Oglethorpe University

The Anti Movements

Punk Rock and Deconstructivism

Aleece Bustamante

Dr. Jeffrey Collins

ART-360

December 11, 2018

Records and songs are not isolated objects; they are the symptoms of an extensive

overall cultural context which owes its existence in equal measure to social

context and political relations as well as to the particular environment of its

listeners. (Wicke viii)

Music does not exist in a vacuum. The same is true of architecture, possibly more so. To

separate a song or a building from its social, political, economic, or philosophical context is to

omit a crucial layer of meaning. One cannot fully understand the Punk movement without a

foundational knowledge of the British economy of the 1970s and existentialist philosophy. And a

discussion of Deconstructivist architecture is incomplete without mention of Jacques Derrida's

philosophy of Deconstruction and American politics under Reagan. To examine only the

aesthetics of these movements is to have a facile understanding of them. And if one were to fully

study Punk Rock and Deconstructivist architecture, they would find that the two movements are

remarkably similar in their approaches to their respective disciplines. This paper will act as an

introduction to the politics and philosophies of both Punk and Deconstructivism, investigating

each individually and then comparing the two.

The Origins of Punk Rock

The origins of the Punk movement have been widely disputed by Americans and British

people, who argue the movement began in their respective homelands. To say the movement

began in one or the other is an oversimplification of Punk's complex origins. The Punk

movement began in earnest with Malcolm McLaren and Sex Pistols. McLaren was the manager

of the band starting in 1975 and used the group as a vessel for his anti-music, anti-art philosophy

(Wicke 135). McLaren's philosophy was in part influenced by that of International Situationism,

an anti-art concept that began in the 1950s with Dadaism and reached its height in British art

schools of the 1960s (Wicke 135). Under McLaren's philosophy, punk music evolved into an "uncompromising negation of those aesthetic criteria" which turned rock music into a mainstream genre (Wicke 136). Rock music, according to Punk philosophers like McLaren, had abandoned its accessible, do-it-yourself roots.

Rock 'n' roll was launched to the forefront of mainstream culture by the simple, rhythmic patterns of The Beatles' early work. But in the decade following the broadcast of "I Want To Hold Your Hand" on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, rock transformed into a genre of technically complex compositions and intricate guitar solos. The genre had gone from The Beatles and The Monkees to Queen and Led Zeppelin. Anti-music Punk bands returned to the simplicity of the early days of rock music. But the gentle love songs of the '60s were replaced by loud, aggressive, cynical indictments of the world (Wicke 137). "Good Day Sunshine" was replaced with "Anarchy in the UK". Sex Pistols and Malcolm McLaren created a new rock music that the youth of Britain understood and found relatable. In place of refinement, Punks offered intensity and energy (Hanscomb). Punk was transformed from music to a cultural revolution, led by British teenagers. However, the story of Punk Rock is not limited to one side of the Atlantic; McLaren is widely considered the father of Punk, but he is not without his predecessors.

The American Influence: New Wave and 'Punk Art'

Before beginning his work with Sex Pistols and the British Punk scene, Malcom McLaren traveled to New York City. There he was exposed to the underground New Wave scene and its avant-garde anti-art experiments (Wicke 138). The artists of this movement wanted to create 'punk art', punk meaning something to the effect of muck, trash, or whore (Wicke 138). To do so they would take "materials from the suppressed waste products of bourgeois everyday life", such as pornography and stereotypes created by television culture, and turn them into

shocking presentations of society (Wicke 138). The New York Punk artists used their art to question the American value system by exposing its seedy underbelly.

This art movement was transformed into rock music by Patti Smith, a journalist who wrote and recited poems before adding rock music to her verses (Wicke 139). Other notable front runners in the creation of American Punk music were The Ramones, Blondie, Television, and Talking Heads. All of these groups formed between 1974 and 1976. The same is true of most British punk bands of similar fame – Sex Pistols, The Clash, The Damned, Joy Division, etc. Since all of these bands started producing music around the same time, it is difficult to pinpoint which was the first true Punk group, and as a result it is nearly impossible to say where Punk began.

