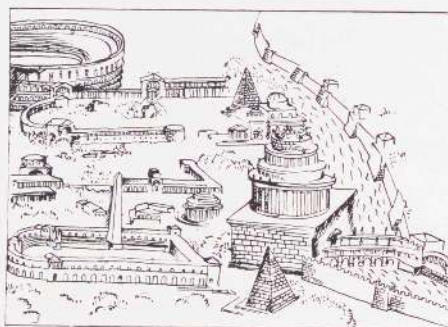


Deconstructivist Architecture

Architecture has always been a central cultural institution valued above all for its provision of stability and order. These qualities are seen to arise from the geometric purity of its formal composition.

The architect has always dreamed of pure form, of producing objects from which all instability and disorder have been excluded. Buildings are constructed by taking simple geometric forms—cubes, cylinders, spheres, cones, pyramids, and so on—and combining them into stable ensembles (fig. 1), following compositional rules which prevent any one form from conflicting with another. No form is permitted to distort



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another; all potential conflict is resolved. The forms contribute harmoniously to a unified whole. This consonant geometric structure becomes the physical structure of the building: its formal purity is seen as guaranteeing structural stability.

Having produced this basic structure, the architect then elaborates it into a final design in a way that preserves its purity. Any deviation from the structural order, any impurity, is seen as threatening the formal values of harmony, unity, and stability, and is therefore insulated from the structure by being treated as mere ornament. Architecture is a conservative discipline that produces pure form and protects it from contamination.

The projects in this exhibition mark a different sensibility, one in which the dream of pure form has been disturbed. Form has become contaminated. The dream has become a kind of nightmare.

It is the ability to disturb our thinking about form that makes these projects deconstructive. It is not that they derive from the mode of contemporary philosophy known as "deconstruction."

Fig. 1. Le Corbusier. *The Lesson of Rome* (illustration from *L'esprit nouveau*, no. 14, n.d. {1922–23})

Fig. 2. SITE. *Best Products Showroom*. Arden Fair Mall, Sacramento, California. 1977

Fig. 3. Gordon Matta-Clark. *Splitting: Four Corners*. 1974

Fig. 4. Hiromi Fujii. *Ushimado International Arts Festival Center*. Ushimado, Japan. 1984

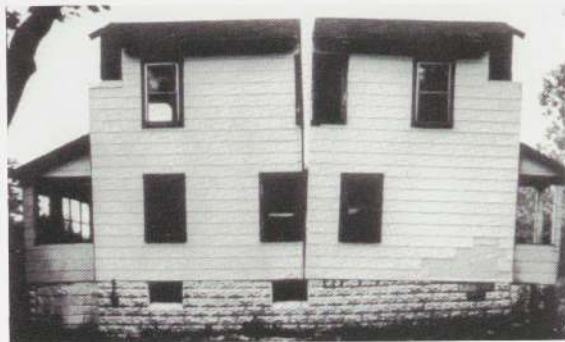
Fig. 5. Peter Eisenman. *Romeo and Juliet Castles*. Venice Biennale, 1985

They are not an application of deconstructive theory. Rather, they emerge from within the architectural tradition and happen to exhibit some deconstructive qualities.

Deconstruction itself, however, is often misunderstood as the taking apart of constructions.

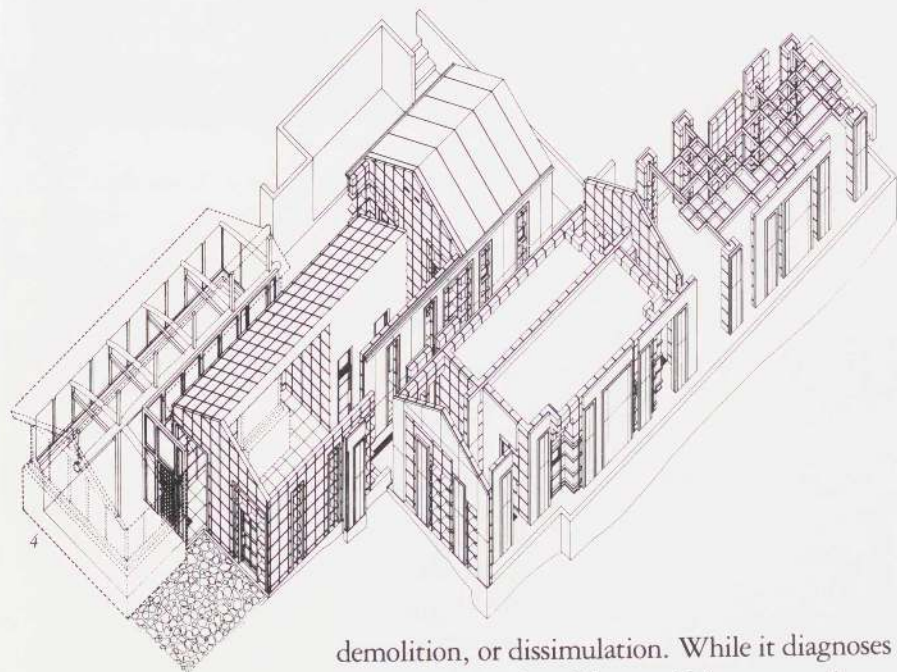


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Consequently, any provocative architectural design which appears to take structure apart—whether it be the simple breaking of an object (figs. 2, 3) or the complex dissimulation of an object into a collage of traces (figs. 4, 5)—has been hailed as deconstructive. These strategies have produced some of the most formidable projects of recent years, but remain simulations of deconstructive work in other disciplines, because they do not exploit the unique condition of the architectural object. Deconstruction is not



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demolition, or dissimulation. While it diagnoses certain structural problems within apparently stable structures, these flaws do not lead to the structures' collapse. On the contrary, deconstruction gains all its force by challenging the very values of harmony, unity, and stability, and proposing instead a different view of structure: the view that the flaws are intrinsic to the structure.

