undergoing radical changes to accommodate the needs of the present. He thinks that is what separates him from the thousand others.

### 3. THE PHILOSOPHIES

Bernard Tschumi has always been rather intrigued by the interaction between the three very fundamentals of design –concept, context and content.

*“There is no architecture without a concept –an overarching idea, diagram, or parti that gives coherence and identity to a building. Concept, not form, is what distinguishes architecture from a mere building.”[1]*

Tschumi says that architecture cannot be conceived without concept –an idea, a thought or a sketch is the first step to designing any given space. It is the concept that ultimately defines and classifies architecture, and not the form.

But at the same time, context is equally important. Any work of architecture is always dependent of the site and a particular setting.

*“The context may be historical, geographical, cultural, political or economic. It is never solely a matter of its visual dimension, or what in the 1980s and 1990s was termed “contextualism,” with an implied aesthetic conservatism.”[2]*

But Tschumi believes that context is never just restricted to only the visual aspect as was believed in the 1980s and 90s. Unseen factors like culture or topography or history of the site can equally affect the process of designing. But with that being said what about content? What is a building without any function? The most basic process of designing involves framing a certain list of requirements describing the intended purpose of the building. It has already been established by Modernists that function can be a driving force behind the generation of form, that “form follows functions”. Tschumi inquires if that phrase can be molded into “*concepts follow content*”[3]

So now arise the most important question, how to determine which term should precede the other? As inseparable as they might be, these three factors often give rise to conflicts. The concept may negate or ignore the surroundings, while the context may dampen the strength of the original architectural idea. The concept may, at some point, precede the function of the building. What if the content of a building is exacerbated to such an extent that it becomes the concept?

Tschumi formulated that these factors can relate in three basic ways –indifference, reciprocity and conflict.

*Indifference:* The condition where any of the one of the participating component remains absolutely ignorant of the other. They co-exist, but never interfere.

*Reciprocity:* The condition when the architectural concept or the content interacts closely with one another, complimenting each other and merging effortlessly.

*Conflict:* The condition that occurs where one of the factors collide strategically with the other. Such a condition may require negotiation of either party for their survival.

This can be explained very simply by quoting one of the Tschumi's examples.

*“For instance, one may cook in the open (indifference), in the kitchen (reciprocity), or in the bedroom (conflict). Or, to use a less domestic example, one can choose to bicycle in a plaza (indifference), a velodrome (reciprocity), or in a concert hall (conflict).”*[4]

#### **4. ESTABLISHING THE RELATIONSHIP**

Bernard Tschumi does not only confine himself in establishing such philosophies, but analyzes and categorizes his projects accordingly, deciding the factors that are favorable to his design and fighting against the odds, bending them to ensure that they work for his benefits, rather than hindering his process. Hence he comes up with a set of possible cases of interaction between context, concept, and content.

##### ***Tactical Indifference***

*“All are freestanding objects unencumbered by their settings.”*[5]

Encompasses the projects where context has almost no significance in the process of concept formation. Instead, Tschumi uses this indifference to consider architecture as an envelope that breaks the common notions of architectural composition and articulation. The projects under this category are in Angouleme, Geneva and Strasbourg.

##### ***Reciprocity and Conflict***

*“... but the concept is made to interact with the context in calculated ways.”*[6]

The projects that come under this category are the Limoges Concert Hall, Carnegie Science Center and the Sports Center in France. In these projects, the architect is forced to consider the interactions between the context, concept and content and modulate his designs accordingly.

##### ***Contextualizing Concept***

*“A priori idea is adapted to a specific environment.”*[7]

The projects under this category deal with the process of acclimating and taking advantage of the available context and ultimately designing an approach that responds to the site. Examples include the projects in Troy, Antwerp Museum, Sao Paulo museum etc.

### ***Conceptualizing Context***

*“The overriding complexities of the site and program demand that context and content be understood and tamed.”[8]*

The exact opposite of the previous condition, in this case, the demands of the site cannot be ignored. Hence for such projects, the concepts are made to address the contextual restraints and turn the adversities into advantages. Examples are the Museum for African Art, The New Acropolis Museum etc.

