Jacques Derrida
A Letter to Peter Eisenman

Translated from the French by Hilary P. Hanel

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The following letter was written in October 1989 in lieu of Derrida's presence at the conference "Postmodernism and Beyond: Architecture as the Critical Art of Contemporary Culture," organized by J. Hillis Miller at the University of California, Irvine. — Eds.

My dear Peter,

I am simultaneously sending this letter, with the cassette that accompanies it, to Hillis, who must talk with us over the course of the anticipated meeting. As he must also moderate and enliven it, but for other reasons as well, Hillis is therefore, along with you, the first addressee of these questions. He understands better that any other the labyrinth, as we all know. And what I am going to say to you will probably reverberate in a sort of labyrinth. I am entrusting to the recording of the voice or the letter that which is not yet visible to me and cannot guide my steps toward an end/exist, that can barely guide them toward an "issue." I am not even sure myself whether what I am sending you holds up. But that is perhaps by design, and it is of this I plan to speak to you. In any case, I very much regret the necessity of depriving myself of this meeting with you, the two of you, all of you.

But now, do not worry, I am not going to argue with you. And I am not going to abuse my absence, not even to tell you that you perhaps believe in it, absence, too much. This reference to absence is perhaps one of the things (because there are others) that has most troubled me in your discourse on architecture, and if that were my first question you could perhaps profit from my absence to speak about it a little, about absence in general, about the role that this word "absence" will have been able to play at least in what you believed you could *say* if not *do* with your architecture. One could multiply examples, but I am

limiting myself to what you say about the presence of an absence in *Moving Arrows Eros and Other Errors*, which concerns Romeo's chateau, "a palimpsest and a quarry," etc. This discourse on absence or the presence of an absence perplexes me not only because it bypasses so many tricks, complications, traps that the philosopher, especially if he is a bit of a dialectician, knows only too well and fears to find you caught up in again, but also because it has authorized many religious interpretations, not to mention vaguely judeo-transcendental ideologizations, of your work. I suspect a little that you liked and encouraged these interpretations even as you discretely denied it with a smile, which would make a misunderstanding a little more or a little less than a misunderstanding. My question has to do not only with absence or the presence of absence, but with God. Voila, if I did not come it is not just because I am tired and overworked, held up in Paris, but precisely to have the opportunity to ask you directly a question about God that I would never have dared to do in Irvine if I had been present in person; instead, I am glad that this question comes to you by way of this voice, that is to say, on tape. The same question brings up others, a whole group of closely related questions. For example, at the risk of shocking you: Whether it has to do with houses, museums, or the laboratories of research universities, what distinguishes your architectural space from that of the temple, indeed of the synagogue (by this word I mean a Greek word used for a Jewish concept)? Where will the break, the rupture have been in this respect, if there is one, if there was one, for you and for other architects of this period with whom you feel yourself associated? I remain very perplexed about this subject and if I had been there I would have been a difficult interlocutor. If you were to construct a place of worship, Buddhist, for example, or a cathedral, a mosque, a synagogue (hypotheses that you are not obliged to accept), what would be your primary concern today? I will make allusion shortly to Libeskind's project in Berlin for a Jewish Museum. We spoke about this the other morning in New York, but let us leave that behind for the moment.

Naturally, this question concerns also your interpretation of *chora* in "our" "work," if one can say in quotations our work "in common." I am not sure that you have detheologized and deontologized *chora* in as radical a way as I would have wished (*chora* is neither the void, as you suggest sometimes, nor absence, nor invisibility, nor certainly the contrary from which there are, and this is what interests me, a large number of consequences). It is true that for me it was easier, in a certain way. I did not have anything to "do" with it and would not have been able to do anything with it, that is, for the city of Paris, for La Villette, the little city; you see what I mean (and the whole difference is perhaps between us). But I would like you to say something to our friends in Irvine, while speaking to them of the difference between our respective relations to discourse, on the one hand, and to the operation of architecture, to its putting into action, on the other hand. Profit from my absence in order to speak freely. But don't just say whatever, because as everything is being recorded today, and memory, always the same, not being at all the same, I will know all that you will have said publicly. I had the feeling, and I believe that you said it somewhere, that you have judged me to be too reserved, in our "choral work," a little bit absent, entrenched in discourse, without obliging you to change, to change place, without disturbing you enough. It is doubtless true that there would be a great deal to say about this subject, which is complicated because it is that of the place (*chora*) and of displacement itself. If I had come, I would have spoken perhaps of my own displacement in the course of "choral work" but here it is you who must speak. Therefore tell me whether *after Choral Work* (as you yourself said in Irvine in the spring) your work took, in effect, a new direction and engaged itself in other paths. What has happened? What for you is this period? this history? How does one determine the boundaries of it or put rhythm into it? When did we begin to work together, had we never done so, on this *Choral Work* that is not yet constructed but that one sees and reads everywhere? When will we stop?