They cannot be removed without destroying it; they are, indeed, structural.

A deconstructive architect is therefore not one who dismantles buildings, but one who locates the inherent dilemmas within buildings. The deconstructive architect puts the pure forms of the architectural tradition on the couch and identifies the symptoms of a repressed impurity. The impurity is drawn to the surface by a combination of gentle coaxing and violent torture: the form is interrogated.

To do so, each project employs formal strategies developed by the Russian avant-garde early in the twentieth century. Russian Constructivism constituted a critical turning point where the architectural tradition was bent so radically that a fissure opened up through which certain disturbing architectural possibilities first became visible. Traditional thinking about the nature of the



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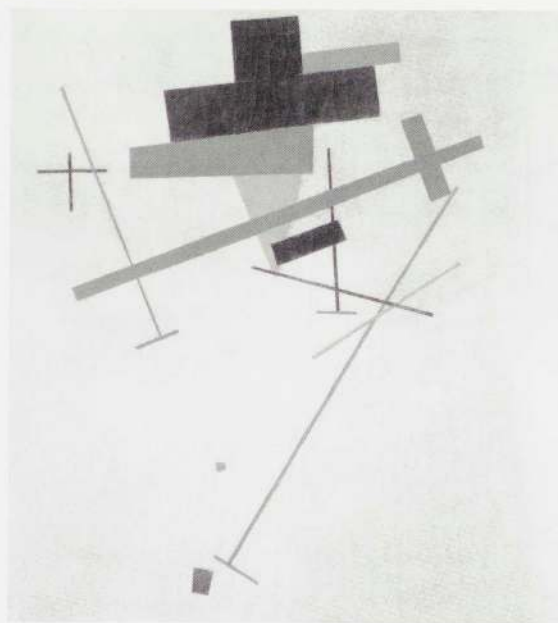
architectural object was placed in doubt. But the radical possibility was not then taken up. The wound in the tradition soon closed, leaving but a faint scar. These projects reopen the wound.

The Russian avant-garde posed a threat to tradition by breaking the classical rules of composition, in which the balanced, hierarchical relationship between forms creates a unified whole. Pure forms were now used to produce "impure," skewed, geometric compositions. Both the Suprematists, led by Malevich, and the constructors of three-dimensional works, primarily

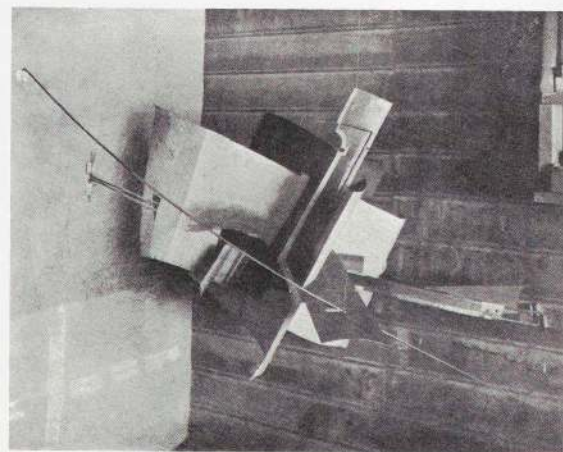
Tatlin, placed simple forms in conflict to produce an unstable, restless geometry (figs. 6, 7). There was no single axis or hierarchy of forms but a nest of competing and conflicting axes and forms. In the years leading up to the 1917 revolution, this geometry became increasingly irregular.

In the years after the revolution, the avant-garde increasingly rejected the traditional high arts, as being an escape from social reality, but embraced architecture precisely because it is inherently functional and cannot be extracted from society. They saw architecture as a high art but one sufficiently grounded in function that it could be used to advance revolutionary goals; since architecture is so intertwined with society, the social revolution required an architectural revolution. Investigations began into using the pre-revolutionary art as the basis for radical structures. Having been lifted up out of the early drawings and into the counter-reliefs, the unstable geometric forms multiplied until they created a new kind of interior space (fig. 8) and seemed about to become architecture. Tatlin's monument (fig. 9), in which pure geometric forms become trapped in a twisted frame, seemed to announce a revolution in architecture. Indeed, for a few years a number of advanced designs were sketched. In Rodchenko's radio station (fig. 10), for example, the pure forms have broken through the structural frame, disturbing both it and themselves. In Krinskii's communal housing project (fig. 11), the frame has completely disintegrated; the forms no longer have any structural relationship and seem to have exploded from within.

