

“Six Concepts” and Disjunctive Empiricism: On Bernard Tschumi’s Theoretico-Practical Promiscuity

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This paper proposes to focus on the notion of “disjunction” as it has been theorized by Bernard Tschumi. More specifically, it will try to show how Tschumi’s inaugurating lecture at Columbia GSAPP, “Six Concepts” (1991), captures the notion of “disjunction” in a state of mutation and adaptation. The critical period in which the lecture takes place marks not only a junction point for the architect-theorist’s career and the legacy of his theoretical apparatus, but it also marks a turning point for the tendencies of architectural theory in Anglo-American universities.

Finally, by electing to revisit the work of an architect-theorist, the following research opens a space for a treatment of theory inflected by both the messiness and vibrancy of practice: the “oeuvre” of a May ‘68 generation being put to work.

The following research proposes to revisit Bernard Tschumi’s account of the concept of “disjunction” through a close reading of the lecture “Six Concepts,” held at Columbia University in 1991 and, in effect, inaugurating Tschumi’s deanship at the GSAPP (1988-2003). A transcript of “Six Concepts” is included in Tschumi’s self-compiled anthology, *Architecture and Disjunction* (1994), and it is the transcript’s specific location in the anthology, as a bookend to the section on “disjunction,” that supports its weight in defining the term. This essay proposes that the lecture is indicative of a phase of mutation for the concept of “disjunction” and that, in a larger sense, this announces a renegotiation of the pressures of practice within the architect’s theoretical artifice.

Furthermore, the significance of the topic of practice for the impending fate of a canonical architectural theory in its “last decade” can hardly be understated – the last issue of *Assemblage* indeed addressing the difficult twinning of practice and theory as its last act. This essay will then also attempt to show that the relatively relaxed and facilitated intrusion of practice in the praxis of theory, by an architect of the theoretical avant-gardes at the tail end of the 1980s, can be understood as a serious aberration from the canonical narrative about architectural theory at this very junction point – itself in the process of taking stock of its own impact and imports. In other words, the very concept of disjunction, with its focus on probing limits, could easily be considered as a timely foil to historicize the shifting boundaries of theory at the beginning “of the end.”

[A PRELIMINARY ACCOUNT OF DISJUNCTION]

Several essays precede the transcript of the lecture “Six Concepts” in the section titled “Disjunction” in Tschumi’s *Architecture and Disjunction*. These set the stage for an initial account of the concept. “Madness and the Combinative,” “Abstract Mediation and Strategy,” “Disjunctions” and “De-Dis-Ex,” written between 1984 and 1991, give a tentative definition of the term. From these, we can first identify a clear affinity of the concept with the affirmation of the importance of *zeitgeist*. “Disjunction” refers to “today’s cultural circumstances,” and its “characteristic fragmentation and dissociation.”¹ As is demonstrated by the architect’s well documented intellectual origins,² this focus on cultural fragmentation follows a line of thought promoted by post-structuralist thinkers such as Barthes, Lacan, and Derrida.

Tschumi also tells us that disjunction is defined by a “set of strategies” which, as a force of cultural resistance, contrasts and attempts to counter a “long-standing practice, which accentuates synthesis, harmony, the composition of elements” in architecture as in culture.³ In order to upset “long-standing practices” engrained in prevalent architectural habits of mind, disjunctive strategies must mine for methodologies of design in the avant-gardes of other disciplines and mediums, such as film theory, philosophy and literature.⁴ These interdisciplinary disjunctive borrowings are what came to be called *transpositions*. The sources of these transpositions have already been well researched⁵ and it will not be of great significance to rehearse this enumeration here. These have led to the theorization of techniques for design which focus on effects of “juxtaposition” and “superposition” among others.⁶ However, more importantly for this paper, it will be more relevant to stress that the relationship of the concept of “disjunction” to these acts of *transposing* – effectively decontextualizing and recontextualizing – becomes doubly significant when considered through the effort of historicizing the conceptual shift of the term “disjunction” itself.

Of significance as well for this paper is “disjunction’s” strong rhetorical reliance on flirting with the limits, in this case, of the architectural discipline. The will to exercise experimentation at the *limit*, is, of course, as Tschumi points out himself, also indebted to post-structuralist thought.⁷ Because they are disciplinary imports “from without,”⁸ Tschumi contends that transpositional methods have the ability to probe and stretch the boundaries of current architectural production. Tschumi indicates that working at the limits is what provides the pleasure of “making architecture.”⁹

Perhaps the last element to remind ourselves about this initial sketch of "disjunction" is that the source texts included in the anthology are dated between 1984 and 1991. By 1984, the design for "La Villette" has already been submitted and the years that follow are marked by the frictions involved with concretizing, and, in reality, constructing, this architecture of transposed post-structuralist thought.