But regardless of where Punk was born, there is no denying that it came of age in the United Kingdom. American Punk never penetrated mainstream culture the way British Punk did, and that is because of the British youth. While it is undeniable that the Punk subculture existed amongst the youth of America, it did not fully take hold until the 1980s with the election of Ronald Reagan (Brennan). So, though the American Punk subculture was significant, in the context of Punk's origins, it is not as important as the subculture of the British youth. This subculture was born in the mid to late seventies, when teenagers in Britain needed a new kind of rock that reflected their social, economic, and political situation, a position Punk was well-equipped to fill.

The Economics of the British Teen and the Birth of Punk Nihilism

In 1974, approximately half of all British school leavers had no vocational training; in 1977, the unemployment rate for teenagers under 18 was 28.8 percent (Wicke 140). For black

teens that number was even higher, with an unemployment rate nearing 80 percent (Wicke 141).

And with unemployment benefits amounting to a meager £18 per week, much of the British

youth was falling near the poverty line (Wicke 140). Unemployment is incredibly isolating,

especially for young people. This feeling of isolation and alienation was only intensified by the

trend in rock music towards intellectual, elitist attitudes that did not reflect the social realities of

the average teenager; young people could not relate to Pink Floyd or David Bowie (Wicke 142).

And with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1978, right-wing conservatism had come to

dominate the political structures of Britain (Wicke 141).

This situation left British teens in a sore state. Unemployment feels like a permanent state

because the longer a person is unemployed the harder it is to get a job; the political system has

ignored them; and the music that claims to be specifically for them, no longer reflects their

reality. The worst of these is unemployment. Without a job to give a person's life structure, each

day passes without regulation or goals. And when it seems like getting a job feels impossible, it

is easy to give up on any hope of future employment. The result is pure nihilism – the world has

no meaning, there is no hope. This is precisely the attitude that allowed Punk to become a total

subculture with its own philosophy.

Punks use the idea of meaninglessness to develop the cultural and aesthetic use of

seemingly pointless everyday objects, obsolete fashions, and trash (Wicke 144). Hence the

common use of safety pins, iron-on patches, ripped clothing, and the practice of writing on

clothing with markers. This also explains the use in Punk art of collage, ransom-note lettering,

stencils, rub-on lettering, rubber stamping, and Xerox copying (Poynor). Punk is not just about

teenage rebellion, though it is certainly an aspect of it; rather, Punk is a subculture with its own

traditions, aesthetics, and philosophy (Wicke 147). But what does any of this have to do with Deconstructivist architecture?

<u>Deconstructivism: The Philosophy of Architecture</u>

To understand the connection between Punk and Deconstructivism, one must be familiar with the guiding principles of Deconstructivism. The philosophy behind Deconstructivism is widely debated; some argue that it is based on the philosophy of Deconstruction pioneered by Jacques Derrida. Others argue that the Deconstructivist architects, like Frank Gehry and Daniel Libeskind, were uninfluenced by Derrida, and the similarities between Deconstructivism and the philosophy of Deconstruction are coincidental. Those who support the second argument, such as Mark Wigley, define Deconstructivism by basing its roots in Russian Constructivism (Haddad and Rifkind). As with the argument over which country started Punk, the answer is not as simple as one or the other. There are Deconstructivist architects that are openly influenced by Jacques Derrida; Bernard Tschumi and Peter Eisenman consulted with Derrida and his writings for their designs (Haddad and Rifkind). However, most 'Deconstructivist' architects had no theoretic connection to Derrida or his philosophy – Frank Gehry found the association amusing and declared his ignorance of Deconstructivist theory (Haddad and Rifkind). Like the Punk discussion, a knowledge of both arguments is important to forming a true understanding of Deconstructivism and all of its complexities.

Derrida's philosophy of Deconstruction is fairly straightforward. 'Deconstruction' refers to the dismantling of western philosophical tradition, using language as a tool against itself to reveal the many problems with it (Haddad and Rifkind). In dismantling language, Derrida believes one could dismantle the premises on which the systems of religion and reason are built. In Derrida's Deconstruction, "meaning is infinitely deferred" and there is no "extralinguistic

beginning or end" (McLeod 44). The connection to architecture is an easy on to make. If

Deconstruction is a challenge to the foundational principles of western philosophy,

Deconstructivism is a challenge to the principle conventions of western architecture. The

problem with applying Derrida's philosophy to architecture is that most of the architects

categorized as Deconstructivist openly deny any connection or outright reject his philosophy

(McLeod 44). One of the only architects to seriously consider Derrida's philosophy and integrate

this form of criticism into designs is Peter Eisenman (Haddad and Rifkind).