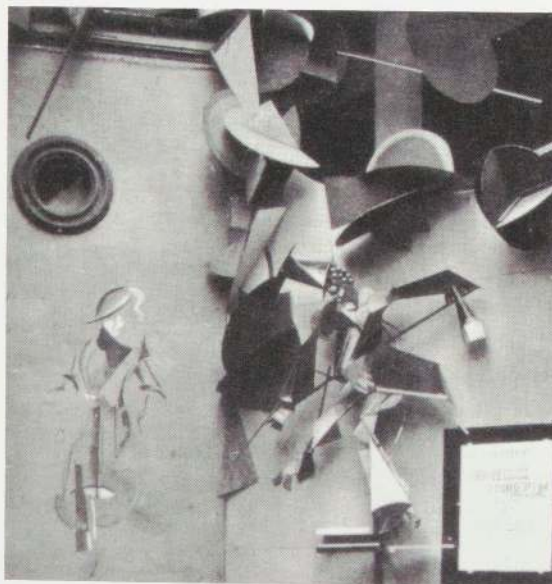
But these radical structures were never realized. A critical shift in thinking took place. The more the Constructivists became committed to architecture, the more the instability of their pre-revolutionary work was removed. The conflict between forms, which defined the early work, was gradually resolved. Unstable assemblages of forms in conflict became machine-like assemblages of forms cooperating harmoniously in the achievement of specific goals. By the time of the canonic work of Constructivist architecture, the Vesnins' Palace of Labor, which was hailed as inaugurating a new age in architecture,



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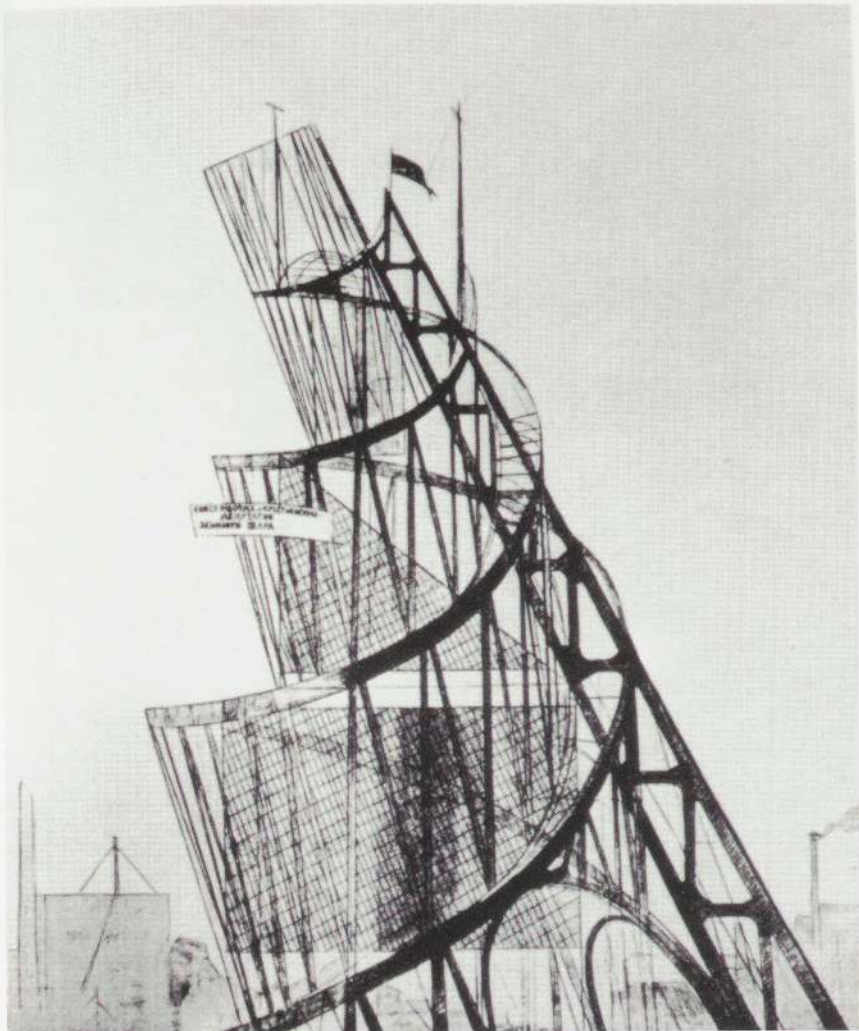


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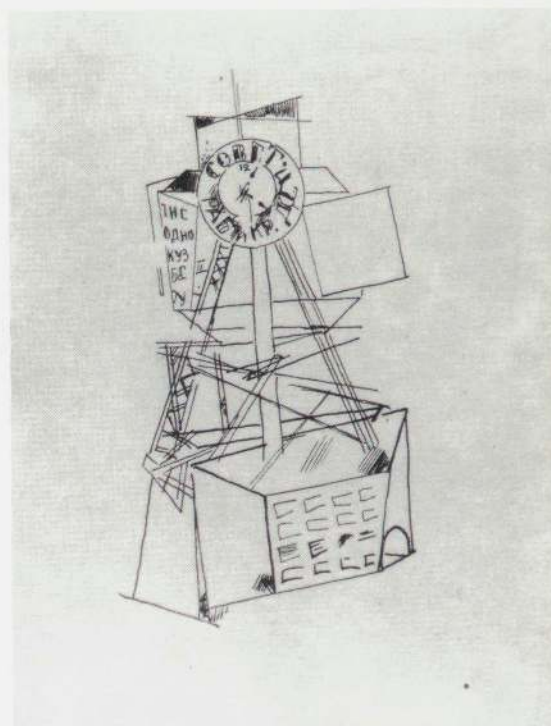
Fig. 6. Kasimir Malevich. Suprematist Painting. 1915-16. Oil on canvas, 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ \times 17 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (49 \times 44.5 cm). Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen am Rhein, Federal Republic of Germany

Fig. 7. Vladimir Tatlin. Corner Counter-Relief. 1914-15. Iron, aluminum, zinc, paint. Whereabouts unknown

Fig. 8. Interior of the Café Pittoresque, Moscow, 1917. Decorations by Georgii Yakulov, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin, and others