## **5. ANALYSIS OF BUILDINGS**

### ***The New Acropolis Museum***

Bernard Tschumi always begins projects by forming questions, the answers to which often lead to a possible solution for the building. It is achieved through a diligent process of evolution, understanding and application of a unique approach. For this project, the very important questions that arose were

*“How to make an architectural statement at the foot of the Parthenon, arguably one of the most influential buildings of all time?*

*How to design a building on a site already occupied by extensive archeological excavations, and in an earthquake-prone zone?*

*How to design a museum to contain the most important collection of classical Greek sculptures and a singular masterpiece, the Parthenon Frieze, currently still located at the British Museum?”[9]*

The solution was found through designing a non-monumental building, stretched over 8000 square meters of exhibition space, enclosing an entrance lobby, retail space, bar and restaurant at the mezzanine level, a restaurant with the view of the Acropolis and a 200-seat auditorium.

To justify the presence of the Parthenon, the museum is built with sheer simplicity. Clarity is maintained through causing the building’s programmatic requirements to turn into architecture. He solves his problem through three primary design features.

*Light-* The museum houses sculptures, making it very essential that ambient natural lighting is a prominent factor. The use of various types of glass allows the passage of light, depending on its requirements.

*Circulation*-Instead of letting the visitors stroll aimlessly inside his museum, Tschumi plans and installs his collection in a chronological sequence. The route through the museum forms a clear three-dimensional loop, creating a series of rich spatial experiences.

*Organization*- Conceived in three layers, the museum is a realization of a program transformed into the concept. Segregated in three layers, each layer represents various eras.

### ***The Museum for African Art***

The Museum for African Art (MAA) was a part of competition that Bernard Tschumi took part in during 2001-2002. Located at the heart of New York, this museum is known for its creative scholarship and lively exhibition programs. Due to limited facilities, they planned the shift to a new location on the upper Fifth Avenue, on the Southern edge of Harlem.

Zoning constraints strictly imposed the need for a street-wall façade which aligned with the existing buildings along the Fifth Avenue, as well as a typical setback on the higher floors.

The solution came in form of “*Wood curves, Glass box.*”[10]

*“Tschumi's tongue-in-cheek solution to New York's stringent street-wall requirements along this prominent stretch of Fifth Avenue was to clad the entire volume in glass, thus building out to the site's perimeter, preserving the Fifth Avenue vertical continuity, and creating that classic Tschumi "in-between" space of excitement that bridges exterior and interior, public and private, city and institution.”*[11]

Instead of letting the site constraints turn into a hindering factor, Tschumi used them to an advantage. The building is a combination of wooden structure, enclosed in a glass box, creating a sense of openness, transparency and easy accessibility for the visitors. The glass cube conforms to the strict zoning laws on the exteriors and brings in ample natural light and unobstructed views of the Central Park.

A clear-span, open floor is achieved by introducing full floor height Vierendeel trusses at alternating levels. The glasses are made mullion-free by using corner point-supported glazing, creating a façade free of lines; a pure glass pane. They are hung off the primary structure and add to the lateral support.

The building's air-handling units and cooling equipment is located on the roof-top resulting in a minimization of the shaft space and duct sizes and allow various microclimates to function separately on each floor.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Through the analysis, it can be said that Tschumi's design, however unfamiliar and disjunctive, holds great meaning when explored thoroughly. Every line, every axis, every material and opening connects the space within to its surroundings or draws the life outside within the building. His buildings are vivid in their appearance and often futuristic in their approach. From his works, it can be drawn is that it is quite possible to achieve a design even in a difficult site, and even use the constraints of the site to one's benefits, but while an architect is focusing on conceptualizing the context, he must remember to consider the areas just immediate to his site as well. Architecture can be harmonious only when all the aspects are considered. Irrespective of how stunning the designing is, if it fails to flow sinuously with the existing fabric, it won't be considered successful.

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