The most notable of Eisenman's work is the Wexner Center for the Arts at the University

of Ohio, completed in 1989 (fig. 1). Eisenman's goal with the center is to resolve the opposition

between two grids, the grid of the campus and the grid of the city (Haddad and Rifkind). To do

this, Eisenman creates a system of interlocking grids made from white canopy steel. In addition

to this, Eisenman revives the history of the site by adding fragmented, red-brick towers which

symbolize the armory that once stood there (Haddad and Rifkind). The towers are sliced by the

grid structure, creating tension between the clashing elements. Eisenman's approach allows the

building to be analyzed and read as text – it is a tool for communicating theory. But Eisenman is

the exception, not the rule; Derrida's philosophy alone is not a sufficient explanation of

Deconstructivism.

On the opposite side of the argument is Mark Wigley, who proposes that

Deconstructivism is rooted in Russian Constructivism of the early twentieth century (Johnson

and Wigley 11). The Russian Constructivists, like Vladimir Tatlin, use pure geometric forms to

produce impure, distorted geometric compositions (Johnson and Wigley 11). This distortion is

rooted in conflict between simple forms; there is no sense of hierarchy or axis in Constructivism,

rather competing forms and axes (Johnson and Wigley 12). What separates Deconstructivism

from Constructivism, according to Wigley, is the way form is distorted. Deconstructivism goes beyond superficial distortion, altering the form from within by fracturing the internal structure and foundational geometry of the building (Johnson and Wigley 16-17). Deconstructivists radically disrupt the architectural object down to its bones – a perfect example of this is Coop Himmelblau's Rooftop Remodeling in Vienna (1985) (fig. 2).

The project is a renovation of a 4300 ft^2 attic space of a traditional apartment block (Johnson and Wigley 80). The otherwise plain building is drastically distorted by a biomorphic, alien-like structure growing from the rooftop corner (Johnson and Wigley 80). The rectangular volume is torn open by oblique beams and peeled metal skin, extending into a chaos of metal and glass. And the distortion is more than decoration; the interior space is determined by the dynamic, broken geometry seen from the exterior. This is not avant-garde decoration, it is a challenge to the conventional notions of what constitutes a building. Though this building fits Wigley's concept of Deconstructivism, that does not prove that Deconstructivism is a direct descendant of Constructivism.

To reduce Deconstructivism to a single formal source, be that Derrida's Deconstruction or Russian Constructivism, is a gross oversimplification. There are several important influences these designers, including German Expressionism, mid-century architecture, and contemporary sculpture (McLeod 44). But amongst these varied influences there is a unifying force. At its core, Deconstructivism is a reaction against Modernism and Post-Modernism and their conservative elements (McLeod 43). The Modernists were fascinated by functionalism and the machine aesthetic, but rather than explore the dynamics of function itself, they simply manipulate pure forms to symbolize the concept of function (Johnson and Wigley 16). And Post-Modernism exists purely as a revival of everything Modernism rejects – historicism, contextualism,

regionalism, and ornamentation (McLeod 30, 34, 36). The Deconstructivists find both of these approaches insufficient for the contemporary world, which is why they develop their own.

The Deconstructivist Approach to Architecture and Politics

Architecture, according to Deconstructivism, gains its critical edge through fragmentation, decentering, and disruption (McLeod 43). In the place of purity, eclecticism, ornament, or refinement, Deconstructivists offer dynamism, complexity, and energy. Much in the way Punk rejects the conventions of rock music, Deconstructivism rejects the principles of architecture. Also like the Punks, the Deconstructivists forsake their role in politics, and in doing so gain power by freeing themselves from the political apparatus (McLeod 51). Instead of attempting to reinvigorate communities as the Post-Modernists did, Deconstructivists explicitly state the impossibility of such a feat (McLeod 51). It is a strange brand of philosophy reminiscent of nihilism, best embodied by Bernard Tschumi's Parc de La Villette (1985) (fig. 3) which he claims, "aims at an architecture that means nothing" (McLeod 47).