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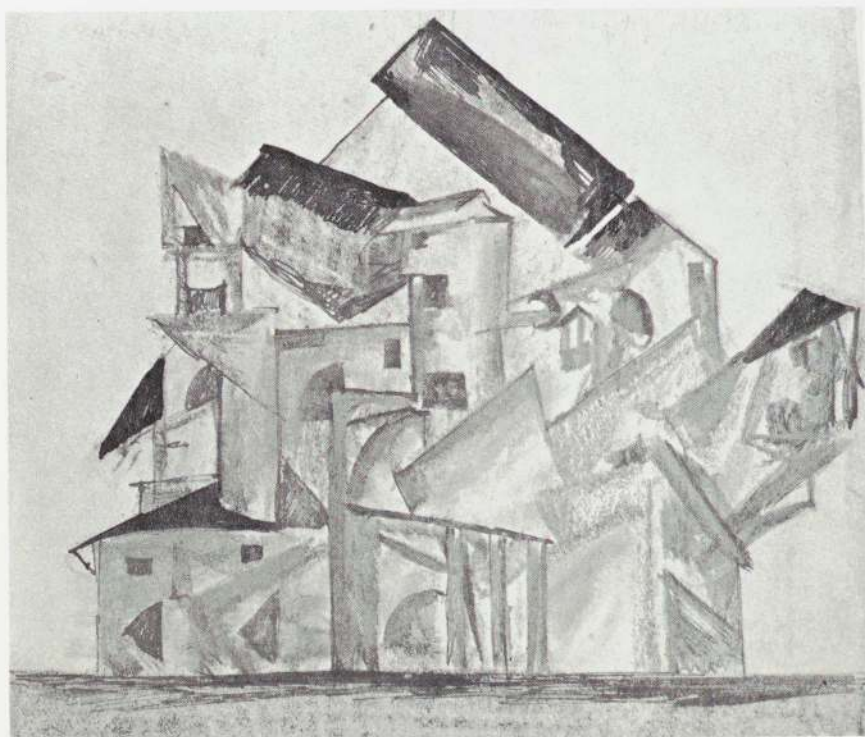


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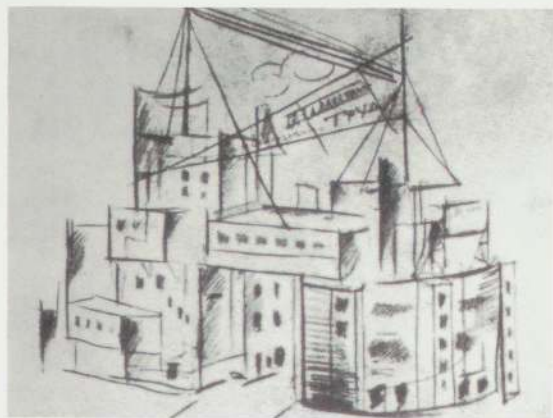
Fig. 9. Vladimir Tatlin.
Project for a Monument to the
Third International. 1919

Fig. 10. Aleksandr
Rodchenko. Experimental
design for a radio station.
1920

Fig. 11. Vladimir Krinskii.
Experimental design for com-
munal housing. 1920



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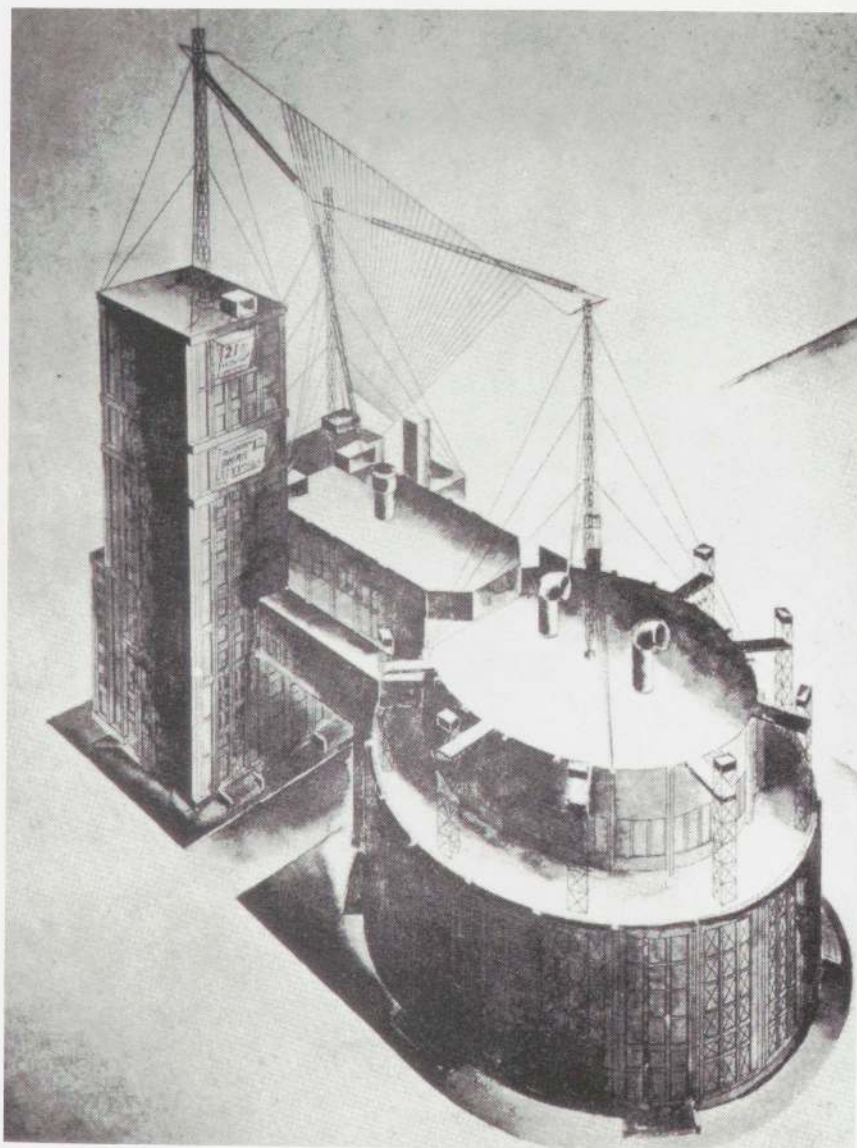