This all brings me directly to the next question. It also concerns a certain absence. Not my absence today in Irvine where I would have so much liked to see you again along with other friends, even more so since I was one of those who had wished for and prepared this meeting (and I

must ask you to forgive me and to make others forgive me); but absence like the shadowed sound of the voice — you see what I mean by this. What relations (new or archiancient, in any case different) does architecture, particularly yours, carry on, must it carry on, with the voice, the capacity of voice, but also therefore with telephonic machines of all sorts that structure and transform our experience of space every day? The question of the nearly immediate telephonic address, certainly *nearly* immediate, and I underline, but also the question of telephonic archivation, as is the case right here, with the spacing of time that telephonic archivation at once supposes and structures. If one can imagine a whole labyrinthlike history of architecture, guided by the entwined thread of this question, where would one be today and tomorrow, and you?

This question of history, as the history of spacing, like the spacing of time and voice, does not separate itself from the history of visibility (immediately mediate), that is to say, from all history of architecture; it is so great that I will not even dare to touch upon it, but will "address" this question, as you say in English, through economy and through metonymy, under the form of a single word, glass (*glas*, *glass*).

What is there of glass in your work? What do you say about it? What do you do with it? How does one talk about it? In optical terms or in tactile terms? Regarding tactility, it would be good if, continuing what we were saying the other morning in New York, you would speak to our friends of the erotic tricks, of the calls of desire, do I dare say, of the sex appeal of the architectural forms about which you think, with which you work, to which you give yourself up. Whether its directions are new or not, does this seduction come as supplement, into the bargain, as precisely the "subsidy/bonus of seduction" or "subsidy/bonus of pleasure"? Or is it essential? Isn't the subsidy/bonus essential, at least? But, then, what would the subsidy/bonus *itself* be? Subsidy/Bonus? For the author of *Moving Arrows Eros and Other Errors*, what is the relation between subsidy/bonus and the rest in the calculations and the negotiations of the architect? As my American students sometimes disarmingly ask me, Could you elaborate on that? I return now to my question, after this long parenthesis on your desire, my question about glass that is not perhaps so far off. What terms do we use to speak about glass? Technical and material terms? Economic terms? The terms of urbanism? The terms of social relations? The terms of transparency and immediacy, of love or of police, of the border that is perhaps erased between the public and the private, etc.? "Glass" is an old word, and am I wrong if I believe that you are interested in glass, that you perhaps even like it? Does it only have to do with new materials that resemble glass but are no longer it, and so on? Before letting you speak about glass, I bring up a text by Benjamin, *Erfahrung und Armut*, which I'm sure you know (it also concerns architecture and was published in 1933, which is not just any date, in Germany or elsewhere). From it I extract at the outset only the following, on which our friends will certainly like to hear you comment.

But Scheerbart — to return to him — most values that his people, and according to their model, his fellow citizens, live in apartments that correspond to their rank: in houses of moving and slippery glass, such as those that Loos and Le Corbusier have since erected. It is not for nothing that glass is such a hard and smooth material upon which nothing attaches itself. Also a cold and concise material. Things made of glass have no 'aura' [*Die Dinge aus Glas haben keine 'Aura'*]. In general, glass is the enemy of secrecy. It is also the enemy of possession. The great poet Andre Gide once said, 'Each thing that I wish to possess becomes opaque for me.'

(Here we return to the question of desire and glass, of the desire of glass: I have elsewhere tried to follow this experience of desire as the experience of glass in Blanchot, especially in *La Folie du jour* and in *L'Arrêt de mort*.)