The public park is composed of scattered structures linked by a complex series of gardens, axial galleries, and promenades spanning 125 acres (Johnson and Wigley 92). The basic principle guiding the design is the superimposition of three independent ordering systems: points, lines, and surfaces (Johnson and Wigley 92). The points are created with a grid of 10m cubes; the lines take the form of intersecting paths; and the surfaces are green spaces which take the shape of geometric figures (Johnson and Wigley 92). Though individually they each exhibit a sense of order, when superimposed they produce distortion. And such was Tschumi's goal; the park has no thematic elements guiding it, only distortion. A similar method is seen in the works of Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid, who use artistic intuition to guide their designs (Haddad and Rifkind).

<u>Intuition and Improvisation</u>

Gehry and Hadid represent a new methodology in architecture, one that brings spontaneity to a discipline that traditionally relies on heavy planning. Both architects design with almost nothing but their own intuition in mind. This method, when done well, yields dynamic, original designs like the Gehry House (1988) and The Peak (1982) (fig.8).

Frank Gehry designed his Santa Monica home in three stages, renovating an existing suburban house; in the first stage, forms push out through from the inside, revealing the structure underneath (Johnson and Wigley 22). A tilted cube made with the timber from the original house bursts through the original skin (fig. 4). The recycling of old materials recalls the Punk practice of using discarded objects in art and clothing. A second skin is formed which encases the front and sides of the new structures, but peels away from the rear wall of the house. In stage two, the structure of the rear wall explodes sending wood planks cascading into the air (fig. 5). The remaining forms escape into the backyard in the third stage (fig. 6). These forms create tension, twisting relative to each other and the house itself (Johnson and Wigley 22). This design is based in conflict, and the same is true of Zaha Hadid's The Peak.

The Peak, which exists only as a design, was intended to be a club for the rich in the hill above Hong Kong harbor (Johnson and Wigley 68). Hadid transforms the natural topography by excavating the site to its lowest level and using the removed stone to construct artificial cliffs (Johnson and Wigley 68). Four beams, representing abstractions of city skyscrapers, are thrust into the man-made landscape (fig. 7). The intersection of the linear beams and the jagged cliffs create a violent tension, as the beams are turned relative to each other, much like in the Gehry House.

The use of intuition to guide designs is comparable to the common practice of improvisation in Punk music, where musicians will improvise a song on the spot, creating a unique, spontaneous, ephemeral piece of music. While a piece of architecture will rarely be as fleeting as an improvised piece of music, the spontaneity and dynamism created in each context is similar. And, as mentioned in the preceding pages, this is not the only similarity between Deconstructivism and Punk Rock.

The Overlap: Deconstructivism and Punk

There are two primary places where Deconstructivism and Punk overlap, those are in their approaches to politics and their approaches to their respective disciplines. Both movements adopt some amount of indifference towards politics, with the belief that they, the Punks and Deconstructivists, do not matter to the political system. In some cases, the goal of Deconstructivism was specifically to show that architecture has no power over society and politics. And the teenagers leading the Punk movement were nihilists, to them nothing they did mattered. Of course, this is not always true – there are Deconstructivists and Punks who use their work as methods of protest or for communicating political messages. This is more obvious in the Punk movement because of the commercialization of the 'rebel punk' stereotype.

In many ways, these two movements are the rebels of their art forms. Both operate on the notion of rejecting conventions and tradition. Punk was born as a new form of rock that abandoned the technical complexity of its predecessors. The rock 'n' roll formula that developed in the 1960s and 1970s is thrown out the door with bands like Sex Pistols and The Clash, who simplify rock music down to basic rhythms and chords. Deconstructivists take a similar route, but rather than simplifying architecture, they inject it with distorted geometry and complexity unlike anything seen before in architecture. They completely reinvent the notion of the building

and what it can be, abandoning almost all precedent. These movements serve a similar role in that they redefine what can be music or architecture. Despite this significant parallel, there is a notable difference in Deconstructivism and Punk.