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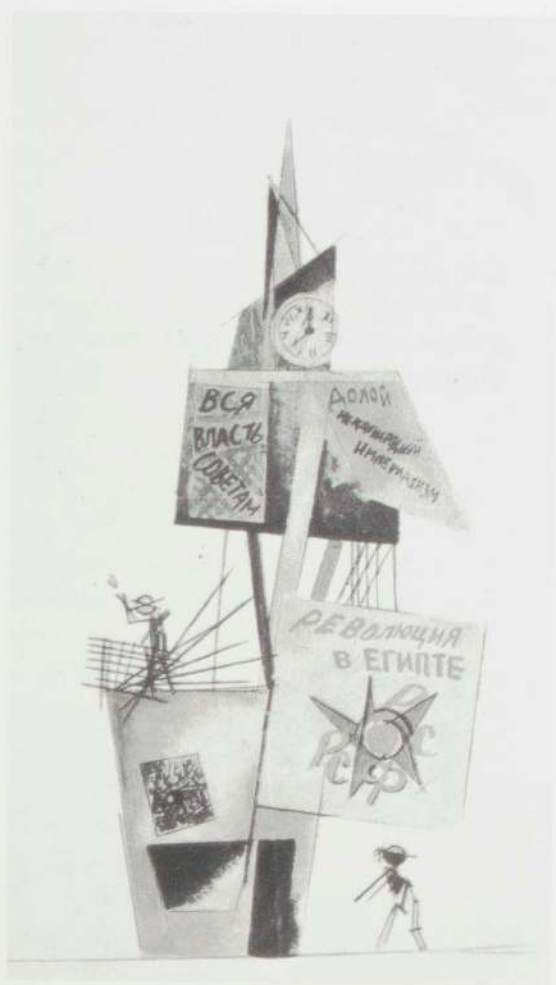
Fig. 12. Vesnin brothers.
Project for a Palace of Labor;
preliminary sketch for competi-
tion design. 1922-23

Fig. 13. Vesnin brothers.
Project for a Palace of Labor;
final scheme. 1923

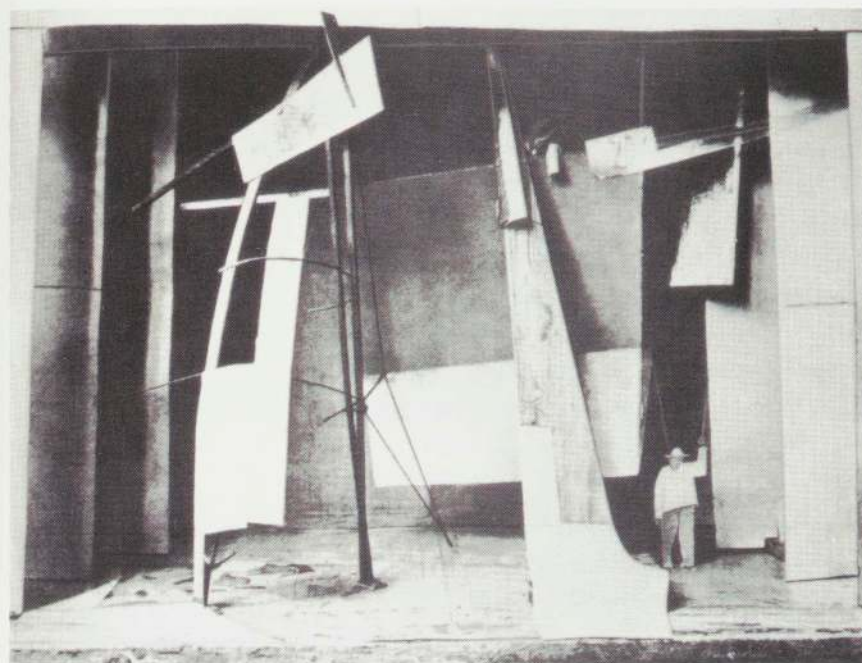
Fig. 14. Aleksandr
Rodchenko. Design for a
newspaper kiosk. 1919



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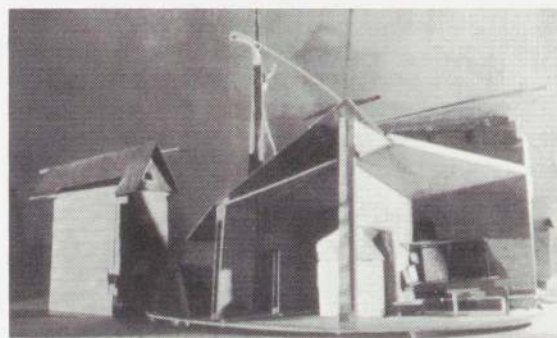
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Fig. 15. Vladimir Tatlin. Maquette for stage set of Velimir Khlebnikov's verse drama *Zangezi*, performed at the Museum of Artistic Culture, Petrograd, 1923

