

THE LAW OF THE OIKOS

Jacques Derrida and the Deconstruction of the Dwelling

DERRIDA'S CONCERN FOR ARCHITECTURE IS JUSTIFIED BY the specific question of dwelling. As I aim to demonstrate, this question is at the very origin of deconstruction and, ultimately, the deconstruction of architecture is a necessary moment of deconstruction itself. To this extent, quoting Derrida from "No (Point of) Madness—Maintaining Architecture," I recall that "[a] consistent deconstruction . . . would do little if it did not take on architecture."¹ Then, Derrida argues that architecture is "the last fortress of metaphysics."² However, he also says that what we consider the essence and sense of architecture is indeed the legacy of a specific, historical determination:

Let us not forget that there is an architecture of architecture. Down to its archaic foundation, the most fundamental concept of architecture has been *constructed*. This naturalized architecture is bequeathed to us: we inhabit it, it inhabits us, we think it is destined for habitation, and it is no longer an object for us at all. But we must recognize there an *artifact*, a *constructum*, a monument. It did not fall from the sky; it is not natural, even if it informs a specific scheme of relations to *physis*, the sky, the earth, the mortal, and the divine. This architecture of architecture has a history; it is historical through and through. Its heritage inaugurates the intimacy of our economy,

the law of our hearth (*oikos*), our familial, religious, and political oikonomy, all the places of birth and death, temple, school, stadium, agora, square, sepulcher. It penetrates us [*nous transit*] to the point that we forget its very historicity: we take it for nature. It is good sense itself.³

Therefore, architecture is not merely “the last fortress of metaphysics” as such, by essence or necessity. It has become what it is when submitted to a specific law of dwelling:

The experience of meaning must be the *dwelling* [habitation], the law of the *oikos*, the economy of men or gods. . . . The arrangement, occupation, and investment of locations should be measured against this economy. . . . Centered and hierarchized, the architectural organization will have had to fall in line with the anamnesis of its origin and the basis of a foundation. Not only from the time of its founding on the ground of the earth, but also since its juridico-political founding, the institution that commemorates the myths of the city, the heroes or founding gods. Despite appearances, this religious or political memory, this historicism, has not deserted modern architecture. Modern architecture is still nostalgic for it: it is its destiny to be a guardian. An always hierarchizing nostalgia: architecture will have materialized this hierarchy in stone or wood (*hylē*); it is a hyletics of the sacred (*hieros*) and the principle (*archē*), an *archihieratics*.⁴

Here Derrida refers to a specific law of dwelling, which is historically determined: the law of the Greek *oikos*. A law that is rooted in an archaic or mythico-religious experience of space and place, which is so powerful as to govern still the distribution of spaces and places that identify individuals and a community

with a certain territory. In order to grasp the bearings of that law, it is worth remarking that, for Derrida, it does not work only for architecture; yet, all aspects of our culture and thus of philosophy are subjected to this law. The reason why architecture is so important for Derrida is that

[o]n the other hand, architecture forms its most powerful metonymy; it gives it its most solid *consistency*, objective substance. By consistency, I do not mean only logical coherence, which implicates all dimensions of human experience in the same network: there is no work of architecture without interpretation, or even economic, religious political, aesthetic, or philosophical decision. But by consistency I also mean duration, hardness, the monumental, mineral or ligneous subsistence, the hyletics of tradition. Hence the *resistance*. the resistance of materials like the resistance of consciousness and unconsciousness that establishes this architecture as the last fortress of metaphysics.⁵

Deconstructing architecture means, therefore, deconstructing the law of the *oikos* that determines the essence of architecture in our tradition, as well as realizing the most general aim of deconstruction. It is from this perspective, I argue, that Derrida proposes to Peter Eisenman to start their collaboration through a reading of Plato's *Timaeus* and of his commentary on this work. The reference is to *Khōra*.⁶ The choice of *Timaeus* is evidently accurate: this is one of the foundational texts of the philosophical as well as of the architectural tradition (in particular, of one of the latter's highest moments, the Renaissance). In the *Timaeus* we find the metaphor of the demiurge as "divine architect" who brings the ideal into the sensible through calculation and geometry. But we also find a paradigmatic analogy between the human body and the structure of a building and a city, an analogy that goes back