The Division: Accessibility

At the heart of Punk Rock is a desire to create accessible music, music that is relatable and easy to produce. Deconstructivism is the opposite – it aims to complicate architecture, creating structures that seem separate from humanity and often reject the human element of architecture. It's difficult to think of any form of architecture as accessible; to become an architect a person must go through years of schooling and to build even the simplest of building requires a substantial budget. To build a Deconstructivist building is more expensive still – intensely fragmented and distorted geometry is not cheap. The Deconstructivists have not intentionally formed an architecture that is expensive, the cost is just an afterthought. But this does create a significant rift between the two movements – one is centered on accessibility while the other is highly inaccessible to the average person. This does not invalidate the similarities between Punk and Deconstructivism, but it does pose an interesting question to Punks. What matters more to the Punk movement: accessibility or rejection of convention?

Motivations or Actions?

One could argue that accessibility matters more as it was the driving force behind Punk's original rejection of convention. Punk was born in part as a way of simplifying rock music to make it more accessible and relatable to teenagers. But one could also argue that the act of rejecting tradition is more important to Punk than the reason behind said rejection. The history of Punk goes far beyond its beginnings, but the thread that ties the movement together is denial of

mainstream music and its conventions, not the notion of accessibility. So, does accessibility really matter to the Punk movement? If it does not, that makes Punk and Deconstructivism all the more similar. On the other hand, if accessibility really is the foundation of Punk, then the rift between the two movements may be larger than previously concluded. However, the goal of this paper is not to give an extensive analysis of the philosophies and motivations behind Punk Rock, this is just a simple introduction to Deconstructivism and Punk. And in the simplest of terms – Punk is anti-music and Deconstructivism is anti-architecture, they are anti- movements.

Appendix
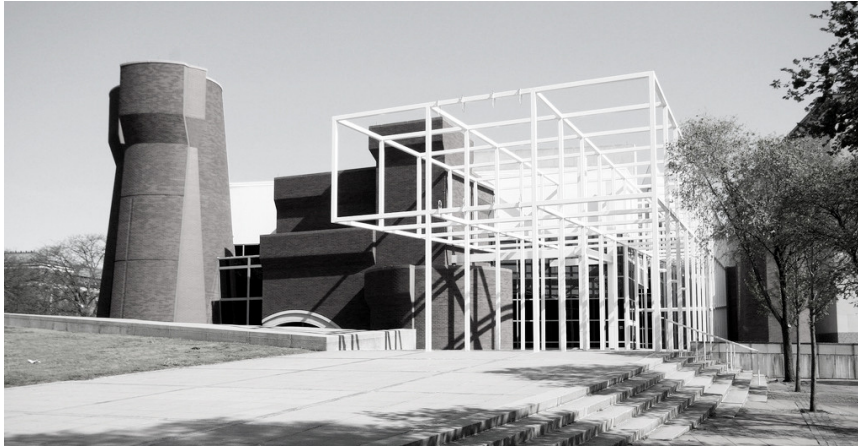
Fig. 1. Peter Eisenman, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, 1989. Langdon, David. "AD

Classics: Wexner Center for the Arts / Peter Eisenman." *ArchDaily*, 17 Oct. 2014,

www.archdaily.com/557986/ad-classics-wexner-center-for-the-arts-peter-eisenman.

Fig. 2. Coop Himmelblau, Rooftop Remodeling, Vienna, 1985. Structural model. Johnson, Philip