Fig. 16. Vladimir Tatlin. Maquette for stage set of Aleksandr Ostrovsky's play *The Comic Actor of the 17th Century*, performed at the Moscow Art Theater, 1935



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Fig. 17. Iakov Chernikhov. Constructive Theatrical Set (illustration from his book *The Construction of Architectural and Machine Forms*, Leningrad, 1931)



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the distinctive geometry of the early work is evident only in the overhead wires (fig. 12). And even then it is tamed further in the transition from the early sketch to the final design (fig. 13), changed from dangerous fantasy to safe reality. In the sketch the lines of the wires clash and the basic volumes are distorted. But in the final design the volumes have been purified—they have become smooth, classical—and the wires all converge in a single, hierarchical, vertical movement. All the tension of the early sketch is resolved into a single axis; the aimless geometry lines up. The project carries but a vestigial trace of the pre-revolutionary studies: the early work has become merely an ornament attached to the roof of a classical composition of pure forms. The structure below remains undisturbed.

Instability had been marginalized. Indeed, it was fully developed only in what had traditionally been considered marginal art forms— theater sets, street decorations, typography, photomontage, and clothing design (figs. 14–18)— arts exempt from the structural and functional constraints of building.

The Russian avant-garde were not prevented from building their early studies for simply political or technological reasons. Nor did they simply abandon the spirit of their early work. Rather, the instability of the pre-revolutionary work had never been proposed as a structural possibility. The early work was not concerned with destabilizing structure. On the contrary, it was concerned with the fundamental purity of structure. Its irregular geometry was understood as a dynamic relationship between forms floating in space rather than as an unstable structural condition intrinsic to the forms themselves. The purity of the individual forms was never called into question; their internal structure was never tampered with. But by attempting to turn the early formal experiments into contorted architectural structures, Tatlin, Rodchenko, and Krinskii transformed dynamism into instability. Their designs therefore constitute an aberration, an extreme possibility beyond the spirit of the early work. The more stable Constructivist architecture of the Vesnins, paradoxically, maintained that spirit, the concern with the purity of structure, precisely by protecting form from the threat of instability. And as a consequence, it was unable to disturb the traditional condition of the architectural object.

Architecture maintained its traditional role. In this sense, the radical avant-garde project failed in architecture. There are formal strategies possible in architecture which transform its fundamental condition; such transformations were effected in other arts, but not in architecture. There was only a stylistic shift, and even then the new style soon succumbed to that of the modern movement, which was developing in parallel at the same time. The Russian avant-garde was corrupted by the purity of the modern movement.

The modern movement attempted to purify architecture by stripping off the ornament of the classical tradition to reveal the naked purity of the functional structure beneath. Formal purity was associated with functional efficiency. But the modern movement was obsessed by an elegant aesthetic of functionalism, not by the complex dynamics of function itself. Rather than use the specific requirements of the functional program to generate the basic order of their projects, they merely manipulated the skin of pure geometric forms in a way that signified the general concept of function. By employing the machine aesthetic, they produced a functionalist style. Like the classicists, they articulated the surface of a form in a way that marked its purity. They restored the very tradition they attempted to escape, replacing the classical skin with a modern skin but not transforming the fundamental condition of the architectural object. Architecture remained an agent of stability.

Each of the projects in this exhibition explores the relationship between the instability of the early Russian avant-garde and the stability of high modernism. Each project employs the aesthetic of high modernism but marries it to the radical geometry of the pre-revolutionary work. They apply the cool veneer of the International Style to the anxiously conflicting forms of the avant-garde. Locating the tension of the early work under the skin of modern architecture, they irritate modernism from within, distorting it with its own genealogy.

It is not necessarily that they consciously work from Constructivist sources. Rather, in dismantling the ongoing tradition, in which modernism participated, they find themselves inevitably employing the strategies rehearsed by the avant-garde. They are not capriciously imitating the

vocabulary of the Russians; the point is that the Russians discovered the geometric configurations which can be used to destabilize structure, and that these configurations can be found repressed within high modernism.

The use of the formal vocabulary of Constructivism is therefore not a historicist game which deftly extracts the avant-garde works from their ideologically charged social milieu by treating them as just aesthetic objects. The true aestheticization of the early formal investigations was actually effected when the avant-garde itself made them ornamental rather than structural. The projects in this exhibition, however, do make the early investigations structural, and thereby return them to the social milieu.

But this does not involve simply enlarging the counter-reliefs, or making the early drawings three-dimensional. These projects gain little of their force from employing conflicting forms. That merely sets the scene for a more fundamental subversion of the architectural tradition. The aesthetic is employed only in order to exploit a further radical possibility, one which the Russian avant-garde made available but did not take advantage of. If the projects in a sense complete the enterprise, in so doing they also transform it: they twist Constructivism. This twist is the "de" of "de-constructivist." The projects can be called deconstructivist because they draw from Constructivism and yet constitute a radical deviation from it.

They accomplish this by exploiting the aberration in the history of the avant-garde, the brief episode of about 1918–20 in which contorted architectural designs were proposed. Irregular geometry is again understood as a structural condition rather than as a dynamic formal aesthetic. It is no longer produced simply by the conflict between pure forms. It is now produced within those forms. The forms themselves are infiltrated with the characteristic skewed geometry, and distorted. In this way, the traditional condition of the architectural object is radically disturbed.