Do people such as Scheerbart dream of glass masonry [*Glasbauten*] in order to have recognized a new poverty [*Bekenner einer neuen Armut*]? But perhaps a comparison here will reveal more than the theory. Upon entering a room of the eighties, and despite the 'comfortable intimacy' ['*Gemütlichkeit*'] that perhaps reigns there, the strongest impression will be, 'You have nothing to look for here.' You have nothing to look for here because there is no ground here upon which the inhabitant would not have already left his trace: by knickknacks on shelves, by doilies on the

armchair, by the sheer curtains at the windows, or by the fire screen in front of the fireplace. A beautiful word from Brecht here helps us go far, farther: 'Erase your traces!' [*Verwisch die Spuren*!], so says the refrain of the first poem in *Anthologie pour les habitants des villes*. . . . Scheerbart and his glass and the Bauhaus and its steel have opened the way: they have created spaces in which it is difficult to leave traces. 'After all that has been said,' declares Scheerbart twenty years later, 'we can easily speak of a "culture of glass" ["*Glaskultur*"]. The new environment of glass will completely change man. And the only thing left to hope for now is that the new glass culture will not enccunter too many opponents.'

What do you think, Peter, of these propositions? Would you be an "opponent," a supporter? Or, as I suppose, but perhaps wrongly, neither one nor the other? In any case, could you say something about it and why?

Benjamin's text speaks, as you have seen, of a "new poverty" (homonym if not synonym for a new expression, a new French concept, to designate a wandering group of poor people, indeed, of the "homeless," which is irreducible to categorizations, classifications, and former localizations of marginality or of the social ladder: the low income, the proletariat as a class, the unemployed, etc.). And the new poverty, the one about which Benjamin speaks, and none other, should be "our" future, already our present. From this fascinating text that is politically ambiguous and that must not be too fragmented, I extract the following:

> Scheerbart is interested in the question of knowing what our telescopes, our airplanes, and our rockets do to men of the past in transforming them into completely new creatures, worthy of notice and affection. Furthermore, these creatures already speak in an entirely new language. And what is Decisive [*das Entscheidende*] in this language is the tendency toward the Arbitrary Construct [*zum willkürlichen Konstruktiven*], a tendency that particularly resists the organic. It is through this tendency that the language of these men, or rather of Scheerbart's people, cannot be confused with any other; because these people object to this principle of humanism that calls for the correspondence with humans. Even up to their proper names. . . . Poverty of experience [*Erfahrungsarmut*]: one must not understand by this that these men desire a 'New Experience.' No, they want to liberate themselves from experience, they want a world in which they can make their poverty be recognized — the exterior and eventually also the interior — in such a pure and distinct way that something decent comes of it. And they are not always ignorant and inexperienced. One can say the opposite: they have consumed [*gefressen*] all of that, 'culture' and 'man' until they are satiated and tired. . . . We have become impoverished. We have abandoned one piece after another of the heritage of humanity and often we should have wagered it to Mont-de-Piété [the Mount of Piety] for a hundredth of its value, in order to receive as an advance the few coins of the 'Present' [*des 'Aktuellen'*]. In the door stands economic crisis, behind her a shadow, the war to come. Today, to attach oneself to something has become the business of the small number of the powerful, and God knows whether they are not more human than the majority; for the most part more barbarous, but not in the good sense [*nicht auf die gute Art*]. The others, however, must settle in once again and with Little. They relate it to the men who created the Fundamentally New [*das von Grund auf Neue zu ihrer Sache gemacht*], and who founded it upon understanding and self-denial. In its buildings [*Bauten*], its paintings, and its histories, humanity prepares itself to outlive [*überleben*], if necessary, culture. And most important, humanity does this while laughing. Perhaps this laughter here and there sounds barbarous. Good (*Gut*). Therefore let he who is an individual [*der Einzelne*] occasionally give a little humanity to the mass, which one day will return it to him with interest. (trans. Ph. Beck and B. Stiegler)

What do you think of this text, Peter, in particular of a poverty that *should* not cause another one to be forgotten? What do you think of these two barbarities that must not be confused and as much as possible — is it possible? — must not be allowed to contaminate each other? What do you think of what Benjamin called the "present" and of his "few coins"? What, for you, would be "good" barbarity in architecture and elsewhere? And the "present"? I know that there is a present that you do not want, but what best breaks (today? tomorrow?) with this present? And you who want to abstract architecture in proportion to man, in proportion even to his scale, how do you understand this "destructive," in Benjamin's sense, discourse in the mouth of "these people [who] object to this principle of humanism that calls for [architecture's] correspondence with humans. Even up to their proper names."?