to the medical school of Cos, which, through Plato, imposes the law of central and hierarchized symmetry to the construction of discourse as well as to sculpture and architecture. More generally, it is in the *Timaeus* that the question of *khōra* establishes the coordinates of Western speculation on space, from Aristotle's criticism up to the Cartesian notion of space as the condition of the *res extensa* and thus to Heidegger, who sees Plato's *khōra* at the origin of the metaphysical determination of space.⁷ For this reason, Heidegger deemed it necessary to go back to the originary Greek conception of dwelling in order to gain an experience of space that would be nonmetaphysical and to start from there a reconsideration of dwelling itself. In my view, Derrida suggests a return to *khōra* in order to acknowledge that both philosophy and architecture have been submitted to the archaic law of dwelling, the law we must not go back to, as Heidegger suggested, but which we must deconstruct and conjure away, in view of another dwelling, a dwelling to come. In "No (point of) Madness—Maintaining Architecture," Derrida precisely demarcates his position from that of Heidegger on the question of the law of the *oikos*:

Heidegger still alludes to it when he interprets homelessness (*Heimatlosigkeit*) as the symptom of ontotheology and, more precisely, of modern technology. . . . This is not a deconstruction, but rather a call to repeat the very fundamentals of the architecture that we inhabit, that we should learn again how to inhabit, the origin of its meaning.⁸

Before returning to *Khōra*, I want to remark that Derrida began to deal with the law of the *oikos* much earlier than the time at which he began to meet architects. We may reframe the whole path of deconstruction in the wake of this question. This is particularly evident in "Plato's Pharmacy," which ends up announcing the work on *khōra* Derrida will complete twenty years later. First, Derrida makes a bold and, in my

view, important point: the system of conceptual opposition that constitutes Platonic metaphysics rests on a nonconceptual opposition, which Plato himself does not develop in conceptual terms, as it cannot be done:

In order for these contrary values (good/evil, true/false, essence/appearance, inside/outside, etc.) to be in opposition, each of the terms must be simply *external* to the other, which means that one of these oppositions (the opposition between inside and outside) must be already accredited as the matrix of all possible opposition. And one of the elements of the system (or of the series) must also stand as the very possibility of systematic or seriality in general.⁹

At the foundations of the system of metaphysics there is a spatial opposition, the inside/outside opposition, which is not purely conceptual but sensible, empirical, coming from an ordinary experience that appears obvious to Plato himself. According to Derrida, we can find the testimony of this experience of space in the archaic rituals of purification of the city, which survive in the *polis* of the classic age. Derrida writes:

The Character of the *Pharmakos* has been compared to a scapegoat. The *evil* and the *outside*, the expulsion of the evil, its exclusion out of the body (and out) of the city—these are the two major senses of the character and of the ritual. . . . The city's body *proper* thus reconstitutes its unity, closes around the security of its inner courts, gives back to itself the word that links it with itself within the confines of the agora, by violently excluding from its territory the representative of an external threat or aggression. That representative represents the otherness of the evil that comes to affect or infect the inside by unpredictably breaking into it. Yet the representative of the outside

is nonetheless *constituted*, regularly granted its place by the community, chosen, kept, fed, in the very heart of the inside. . . . The ceremony of the *pharmakos* is thus played out on the boundary line between inside and outside, which it has as its function ceaselessly to trace and retrace. *Intra muros/extra muros*.¹⁰

This is the origin of the law of the *oikos*: the mythico-religious experience that still survives in the organization of the space of the *polis*, and, at the same time, constitutes the paradigm of ontological identity understood as a permanent and stable presence, independent and autonomous from the alterity to which it is detached as the inside from the outside. But it is necessary to return to *Khōra* to understand the phantasmatic ground (which is powerful as much as it is illusory), that, according to Derrida, still haunts our dwelling. At least this is the hypothesis I will test in the next section.

Politics of Khōra

In order to grasp the political dimension of the *Timaeus* and of the ontological question posed in *Khōra*, it is necessary to refer to other texts by Derrida, which are still unpublished and which I had the opportunity to read in the Derrida archives. In particular, I refer to a seminar of 1985–1986 entitled “Nationalité et nationalisme philosophique: mythos, logos, topos,” whose first six sessions focus on the *Timaeus* and the question of *khōra*.¹¹ In fact the text proposed to Eisenman is a quite bizarre editing of excerpts from this seminar. Here we can see that the stakes of Derrida’s reading are political. In fact, the *Timaeus* continues a dialogue that took place the day before, where Socrates described “the ideal polis and its constitution,”¹² and that can be identified with the *Republic*. From the first conversation, we know that the dialogues take place during the Pan-Athenian celebrations, which had the character