[SIX CONCEPTS DECONSTRUCTED : SUBTEXTS AND INTERTEXTS]

Though the concept of "disjunction" is omitted from the "Six Concepts" lecture's six concepts, a cursory review of the lecture's content will confirm its strong association with some of the thematics outlined above. It is, however, in cross-referencing the lecture's tone with a larger field of contextual anecdotes and webs of anachronisms that the preliminary ideas surrounding the term "disjunction" will start to slip out of plane.

At first glance, the "Six Concepts" (1991) lecture can easily be understood as a kind of prospective pedagogical agenda giving gravitas and tone to Bernard Tschumi's deanship at the Columbia GSAPP. In the anthology *Architecture and Disjunction*, the lecture's transcript is divided into three parts: a prologue, part 1 and part 2. A first reading of the prologue and part 1 reveals, unsurprisingly, a Tschumi eager to reiterate his ideological affiliations and position himself at the progressive end of the culture wars fomented by the 1980s. In fact, in order to set this clearly, Tschumi introduces the lecture as a response to the publication of a Vincent Scully article in the *New York Times*.¹⁰ The Scully article, praising the merits and commercial reception of New Urbanist developments,¹¹ makes excellent fodder for the admonishing tone of what follows. In short, rhetorically, Tschumi focuses on the failures and misconceptions of historicist post-modernisms and their deployment, especially in America. More specifically, he asserts that they are symptomatic of an incorrect response to two different set of issues. First, they have suffered from a misreading of post-structuralist thinkers from Roland Barthes to Venturi.¹² Second, Tschumi asserts that historicist post-modernisms are inadequately equipped to confront the contemporary, fragmented city.¹³ Enlarging the issue to other undercurrents of "post-modernisms," Tschumi later takes issue with the notion of style and its complicity in strictly encouraging development of formal syntax.¹⁴ According to the new dean, style and formal syntax are also the main culprit involved in the reductive dichotomy of conversations centered on skin and structure. Most notably, the prologue and part 1 of the lecture serve to emphasize a prevalent academic ambivalence with a market driven embrace of the past decade's formal and stylistic experiments with post-modernism.

It is of course undeniable that Mary McLeod's 1989 article in *Assemblage 8* "Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism"¹⁵ is on Tschumi's

mind. On the one hand, the first two parts of the 1991 lecture explicitly mirror and rehearse McLeod's criticism regarding the aesthetization of post-modernist discourse and its celebration in mass consumer culture.

On the other hand, the lecture's part 2 tries to offer a counter-argument to McLeod's criticism of aestheticization by focusing on constructing a pedagogical agenda based on producing forms of knowledge instead of a knowledge of forms.¹⁶ Re-enacting "disjunction's" reliance on "strategies," part 2 elaborates on "Six Concepts," the application of which would lead to the teaching and production of forms of knowledge in architecture. In order of appearance, these concepts include: (1) "Technologies of Defamiliarization," (2) "The Mediated Metropolitan Shock," (3) "De-Structuring," (4) "Superimposition," (5) "Crossprogramming" and (6) "Events: The Turning Point." Reading these concepts strictly thematically, concepts (1) and (2) reiterate the progressive impulses of media technologies and the role they must play in destabilizing architectural practice and thought.¹⁷ With concepts (2) to (6) Tschumi makes a persistent case for the relevance of strategies of transpositions, which the architect credits for both his early theoretical musings ("Manhattan Transcripts," "Screenplays") and for the performative concepts of "program" and "activities."¹⁸

Certainly, Tschumi's desperate attempt to salvage the relevance of strategies of transpositions can also be seen as an attempt to rebuke McLeod's criticism of textual strategies for architectural design as being formal experimentations in disguise.¹⁹ In a way, McLeod's article in *Assemblage 8* is emblematic of a larger sentiment at the turn of the 1980s of assessing the impacts, failures and impasses of architectural theory after more than a decade of post-structuralist applications and complications within architectural production. Tschumi's awareness of this sentiment in the lecture is undeniably palpable. However, in building up the "forces of consumption and commodification"²⁰ as a kind of bogeyman for the dealings of architectural theory, it could be said that McLeod's 1989 article conflates too easily the intricacies of the relationship between theory and practice. This paper proposes to problematize this further in retracing the conceptual shift of "disjunction" at this juncture point.