This disturbance does not result from an external violence. It is not a fracturing, or slicing, or fragmentation, or piercing. To disturb a form from the outside in these ways is not to threaten that form, only to damage it. The damage produces a decorative effect, an aesthetic of danger, an almost picturesque representation of peril—but not a tangible threat. Instead, deconstructivist architecture disturbs figures from within. But this does not mean that contorted geometry

Fig. 18. El Lissitzky.
Untitled. 1924–30. Gelatin-silver print, 6¼ × 4⅝" (16.1 × 11.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Gift of Shirley C. Burden and David H. McAlpin (by exchange)

has become some new kind of interior decoration. It does not simply occupy the space defined by an already existing figure. The internal disturbance has actually been incorporated into the internal structure, the construction. It is as if some kind of parasite has infected the form and distorted it from the inside.

The rooftop remodeling project in this exhibition, for example (pls. 85–89), is clearly a form that has been distorted by some alien organism, a writhing, disruptive animal breaking through the corner. Some twisted counter-relief infects the orthogonal box. It is a skeletal monster which

way, the form somehow remains intact. This is an architecture of disruption, dislocation, deflection, deviation, and distortion, rather than one of demolition, dismantling, decay, decomposition, or disintegration. It displaces structure instead of destroying it.

What is finally so unsettling about such work is precisely that the form not only survives its torture, but appears all the stronger for it. Perhaps the form is even produced by it. It becomes unclear which came first, the form or the distortion, the host or the parasite. At first glance the difference between the form and its ornamental distortion appears clear, but on closer examination the line between them breaks up. The more carefully we look, the more unclear it becomes where the perfect form ends and its imperfection begins; they are found to be inseparably entangled. A line cannot be drawn between them. No surgical technique can free the form; no clean incision can be made. To remove the parasite would be to kill the host. They comprise one symbiotic entity.

This produces a feeling of unease, of disquiet, because it challenges the sense of stable, coherent identity that we associate with pure form. 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 is secretly monstrous. Tortured from within, the seemingly perfect form confesses its crime, its imperfection.

This sense of dislocation occurs not only within the forms of these projects. It also occurs between those forms and their context.

In recent years, the modern understanding of social responsibility as functional program has been superseded by a concern for context. But contextualism has been used as an excuse for mediocrity, for a dumb servility to the familiar. Since deconstructivist architecture seeks the unfamiliar within the familiar, it displaces the context rather than acquiesce to it. The projects in this exhibition do not ignore the context; they are not anti-contextual. Rather, each makes a very specific intervention.

What makes them disturbing is the way they find the unfamiliar already hidden within the familiar context. By their intervention, elements of the context become defamiliarized. In one project, towers are turned over on their sides,

breaks up the elements of the form as it struggles out. Released from the familiar constraints of orthogonal structure, the roof splits, shears, and buckles. The distortion is peculiarly disquieting because it seems to belong to the form, to be part of it. It seems to have always been latent there until released by the architect: the alien emerging out of the stairs, the walls, and the roof plane—not from some fissure or dark corner—is given shape by the very elements that define the basic volume of the attic. The alien is an outgrowth of the very form it violates.

The form is distorting itself. Yet this internal distortion does not destroy the form. In a strange



while in others, bridges are tilted up to become towers, underground elements erupt from the earth and float above the surface, or commonplace materials become suddenly exotic. Each project activates some part of the context to disturb the rest of it, drawing out previously unnoticed disruptive properties and making them thematic. Each thereby assumes an uncanny presence, alien to the context from which it derives, strange yet familiar—a kind of sleeping monster which awakens in the midst of the everyday.

This estrangement sets up a complicated resonance, between the disrupted interior of the forms and their disruption of the context, which calls into question the status of the walls that define the form. The division between inside and outside is radically disturbed. The form no longer simply divides an inside from an outside. The geometry proves to be much more convoluted: the sense of being enclosed, whether by a building or a room, is disrupted. But not by simply removing walls—the closure of form is not simply replaced by the openness of the modern free plan. This is not freedom, liberation, but stress; not release, but greater tension. The wall breaks open, and in a very ambiguous way. There are no simple windows, no regular openings puncturing a solid wall; rather, the wall is tormented—split and folded. It no longer provides security by dividing the familiar from the unfamiliar, inside from out. The whole condition of enclosure breaks down.

Even though it threatens this most fundamental property of architectural objects, deconstructivist architecture does not constitute an avant-garde. It is not a rhetoric of the new. Rather, it exposes the unfamiliar hidden within the traditional. It is the shock of the old.

It exploits the weaknesses in the tradition in order to disturb rather than overthrow it. Like the modern avant-garde, it attempts to be disturbing, alienating. But not from the retreat of the avant-garde, not from the margins. Rather, it occupies, and subverts, the center. This work is not fundamentally different from the ancient tradition it subverts. It does not abandon the tradition. Rather, it inhabits the center of the tradition in order to demonstrate that architecture is always infected, that pure form has always

been contaminated. By inhabiting the tradition fully, obeying its inner logic more rigorously than ever before, these architects discover certain dilemmas within the tradition that are missed by those who sleepwalk through it.

Deconstructivist architecture therefore poses problems to both the center and the margins, both the conservative mainstream and the radical fringe of the architectural profession. Neither can simply appropriate the work. It cannot simply be imitated by the margins, because it demands such an intimate knowledge of, and therefore complicity with, the inner workings of the tradition. But neither can it simply be appropriated by the center; it cannot be so easily assimilated. It invites consumption by employing traditional architectural forms—tempts the profession to swallow it whole—but, because it infects those forms, it always produces a kind of indigestion. In that moment of critical resistance it assumes its full force.