of a national celebration and involved the entire population. The celebration is devoted to Athena, the goddess, founder and protector of the city. A spectacular procession used to climb the Acropolis up to the temple of Athena where an impressive sacrifice celebrated the divine origin of the city and renewed the alliance with the protector goddess. The core of the cult was the myth of the autochthony of the Athenians' ethnicity, that is, the myth of Erichthonius, who was born directly from earth, not from a woman, but from the soil fecundated by the seed of Hephaestus, dispersed after his clumsy attempt to possess Athena. At the top of the Acropolis, in the archaic age, the Erechtheion was the oldest temple and was dedicated to these myths of foundation and thus also to the cult of Erichthonius, the king-God of the origins. When in the classical age it was rebuilt in another place, the original foundations were retained. Therefore, during the Pan-Athenian celebrations, the people of Athens, the sons of the earth, celebrated at the same time the divine and autochthonous origin of their *genos*, which made them exceptional and superior with respect to the other Greeks.¹³ As it is well known, first Cimon and then Pericles invested huge amounts of capital to rebuild the Acropolis after its destruction by the Persians, in order to restore its symbolic value and thus to remove the trauma inflicted on Athenian identity by the foreign invasion. The most important architects of the age were involved in the work of reconstruction, which can be seen as a paradigm of Western architecture. The whole architectural organization seems structured according to that symbolic project, which found in the Pan-Athenian celebrations its concrete and spectacular realization. In particular, in the processional ascension we find represented a divine procession in the extraordinary, internal frieze of the Parthenon, realized by Phidias and his disciples.¹⁴ In the seminar devoted to the *Timaeus*, Derrida lingers on this celebration, on its spatial organization and its archaic cause, at the roots of the myth of autochthony. In particular, he focuses on the itinerary of the procession along the sacred way. The procession leaves from the lower city, namely, the Ceramic,

where the famous Athenians are buried, passes by the agora, the secularized space of the political, goes up to the Acropolis, and ends before the impressive statue of Athena. The following remark by Derrida is the key to understanding what is at stake here: “At the Ceramic, in the civic ground (*khōra*) they come from, the sons of the polis are buried: time annihilates through the return of the end to the origin.”¹⁵

I emphasize the word between parentheses: the civic ground is called *khōra*. We should read the *Timaeus* from this perspective. This is the subject of the dialogue: sketching out, along with the *Critias*, which was never finished, and, perhaps, with the *Hermocrates*, which was never written, the complete table that would make possible the transition into historical reality of the perfect city Socrates described according to its ideal traits in the *Republic* and, briefly, at the beginning of the *Timaeus*. This general table responds to an urgent political necessity: Timaeus and Critias must expose the possibility of putting the ideal *polis* into action in historical becoming, the possibility of the passage from the ideal to the sensible. This possibility must be grounded on the origin and structure of the universe and, thus, on the origin and history of the city that is supposed to actualize it, namely, Athens. Socrates himself delineates in these terms the order of the dialogue and the tasks of the interlocutors: Timaeus performs the onto-cosmological reconstruction, from the origin of the universe to the anthropological structure of man, while Critias reconstructs the origin of the people of Athens and their history. Therefore, Plato aims to demonstrate the congruity of his ideal and political construction with the ontological foundations of all that is, and thus the possibility of the concrete actualization of the ideal in a specific place (Athens). But we can also suppose that the ontological, cosmological, and anthropological determinations are constructed so as to resonate with the possibility of the actualization of the ideal polis. Let me follow the initial lines of the *Timaeus* up to the point when Socrates assigns Timaeus and Critias the task of making the ideal polis sensible. He has just summarized the essential passages of the

discourse held the day before on “the city—*politeia*—and its constitution.” Hence, Socrates lets his interlocutors speak: he described the essence of the perfect *polis*, but this is only a fixed, motionless, and lifeless image (*hypo graphés*). It is time to make it lively, to bring it from essence to existence. This passage is decisive: the essence of *polis* takes its life in war. War is the proof against which one must measure the possible actualization of the political ideal:

I should like to hear an account of it putting forth its strength in such contests as a State will engage in against others, going to war in a manner worthy of, and achieving results befitting, the training and education given to its citizens, both in fears of arms and in negotiation with various other States.¹⁶