[DISJUNCTIVE EMPIRICISM?]

The Intrusion of Practice Part 1 : an Expanded Audienceship

Expanding on the "Six Concepts" analysis beyond its broader rhetorical brushstrokes to focus on the minutiae of Tschumi's arguments, this section of the paper contends that re-contextualizing specific parts of Tschumi's theoretical allusions within a larger historical field reveals, first, issues of audienceship. The question of whom is on the receiving end of the 1991 address starts to hint towards the intrusion of practice in the

conceptual apparatus of the term “disjunction.” Through this lens, Tschumi’s praxis of theoretical promiscuity in redefining the concept confuses the boundary between theoretical instrumentalization and theoretical resilience.

Beyond its purported ideological underpinnings, what transpires in Tschumi’s lecture is the recurrence of the motif of architectural practice. After all, Scully’s article is a praise of DPZ’s professional merits and one could wonder if Tschumi’s diatribes in the prologue and part 1 might not be a projection of his having to come to terms with his own growing practice. Indeed, the architect has seen a growth in demand for built work in the years that immediately precede his appointment as dean, and this growing demand will follow him for years to come. This is a time when he is commissioned to build the “electronic carpet” at Le Fresnoy (1991), after a dry spell of several years following LaVillette (1982).²¹ Emphasizing this fortuitous change of winds, the transcript of the “Six Concepts” lecture in the anthology includes a series of proposals which are contemporaneous to the address: the “Inhabited Bridges” (1988), the “ZKM Center for Art and Media Technology” (1989), the “Glass Video Gallery” (1988) and the “Bibliothèque de France” (1988).

In this context, the recurring, almost obsessive, discussion of the skin/structure binary in all parts of the lecture takes on another meaning. In a strange revival of modernist reprimand and enlightenment verve on the necessity of tectonic expression, “Six Concepts” relentlessly dismisses post-modernist experimentations in ornate skin designs. Tschumi suggests: “If the design of windows only reflects the superficiality of the skin’s decoration, we might very well start to look for a way to do without windows. If the design of pillars reflects the conventionality of a supporting frame, maybe we might get rid of pillars altogether.”²² Taking sides with both Laugier and Didascalò in Piranesi’s *Dialogues*,²³ though failing twice in both updating a centuries old argument and indulging us in a satirical tone, Tschumi clearly positions himself as a “structures” man, on the “right” - though ironically anachronistic - side of both history and theory. Surely, Tschumi’s rhetorical manoeuvring here is far from being effective in addressing a strictly academic audience.

Tschumi’s siding with structure, then, might be seen as a first step in addressing a wider audience, and in allowing for a theoretical praxis to encompass new stakeholders. This reading evidently resonates with the interchangeable use of the term “structure” in the “Six Concepts” lecture to mean that which is “holding it together,”²⁴ in buildings as in institutions alike. Multiple times over, Tschumi integrates in his address references to the campus of Columbia to illustrate his point about the current state of building culture. In the prologue, he evokes the failure to produce any structural change on campus by limiting efforts of developments to the surface treatment of existing buildings.²⁵ In “Concept 5: Crossprogramming,” the

architect celebrates the constant renewal of program that has faced the Rotunda.²⁶ Conceivably, Tschumi’s lecture is indeed also addressed to institutional partners - those who could be inclined to solicit the new dean’s help for “structural change.” This larger, institutional audience, might also account for some of the sections in the lecture which simplify parts of canonical architectural history to a point of vulgarization. In this respect, we could point here towards Tschumi’s citation of the Albertian aphorism: “Ornament has the character of something attached or additional.”²⁷ It is indeed curious that the architect would use such a banality to sanction a renewed debate on the topic of structure/ornament. Similarly, elsewhere, the architect briefly mentions the impact of the elevator on 19th century building design to emphasize the importance of the discipline’s adaptation to new forms of technology.²⁸ As it may be, securing funds for the computers of the paperless studio might have been just around the corner.