Much supposedly radical architectural work of recent years has neutralized itself by maintaining itself in the margins. A body of brilliant conceptual projects has developed which perhaps look more radical than the work in this exhibition but lack its force, because they do not confront the center of the tradition: they marginalize themselves by excluding building. They do not engage with architecture but make sophisticated glosses on it. They produce a kind of commentary on building without entering into building. Such drawings have written into them the detachment of the historical avant-garde. They inhabit the margins, the ones up front, at the frontier. They are projections of the future, brave new worlds, utopian fantasies.

In contrast, the work in this exhibition is neither a projection into the future nor simply a historicist remembrance of the past. Rather, it attempts to get under the skin of the living tradition, irritating it from within. Deconstructivist architecture locates the frontiers, the limits of architecture, coiled up within everyday forms. It finds new territory within old objects.

This work carries out the kind of subversion usually regarded as possible only in realms distanced from the reality of built form. The projects are radical precisely because they do not play in the sanctuaries of drawing, or theory, or sculpture. They inhabit the realm of building. Some have

been built, some will be built, and others will never be built—but each is buildable; each aims at building. They develop an architectonic coherence by confronting the basic problems of building—structure and function—even if they do so in an unconventional way.

In each project, the traditional structure of parallel planes—stacked up horizontally from the ground plane within a regular form—is twisted. The frame is warped. Even the ground plane is warped. The interrogation of pure form pushes structure to its limits, but not beyond. The structure is shaken but does not collapse; it is just pushed to where it becomes unsettling. The work produces a sense of unease when floors and walls move disconcertingly, tempting us to trust something closer to the edge. But if these structures produce a sense of insecurity, it is not because of flimsiness. These buildings are extremely solid. The solidity is just organized in an unfamiliar way, shifting our traditional sense of structure. Though structurally sound, at the same time they are structurally frightening.

This displacement of traditional thinking about structure also displaces traditional thinking about function. The modernists argued that form follows function, and that functionally efficient forms necessarily had a pure geometry. But their streamlined aesthetic disregarded the untidy reality of actual functional requirements. In deconstructivist architecture, however, the disruption of pure form provides a dynamic complexity of local conditions that is more congruent with functional complexity. Moreover, forms are disturbed and only then given a functional program. Instead of form following function, function follows deformation.

Despite calling into question traditional ideas about structure, these projects are rigorously structural. Despite calling into question the functionalist rhetoric of modernism, each project is rigorously functional.

For most of the architects, this commitment to building is a recent shift that has completely changed the tone of their work. They have left their complex abstractions and confronted the materiality of built objects. This shift gives their work a critical edge. Critical work today can be done only in the realm of building: to engage with the discourse, architects have to engage with building; the object becomes the site of all theoretical inquiry. Theorists are forced out of

the sanctuary of theory, practitioners are roused from sleepwalking practice. Both meet in the realm of building, and engage with objects.

This should not be understood as a rejection of theory. Rather, it indicates that the traditional status of theory has changed. No longer is it some abstract realm of defense that surrounds objects, protecting them from examination by mystifying them. Architectural theory generally preempts an encounter with the object. It is concerned with veiling rather than exposing objects. With these projects, all the theory is loaded into the object: propositions now take the form of objects rather than verbal abstractions. What counts is the condition of the object, not the abstract theory. Indeed the force of the object makes the theory that produced it irrelevant.

Consequently, these projects can be considered outside their usual theoretical context. They can be analyzed in strictly formal terms because the formal condition of each object carries its full ideological force. Such an analysis brings together highly conceptual architects with pragmatists. They join together in the production of disquieting objects which interrogate pure form, in a way that exposes the repressed condition of architecture.

This is not to say that they participate in a new movement. Deconstructivist architecture is not an “-ism.” But neither is it simply seven independent architects. It is a curious point of intersection among strikingly different architects moving in different directions. The projects are but brief moments in the independent programs of the artists. Clearly, they influence each other in complex ways, but this is not a team; it is, at best, an uneasy alliance. This exhibition is as much about the uneasiness as it is about an alliance. The episode will be short-lived. The architects will proceed in different directions. Their work will not authorize a certain kind of practice, a certain kind of object. This is not a new style; the projects do not simply share an aesthetic. What the architects share is the fact that each constructs an unsettling building by exploiting the hidden potential of modernism.

The disquiet these buildings produce is not merely perceptual; it is not a personal response to the work, nor even a state of mind. What is

being disturbed is a set of deeply entrenched cultural assumptions which underlie a certain view of architecture, assumptions about order, harmony, stability, and unity. Yet this disturbance does not derive from, or result in, some fundamental shift in culture. The disquiet is not produced by some new spirit of the age; it is not that an unsettled world produces an unsettled architecture. It is not even the personal angst of the architect; it is not a form of expressionism—the architect expresses nothing here. The architect only makes it possible for the tradition to go wrong, to deform itself. The nightmare of deconstructivist architecture inhabits the unconscious of pure form rather than the unconscious of the architect. The architect merely countermands traditional formal inhibitions in order to release the suppressed alien. Each architect releases different inhibitions in order to subvert form in radically different ways. Each makes thematic a different dilemma of pure form.

In so doing they produce a devious architecture, a slippery architecture that slides uncontrollably from the familiar into the unfamiliar, toward an uncanny realization of its own alien nature: an architecture, finally, in which form distorts itself in order to reveal itself anew. The projects suggest that architecture has always been riddled with these kinds of enigmas, that they are the source of its force and its delight—that they are the very possibility of its formidable presence.

Mark Wigley
Associate Curator of the Exhibition