War and thus the affirmation and defense of one’s identity against the identity of others: this is the goal of the ideal construction of the *polis* and, therefore, the ground on which the very constitution of the *polis* lies and organizes itself. Derrida writes:

To give birth—but this is also war. And therefore death. This desire is also political. How would one animate this representation of the political? . . . The possibility of war makes the graphic image (*hypo graphés*)—the description—of the ideal city go out, not yet into the living and mobile real, but into a better image, a living image of this living and mobile real, while *yet* showing a functioning that is internal to the test: war. In all the senses of the word, it is a *decisive exposition* of the city.¹⁷

The ideal determination of the city must be tested through its existence, and this existence, the life of the ideal city, consists in war. Its relationship with other cities is thought in terms of conflicting opposition. The other as such is stranger and

foreign, a threat for the life of the city, which is conceived as an interiority faced with a certain outside. At this point, Socrates distributes the roles and duties his interlocutors carry out. First, he excludes poets (*poiētikon genos*) from fulfilling this task since they are a *genos* of imitators (*mimētikon ethnos*). Above all, he aims to establish the *genos* authorized to say the truth against the *genos* of sophists:

I am aware that the Sophists (*sophistōn genos*) have plenty of brave words and fair conceits, but I am afraid that being only wanderers from one city to another, and having never had habitations of their own (*oikēsis idias*), they may fail in their conception of philosophers and statesmen, and may not know what they do and say in time of war, when they are fighting or holding parley with their enemies. And thus people of your class (*genos*) are the only ones remaining who are fitted by nature and education to take part at once both in politics and philosophy.¹⁸

The true discourse about the polis can be performed only by the *genos* that has occupied permanently, since its birth, its original place. Derrida writes:

Socrates privileges here again the *situation*, the relation to place: the genus of sophists is characterized by the absence of a proper place, an economy (*oikonomia*), a fixed domicile; these people have no domesticity. No house that is proper to them (*oikēsis idias*). They wander from place to place, from town to town, incapable of understanding these men who, being philosophers and politicians, *have (a) place [ont lieu]*, that is, act by means of gesture and speech, in the city or at war.¹⁹

Therefore, the legitimacy of the discourses (*logoi*) authorized to state the truth of the *polis* depends on their belonging

to a certain philosophical and political *genos*. The determination of this belonging, which provides the grounds for the very legitimacy of the true *logos*, is the determination of the belonging to one's own original place. This belonging refers to the order of dwelling, it is linked to the *oikos*, to the familiar nucleus as an original community, which is the constitutive element of the *polis*. Belonging is given by birth and education. It stands against one's differing from oneself that characterizes the *genos* of sophists, who wander from one city to another and have no proper place (*oikēsis idias*). At this point it is clear, or at least it should be, that the archaic ghost haunting ontology and politics and binding one to another comes from an archaic experience of dwelling and thus of community. This law imposes the task of thinking identity (ontological and political identity) in terms that are irreducibly spatial: origin as a place, permanence, stability, being distinguished and protected from difference, alterity, the stranger, and the foreign. Indeed, when opening his discourse on the origin and structure of the universe, Timaeus affirms the fundamental ontological distinction and defines the two opposite genera of being into which everything that is settles: the ideal and the sensible. Stability and permanence, immutable identity, are the ontological traits of the ideal being against the sensible being, which, conversely, corresponds to the order of becoming and thus is always changeable and differing from itself like the sophist.²⁰ At this point, it remains to show how this law also determines the ontological question of *khōra*.

The phantasm of the origin

Let me briefly summarize the context of the question: in the first part of his discourse, once the primary ontological distinction between the ideal and the sensible, between being and becoming has been posited, Timaeus introduces the figure of the Demiurge, who shapes the sensible by staring at the ideal. However, at the heart of his discourse, Timaeus wonders how this transition happens. He must hypothesize a third genus, neither ideal, nor

sensible, through which the passage takes place, and he names it *khōra*. As it is neither sensible nor ideal, not even a being, it cannot be determined in any way as a being could be. For this reason, to describe it, Timaeus must use a set of analogies (the receptacle, the cast, the sieve, the nursemaid, etc.), assuming that none of them are adequate since they all come from the sensible determined in the *khōra*. This third remains indeterminate: the indeterminate that prevents itself from any possible determination and makes every determination possible. But, at the same time, in its indeterminateness *khōra* imposes on us the thought that all that is, is as such because it takes place, has an origin that remains fixed, permanent, and stable, has a proper place, *oikēsis idias*. In the aforementioned seminar, Derrida is more explicit:

If *khōra* can receive everything, if it can become everything, one could ask why Timaeus insists on the necessity of a unique appellation. Perhaps, because it can receive everything, one could give it all the names one wants, since it can take any form, ultimately one could give a name different from *khōra*. As it does not exist under the form of a being identical with itself, of an ideal referent or a thing, one does not see why it would have only one name. But it is precisely because of this that it is always necessary to name it in the same way, since it is paradoxically necessary to keep the sense that it has no sense, to prevent one from puzzling it with what it receives and that it is not, so it is absolutely necessary for the law of discourse to name it always in the same constant and identifiable way in order not to confuse it with what it receives, with the forms it can take and, thus, it is necessary to name it always in the same way, it is necessary that language always points to that unique thing which is not a thing, which cannot be confused with anything, etc. Therefore, naming it in the same way means to maintain paradoxically the same reference

to what cannot ever be a real and determinate referent, a particular referent, a singular one.²¹

Referring to Critias's story about the act of the foundation of the city and, in particular, to Athena's choice of the place, the seminar explains that "this choice decides everything"²² and thus highlights the first anticipation of the future, apparently ontological, question of *khōra*. Critias's discourse, Derrida remarks, "has already presented itself as a discourse about *khōra* even before *khōra* as such becomes the subject of the general discourse."²³ From this perspective, the choice of the name *khōra* seems to have been surreptitiously conditioned by the preamble to *Timaeus*, where Socrates summarizes the discourse about the ideal *polis*, and where the term first appears, long before Timaeus's onto-cosmogonic discourse. In the preamble, Socrates briefly describes the law that regulates weddings and education: it is necessary to raise the sons of the best citizens and take the others to another country, giving everybody their proper place. Socrates calls this place *khōran*.²⁴ In this first occurrence, *khōra*, according to its semantic specter, refers to the occupation of a place; it describes the borders of an inhabited territory *against* a wild space. Derrida writes:

Although the word was already uttered (19a), the question of *khōra* as a general place or total receptacle is, of course, not *yet* posed. But if it is not posed as such, it gestures and points already. The note is given. For, on the one hand, the ordered polysemy of the word always includes the sense of political place or, more generally, of *invested* place, by opposition to abstract space. *Khōra* "means": place occupied by someone, country, inhabited Place, marked place, rank, post, assigned position, territory, or region. And in fact, *Khōra will* always already be occupied, invested, even as a general place, and even when it is distinguished from everything that takes place in it.²⁵

Finally, for Plato, it is not important to establish what *khōra* is, but that there is a proper place, a unique origin that is self-identical, stable and permanent, an origin that, remaining indeterminate in itself, institutes the criterion of every possible ontological determination: identity understood as stability and permanence. Therefore, the law of the *oikos* secretly grounds ontology and thus our experience and conception of dwelling. It is a law but also an archaic phantasm to which no reality corresponds, since no reality can correspond to the myth of Erichthonius, the myth of autochthony, the myth of the political identity of Athens. This phantasm still haunts our experience and conception of dwelling and architecture.²⁶ Derrida refers to it in *Specters of Marx*, in a passage in which he proposes a formalization of its law:

Inter-ethnic wars (have there ever been another kind?) are proliferating, driven by an archaic phantasm and concept, by a primitive conceptual phantasm of community, the nation-State, sovereignty, borders, native soil and blood. . . . But how can one deny that this conceptual phantasm is, so to speak, made more outdated than ever, in the very ontopology it supposes, by tele-technic dis-location? (By ontopology we mean an axiomatics linking indissociably the ontological value of present-being [on] to its *situation*, to the stable and presentable determination of a locality, the topos of territory, native soil, city, body in general).²⁷

A little bit later, Derrida invites us to rethink dwelling in the wake of an experience of place and space that is more original than the experience imposed by the law of the *oikos*, an experience removed by the law of the *oikos* in the phantasmatic desire of an autochthonous identity, that is, of an identity pure and immune from any relation to the other in general: “All stability in a place being but a stabilization or a sedentarization, it will have to have been necessary that the local *différance*, the

spacing of a displacement gives the movement its start. And gives place and gives rise [*donne place et donne lieu*].”²⁸

This means that we must rethink dwelling by departing from *différance* as the condition of spacing and thus of taking place in general. This is the task of a deconstruction of the dwelling, and, at the same time, of the architecture of deconstruction.