In short, it is possible to suggest that the lecture shows Tschumi anticipating the weight of his own voice in the expansion and adaptation of Columbia University’s campus at this time. His focus on the fundamental role of “program” in architecture, more specifically in Concept 5, could be interpreted as a particularly effective argument to make in the context of development trends on campuses, since all building initiatives usually start and end with issues of planning: the lack or reorganization of available space. In fact, in the years leading up to the publication of *Architecture and Disjunction* he is invited to sit on the committee assembled to discuss the fate of the university’s student center which had come under scrutiny for being unequipped to meet contemporary demands for space. As Herbert Muschamp points out in an article written for the *New York Times* in 1999, it might be due to more than coincidence that Tschumi’s own proposal for the Alfred Lerner Hall (1994)²⁹ was considered the most promising to concretize.³⁰ Construction for the Alfred Lerner Hall ended in 1999 and the building opened to the public.³¹ Rehearsing a conceptual framework focus on performative notions of movement, space and event, the principal feature of the design are the elaborate hanging circulation ramps that loop around an open atrium and connect one part of the floor plate to its opposite side.³² The architect did not have to look very far for inspiration - having, as solid precedent for this new open space of spectacle, the progressive role of places of assembly on Columbia’s campus.³³ Unfortunately, and not without a slight touch of irony, the Alfred Lerner Hall was very quick to underperform its initial ambitions of providing sufficient space for future student and administrative functions.³⁴ The infrequent use of the grand circulation space at the Alfred Lerner Hall has been identified as the main culprit for this inconvenient turn of events.³⁵ In any case, the anecdote certainly helps to point out that the architect, as a tool for persuasion, aptly leverages the implications of his own identity. His militant European past might have swayed an

audience in the interest of rallying approval for a grand space of democratic circulation and assembly, especially in the context of Columbia's previous litigious efforts in the matters of campus development. Furthermore, his prestigious appointment as dean certainly positioned him as a reliable authority on architecture and planning, and perhaps his petition for a forward looking agenda for the School (the lecture, "Six Concepts") could have served as a selling point, for administrators and donors alike, that the Alfred Lerner Hall would be a marker for the campus of tomorrow.

Mirroring the mutation undergone by Tschumi's career in 1991, and the challenges involved in upholding a difficult double identity – the theoretical architect and the professional –, it will come as no surprise that "Six Concepts" leaves us with a revised notion of "disjunction." In his elaboration of "Concept IV: Superimposition," the architect states: "Yet if I was to examine both my own work of this time and that of my colleagues, I would say that both grew out of a critique of architecture, of the nature of architecture. It dismantled concepts and became a remarkable conceptual tool, but it could not address the one thing that makes the work of architects ultimately different from the work of philosophers: materiality."³⁶ Hence, to understand the 1991 address as part of a final term to the idea of "Disjunction," it seems that Tschumi would very much like to have us believe that it is his very own "empirical shift," albeit one that evolved on his own terms and representing as it were the final evolution of a long period of now concretized post-structuralist experimentation. Tschumi's attempted tour de force has no small ambition: to persuade us that "disjunction" has the theoretical resilience to weather both the past post-structuralist and the impending deleuzian storm of the coming decade. With "Six Concepts," "disjunction"-cum-"disjunctive empiricism" is not only the expression of an abstract contemporary mediated *zeitgeist* or the necessary accretion of effects in the service of "dislocation" and "fragmentation." It is the affirmation of what is there, what is observable: stakeholders, institutions, performance, cities. The title of the following publication series about his own work, "Event Cities" (1-4), corroborates this reading. In fact, the first "Event Cities" is published in 1994, the same year as the anthology *Architecture and Disjunction*. In addition, reference to the contemporary reality of development forces in the city abound in the lecture, even more so with respect to the conditions faced by the megalopolis of Tokyo and New York.³⁷

The Intrusion of Practice Part 2 :a Difficult Crowd

As is evidenced by the ripple effects of McLeod's 1989 article, we could say that the historical moment of the conceptual shift of disjunction marks a moment of reckoning for architectural theory and its relationship to the profession of architecture. Another poignant moment in the tumultuous relationship of architectural theory to practice is, in fact, at the self-proclaimed end of architectural theory. It is rather