Therefore, Peter, I would like, and your listeners in Irvine, I imagine, will perhaps like, to hear you speak about the relations between architecture today and poverty. All poverties, the one about which Benjamin speaks and the other; between architecture and capital (the equivalent today of the "economic crisis" occurring in 1930 "*in der Tur*," in the "opening of the door"); between architecture and war (the equivalent today of the "shadow" and of what "comes" with it); the scandals surrounding social housing, "housing" in general (not without recalling what we have both said, which is a little too complicated for a letter, of the habitable and the inhabitable in architecture), and the "homeless," "homelessness" today in the United States and elsewhere.

This letter is already too long. I shall speed up a little to link schematically other questions or requests to the preceding ones. I cited this text by Benjamin, among other reasons, to lead you to ruin and to destruction. As you know, what he says about "aura" destroyed by glass (and by technology in general) is articulated in a difficult discourse on "destruction." In the *Trauerspiel* (and certainly elsewhere but I don't remember where anymore), Benjamin talks about the ruin, especially about the "baroque cult of the ruin," "the most noble matter of baroque creation." In the photocopied pages I am sending you, Benjamin declares that for the baroque "the ancient inheritance is comparable, in each one of its components, to the elements from which is concocted the new totality. No, they build it. Because the achieved vision of this new thing is that: the ruin. . . . The work [of art] confirms itself as ruin. In the allegoric edifice of the *Trauerspiel*, these ruined forms of the salvaged work of art clearly have always already come unfastened." I will say nothing about Benjamin's concept of the ruin, which is also the concept of a certain mourning in affirmation, indeed the salvation of the work of art; I will, however, use this as a pretext to ask you the following.

First, is there a relationship between your writing of the palimpsest, your architectural experience of memory (in *Choral Work*, for example, but also everywhere else), and "something" like the ruin that is no longer a thing? In what way would you say, and would you say it, is your calculation, reckoning, of memory not baroque in this Benjaminian sense, despite some appearances? Second, if all architecture is finished, if therefore it carries within itself the traces of its future destruction, the already past future, future perfect, of its ruin, according to methods that are each time original, if it is haunted, indeed signed, by the spectral silhouette of this ruin, at work even in the pedestal of its stone, in its metal or its glass, what would again bring the architecture of "the period" (just yesterday, today, tomorrow; use whatever words you want, modern, postmodern, post-postmodern, or amodern, etc.) back to the ruin, to the experience of "its own" ruin? In the past, great architectural inventions constituted their essential destructability, even their fragility, as a resistance to destruction or as a monumentalization of the ruin itself (the baroque according to Benjamin, right?). Is a new image of the ruin to come already sketching itself in the design of the architecture that we would like to recognize as the architecture of our present, of our future, if one can still say that, in the design of your architecture, in the past future, the future perfect, of its memory, so that it already draws and calculates itself, so that it already leaves its future trace in your projects? Taking into account what we were saying previously about Man (and God), will we again be able to speak of "the memory of man," as we say in French, for this architecture? In relation to the ruin, to fragility, to destructability, in other words, to the future, could you return to what we were talking about the other morning in New York, about excess and "weakness"? Every time that excess presents itself (it never presents itself except above and beyond ontological oppositions), for my part, I hesitate to use words of force or of weakness. But it is certainly inevitable as soon as there is announcement. This is nothing more than a pretext so that *you* talk about it, Hillis and you.

Finally, from fragility I turn to ashes, for me the other name or the surname for the essence (not the essential) of the step, of the trace, of writing, the place without place of deconstruction. There where deconstruction inscribes

itself. (In "Feu la cendre" — excuse my reference to something that dates from nearly twenty years ago — this conception of ashes, as the trace itself, was principally reserved for, or rather entrusted to, the "burn everything" and to the "holocaust.") To return to our problem and to hear again the fragile words of "fragility," of "ashes," of "absence," or "invisibility," of "Jewish" or not "Jewish" architectural space, what do you think of the Berlin Museum Competition, about which we also spoke the other morning in New York? In particular, what do you think of the words of Libeskind, the "winner" of the "competition," as printed in a recently published interview with him in the newsletter of the architecture school at Columbia? Here I must content myself with quoting:

> And in turn the void materializes itself in the space outside as something that has been ruined, or rather as the solid remainder of an independent structure, which is a voided void. Then there is a fragmentation and a splintering, marking the lack of coherence of the museum as a whole, showing that it has come undone in order to become accessible, functionally and intellectually. . . . It's conceived as a museum for all Berliners, for all citizens. Not only those of the present, but those of the future and the past who must find their heritage and hope in this particular form, which is to transcend passive involvement and become participation. With its special emphasis on housing the Jewish Museum, it is an attempt to give a voice to a common fate — to the contradictions of the ordered and disordered, the chosen and the not chosen, the vocal and the silent. In that sense, the particular urban condition of Lindenstrasse, of this area of the city, becomes the spiritual site, the nexus, where Berlin's precarious destiny is mirrored. It is fractured and displaced, but also transformed and transgressed. The past fatality of the German Jewish cultural relation to Berlin is enacted now in the realm of the invisible. It is this invisibility which I have tried to bring to visibility. So the new extension is conceived as an emblem, where the invisible, the void, makes itself apparent as such. . . . It's not a collage or a collision or a dialectic simply, but a new type of organization which is really organized around a void, around what is not visible. And what is not visible is the collection of this Jewish Museum, which is reducible to archival material, since the physicality of it has disappeared. The problem of the Jewish Museum is taken as the problem of Jewish culture itself — let's put it this way, as the problem of an avant-garde of humanity, an avant-garde that has been incinerated in its own history, in the Holocaust. In this sense, I believe this scheme joins architecture to questions that are now relevant to all humanity. What I've tried to say is that the Jewish history of Berlin is not separable from the history of modernity, from the destiny of this incineration of history; they are bound together. But bound not through any obvious forms, but rather through a negativity; through an absence of meaning and an absence of artifacts. Absence, therefore, serves as a way of binding in depth, and in a totally different manner, the shared hopes of people. It is a conception that is absolutely opposed to reducing the museum to a detached memorial.

Once again void, absence, negativity, in Libeskind as in you. I leave you alone to deal with these words, dear Peter, dear Hillis; I will tell you what I think some other time, but I suggested what I think at the beginning. Once again I have spoken too much and naturally I abuse my absence. I admit it as a sign of love. Forgive me, Hillis and you, and ask our friends, your listeners, to forgive me for not being there to speak with them and to listen to you.

Affectionately,

Jacques

P.S. 1. This tape was recorded and this transcription finished when I read, at the end of an interview (in the special edition of the Spanish magazine *Arquitectura* devoted to "Deconstruction" [270] — it's the title of the introduction), the following lines from you that were already anticipating my questions: "I never talk about deconstruction. Other people use that word because they are not architects. It is very difficult to talk about architecture in terms of deconstruction, because we are not talking about ruins or fragments. The term is too metaphorical and too literal for architecture. Deconstruction is dealing with architecture as a metaphor, and we are dealing with architecture as a reality. . . . I believe poststructuralism is basically what I mean by postmodernism. In other words, postmodernism is poststructuralism in the widest sense of the word." I certainly believe that I would *not* subscribe to *any* one of these statements, to *any* one of these 7 sentences, neither

to 1 nor to 2 nor to 3 nor to 4 nor to 5 nor to 6 nor to 7. But I cannot explain it here and I, truly, never talk much *about* deconstruction. Not spontaneously. If you wish, you could display 1,2,3,4,5,6,7 before the listeners and try to convince them by refuting the contrary propositions or you could let this postscript fall to the side.

P.S. 2. I was certainly forgetting the fundamental question. In other words, the question of foundation, of what you do at the foundation of the foundation or at the foundation of the foundation in your architectural design. Let's talk fundamentally about Earth itself. I have questioned you in a noncircuitous fashion about God and Man. I was thinking about the Sky and the Earth. What does architecture, and primarily yours, have to see and do with *experience*, that is to say, with the voyage that makes its way outside of Earth? Then, if we don't give up architecture, and I believe that we are not giving it up, what are the effects on "design" itself of terrestrial architecture, of this possibility? Of this definite possibility from now on of leaving the terrestrial soil? Will we say that the architecture of a rocket and of astronomy in general (already announced by literature, at least, and long before becoming "effective"), that they dispense with foundations and thus of "standing up," of *the* "standing up," of the *vertical* stance of man, of the building in general? Or do these architectures (of rockets and astronomy in general) recalculate foundations and does the calculation remain a terrestrial *difference*, something which I somewhat doubt? What would be an architecture that, without holding, without standing upright, vertically, would not fall again into ruin? How do all these possibilities and even questions (those of holding up, holding together, standing or not) record themselves, if you think that they do? What traces do they leave in what you would build right now in Spain, in Japan, in Ohio, in Berlin, in Paris, and, tomorrow, I hope, in Irvine?