and Mark Wigley. *Deconstructivist Architecture: The Museum of Modern Art, New York*.
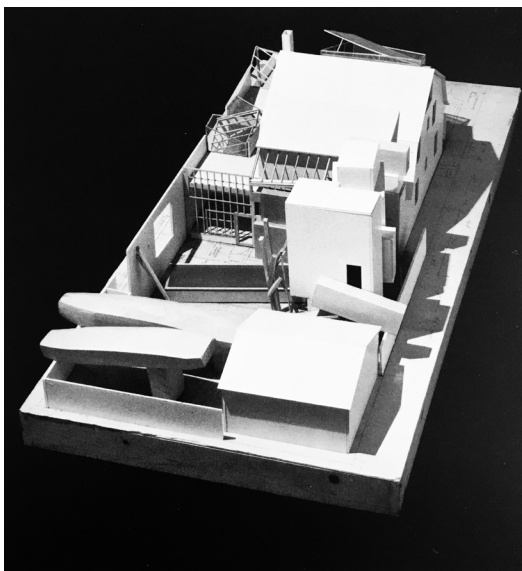
Little, Brown, 1988. p. 82.
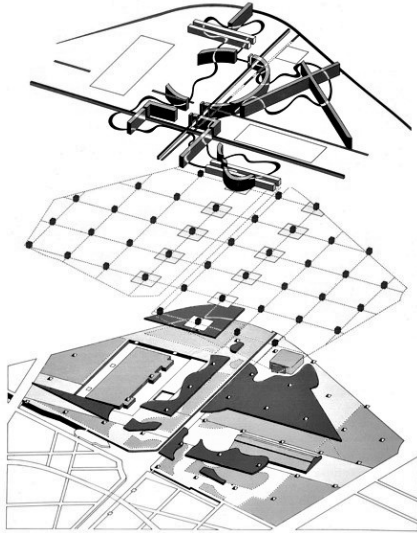
Fig. 3. Bernard Tschumi, Parc de Lar Villette, Paris, 1985. Axonometric; superimposition of

points, lines, and surfaces. Souza, Eduardo. "AD Classics: Parc De La Villette / Bernard

Tschumi Architects." *ArchDaily*, 9 Jan. 2011, www.archdaily.com/92321/ad-classics-

parc-de-la-villette-bernard-tschumi.

Fig. 4. Frank Gehry, Gehry House, Santa Monica, 1988. Model, first stage. Johnson, Philip and

Mark Wigley. *Deconstructivist Architecture: The Museum of Modern Art, New York*.

Little, Brown, 1988. p. 25.

Fig. 5. Frank Gehry, Gehry House, Santa Monica, 1988. Model, second stage. Johnson, Philip

and Mark Wigley. *Deconstructivist Architecture: The Museum of Modern Art, New York*.

Little, Brown, 1988. p. 26.

Fig. 6. Frank Gehry, Gehry House, Santa Monica, 1988. Model, third stage. Johnson, Philip and

Mark Wigley. *Deconstructivist Architecture: The Museum of Modern Art, New York*.

Little, Brown, 1988. p. 29.

Fig. 7. Zaha Hadid, The Peak, Hong Kong, 1982. Conceptual rendering of beams driven into

hillside. Johnson, Philip and Mark Wigley. *Deconstructivist Architecture: The Museum of*

Modern Art, New York. Little, Brown, 1988. p. 75.

Fig. 8. Zaha Hadid, The Peak, Hong Kong, 1982. Site plan. Johnson, Philip and Mark Wigley.

Deconstructivist Architecture: The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Little, Brown,

1988. p. 69.

Works Cited

Brennan, Collin. "A Brief History of Punk Rock and Presidential Politics." *Consequence of*

    Sound, 13 July 2016, www.consequenceofsound.net/2016/07/a-brief-history-of-punk-

    rock-and-presidential-politics. Accessed 25 Nov 2018.

Haddad, Elie, and David Rifkind. *A Critical History of Contemporary Architecture: 1960-2010*.

    Routledge, 2014. *EBSCOhost.*

Hanscomb, Stuart. "Do it Yourself: Existentialism as Punk Philosophy." *Café Philosophy*, June

    2014, http://cafephilosophy.co.nz/articles/do-it-yourself-existentialism-as-punk-

    philosophy. Accessed 24 Nov 2018.

Johnson, Philip and Mark Wigley. *Deconstructivist Architecture: The Museum of Modern Art,*

    New York. Little, Brown, 1988.

McLeod, Mary. "Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to

    Deconstructivism." *Assemblage*, no. 8, 1989, pp. 23–59. *JSTOR*,

    www.jstor.org/stable/3171013.

Poynor, Roy. "The Art of Punk and the Punk Aesthetic." *Design Observer*, 9 June 2016,

    https://designobserver.com/feature/the-art-of-punk-and-the-punk-aesthetic/36708.

    Accessed 24 Nov 2018.

Wicke, Peter. *Rock Music: Culture, Aesthetics, and Sociology*. Cambridge University Press,

    1990.