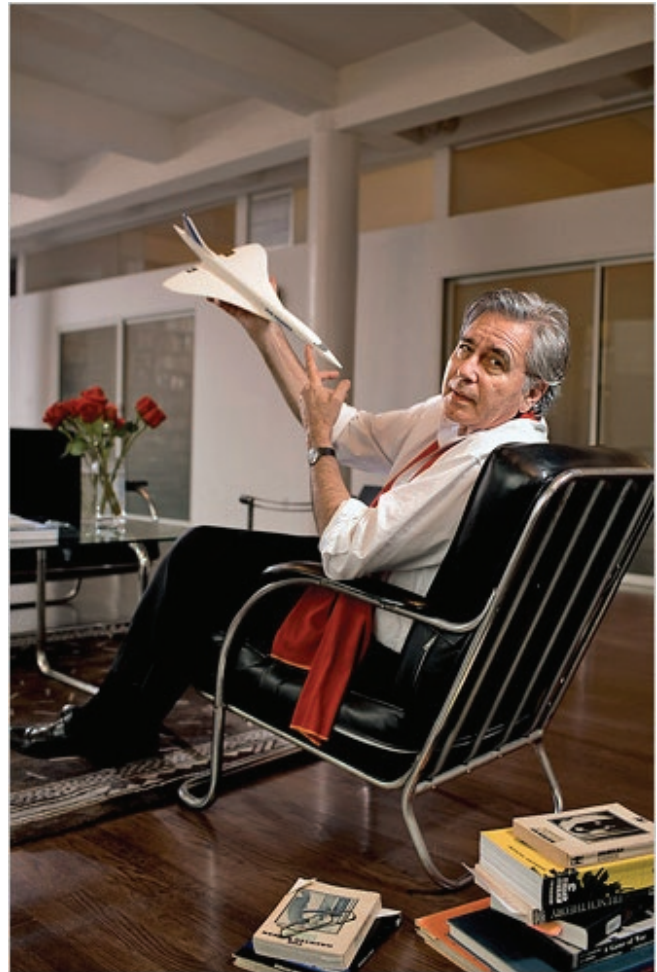


Figure 1. Bernard Tschumi, reclining. Ben Stechschulte/Redux, for The New York Times.

significant that McLeod also publishes a decade later to the very last issue of *Assemblage 41* a short contribution entitled "Theory and Practice"³⁸ - the last issue of the journal thematically focusing on this difficult twinning. Here, McLeod tried to reinforce the existence of a "schism" between theory and practice over the last decade, and, according to the historian, the failure of one pole to speak productively to the other has led to the former's demise. In this contribution, McLeod writes that "All too often, real theoretical work – the testing, probing, and reformulation of a proposition in relation to messy, complicated reality – is avoided."³⁹ In place of this, "standard practice is to apply canonical theory (...) to an architectural design, claiming it as the manifestation of the pet theory."⁴⁰ Though McLeod's contribution here aims to be critical of architectural theory's willful ignorance of practice, it nevertheless works to uphold two of the myths regarding the role, or telos, of architectural theory in its "last decade." First, by reaffirming the existence and persistence of a so-called "schism," the text helps to paint the portrait of a stoich, and essential theoretical praxis, one that, though it might have suffered from its willful ignorance, still had the

rigor and intellectual strength to remain pure and abstract. In fact, we could even say that this edifying myth is also present in the critical stakes of McLeod's 1989 article. By criticizing architecture theory's reception of post-structuralism as a categorically solipsistic enterprise, McLeod reinforces the same portrait.

And second, the "schism" argument is in line with a dominant discourse about architectural theory in its last decade which is embedded within the reformative ideas proposed in McLeod's 1989 article. In this earlier contribution, in reiterating the impotence of architectural theory's commitment to social change over autonomous aesthetics, he articulates theory's relationship to reform as unilateral: theory must project change outwards.⁴¹ However, taken in reverse, that architectural theory might be inflected by forces outside itself is a sign of corruption. McLeod's persistent flattening of any discussion about practice to its being a symptom of the dominant forces of the market and the threats of commodification is indeed a case in point.

In other words, this paper proposes that Tschumi is a problematic figure for the edification of both myths. The discomfort of dominant voices with Tschumi's theoretical praxis post 1980's could perhaps be retraced to some of the literature written on the architect by those said voices. For example, K. Michael Hays' book on *Architecture's Desire: Reading the Late Avant-Garde*, though published in 2010, makes a hard stop at the end of the 1980's and mostly focuses on "La Villette" as a foundational project for Tschumi's theoretical pursuits.⁴² In relaxing the conceptual armature around the seminal concept of "disjunction" and thereby accepting the pressures felt from practice, Tschumi reverses architectural theory's dominant understanding of its unilateral relationship to reform, especially in its historical context. As Louis Martin brashly puts: "Promoting an openly antirational position, Tschumi's transpositions were clearly not epistemologically rigorous. The goal being to create specific effects in architecture, his actions were justified by a contextual rather than scientific logic."⁴³ Whether one wishes to follow Tschumi *to the letter* or not, the theoretical-architect's reconfiguration of "disjunction" towards "disjunctive empiricism" is definitely an exercise in probing the limits of theory itself, by allowing practice to "expose the gaps" and holes of theoretical praxis and discourse "that our own inability to see beyond the past and present" has precluded.⁴⁴

ENDNOTES

- 1 Bernard Tschumi, "Disjunctions," in *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 208.
- 2 Louis Martin, "Transpositions: On the Intellectual Origins of Tschumi's Architectural Theory," *Assemblage* 11 (April 1990): 22-35.
- 3 Martin, 22-35.
- 4 Tschumi, "Disjunctions," 210.

- 5 Martin, "Transpositions: On the Intellectual Origins of Tschumi's Architectural Theory," 22-35.
- 6 Tschumi, "Disjunctions," 209-213.
- 7 Tschumi, 211.
- 8 Tschumi, 211.
- 9 Tschumi, 211.
- 10 Bernard Tschumi, "Six Concepts," in *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 227.
- 11 Vincent Scully, "Back to the Future, with a Detour Through Miami," *New York Times*, January, 27, 1991.
- 12 Scully, "Back to the Future, with a Detour Through Miami."
- 13 Scully, "Back to the Future, with a Detour Through Miami."
- 14 Scully, "Back to the Future, with a Detour Through Miami."
- 15 Mary McLeod, "Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism," *Assemblage* 8 (February 1989), in K. Michael Hays, *Architecture Theory Since 1968* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), 680-702.
- 16 Bernard Tschumi, "Six Concepts," 228-260.
- 17 Tschumi, 237-248.
- 18 Tschumi, 248-259.
- 19 Mary McLeod, "Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era," 692-693.
- 20 McLeod, 690.
- 21 "Projects," Bernard Tschumi Architects. <http://www.tschumi.com/projects/>.
- 22 Bernard Tschumi, "Six Concepts," 237-245.
- 23 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, "Opinion on Architecture: A Dialogue" in *Observations on the Letter of Monsieur Mariette: With Opinions on Architecture, and a Preface to a New Treatise on the Introduction and Progress of the Fine Arts in Europe in Ancient Times*, trans., Caroline Beamish and David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2002) 102-114.
- 24 Bernard Tschumi, "Six Concepts," 250.
- 25 Tschumi, 233.
- 26 Tschumi, 255.
- 27 Tschumi, 249-250.
- 28 Tschumi, 245.
- 29 "Projects," Bernard Tschumi Architects. <http://www.tschumi.com/projects/>.
- 30 Herbert Muschamp, "Echoes of '68 on Columbia's Campus," *New York Times*, October, 24, 1999.
- 31 Karen W. Arenson, "On Campus; Columbia's Colossal Student Center, Designed by its Dean of Architecture, Opens in September," *New York Times*, July, 28, 1999.
- 32 "Lerner Hall Student Center," in "Projects," Bernard Tschumi Architects. <http://www.tschumi.com/projects/33>; Bernard Tschumi, "Six Concepts," 250.
- 33 *Muschamp notes that Columbia students had actively taken part in the civil protest of the 60s and had militantly occupied public space in the demand for a revision of the institutions ties to its neighbors. Certainly, Tschumi had shared a sense of empathy for those events. Muschamp, "'Echoes of '68 on Columbia's Campus.'"
- 34 Muschamp, "'Echoes of '68 on Columbia's Campus.'"
- 35 Muschamp, "'Echoes of '68 on Columbia's Campus.'"
- 36 Bernard Tschumi, "Six Concepts," 253.
- 37 Martin, "Transpositions," 24.
- 38 Mary McLeod, "Theory and Practice," *Assemblage* 41 (April 2000): 51.
- 39 McLeod, 51.
- 40 McLeod, 51.
- 41 McLeod, "Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era," 697.
- 42 K. Michael Hays, *Architecture's Desire: Reading the Late Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010), 135-180.
- 43 Martin, "Transpositions," 33.
- 44 In a reversal of K. Michael Hays and Alicia Kennedy in "After All, or the End of 'The End of,'" *Assemblage* 41 (April 2000): 7.