There Are No Corners After Derrida

The original title of this paper was to be “There Were No Corners Before Derrida.” This idea basically came from an intuitive leap, but it was clearly intended to be provocative. I knew there was something about Jacques Derrida’s discourse on rhetoric and the rhetorical figure that could be used today to reflect on the status of the object in architecture and in particular the corner. Corners are unique architectural conditions different from other architectural objects (facades, walls, etc.). This is because corners are elusive and thus rarely thematized in architecture. For example, when Rosalind Krauss said that architecture will always have four walls — that is, an enclosure — she never said that architecture has corners, either external or internal.

After many hours of thinking about the title, I realized that I had fallen into the same trap as the architectural traditionalists who consider the corner, like all other integers of architecture, as both a real thing and a sign. For these traditionalists, that sign has a simple one-to-one relation between signifier and signified, and thus is always present as a stable entity. But if Derrida’s questioning of the signifier/signified relationship has some merit, then what I mean to say is, “There Are No Corners After Derrida.” Yes, there are still real intersections of walls, ceilings, and floors, but these can be reconceptualized within the discipline of architecture in a new and different way because of Derrida’s thinking; Derrida’s questioning of the one-to-one relationship between signifiers and signified meant that language, and perhaps rhetoric specifically, involves a free play of signifiers.

In the examples that follow — insofar as they have rhetorical implications — the idea of rhetoric was traditionally based on the formal or grammatical, and thus on the presupposition of a one-to-one correspondence between the components of the sign (the signifier and the signified). Therefore, any rhetoric can be said to have evolved out of this stable dyadic relationship and thus is secondary to it. Just as Derrida draws on C.S. Peirce’s conception of a “pure
rhetoric” (the generation of signs from signs ad infinitum) to call into question the fixed relationship between signifier and signified, I would like to propose the corner as a site of multiple, potentially unmotivated significations, of the possible destabilization of the formal as a basis for conceptualizing architecture. Traditionally, the corner has described a rhetorical figure that emerged from a formal conception. But since the corner is relational, negotiating between grammatically coherent units — that is, Krauss’s “four walls” — it is already a fugitive conception. In this sense, one could have said there were no such corners before Derrida. But the convention of the corner-as-sign will not serve us well here, even under erasure. For Derrida, it is no longer the formal, or grammatical, that conditions rhetoric, but rather the free play of signifiers that creates an undecidable relationship between the sign and the thing. Thus, one can argue that the corner, in the formal and grammatical sense of the object—sign, no longer exists after Derrida.

Another important text in this context is Paul de Man’s reading of Peirce on grammar and rhetoric. De Man, in his 1973 “Semiology and Rhetoric,” cites two precedents for making a distinction between “pure grammar” and “pure rhetoric.” The first is Kenneth Burke’s definition of “deflection.” For Burke, deflection, “any slight bias or even unintended error,” forms the rhetorical basis of language. De Man interprets this as “a dialectical subversion of the consistent link between sign and meaning that operates within grammatical patterns.” Second, and more important for our purposes, Peirce puts forward another practice that transforms the one-to-one relation between sign and meaning and, subsequently, calls into question grammatical, formal, or logical structures. According to de Man, “The interpretation of the sign is not, for Peirce, a meaning but another sign; it is a reading... [that] has, in its turn, to be interpreted into another sign, and so on ad infinitum.” As with Burke’s “deflection,” this process, by which “one sign gives birth to another,” defines, for Peirce, “pure rhetoric” — as opposed to “pure grammar.” Pure grammar for de Man suggests the possibility of an unproblematic, dyadic meaning, and pure logic, which in turn postulates the possibility of the universal truth of meanings. De Man concludes: “Only if the sign engendered meaning in the same way that the object engenders the sign, that is, by representation, would there be no need to distinguish between grammar and rhetoric.” This distinction, between the generation of the sign from the object, and the generation of meaning from the sign.
determines our particular interest in the rhetorical as that which might destabilize any reading of architecture.

The idea of grammar has a long history in architecture. Many treatises bear the title “Grammaire.” These are about “getting things right,” or about following a certain “precedent” or a particular logic inherent in a particular site or program. Even in my own PhD dissertation, grammar as a manifestation of formal logic (in what was, at the time, called generic form) played an important role.²

Since Alberti, a column has been seen not only as a structural element but also as the sign of structure. The simultaneous presence of sign and object in architecture previously determined both their grammatical union and their metaphysics. The one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified is the linguistic foundation of all metaphysics. Derrida once claimed that architecture was “the locus of the metaphysics of presence” for the very reason that, in architecture, object, sign, and meaning converge. It is only when the deflections, multiple meanings, or undecidable figures that characterize the rhetorical impinge on the grammatical that the effects of rhetoric reveal their role in fundamentally calling the metaphysical project into question. Following Derrida’s idea of the undecidability of rhetoric, it is possible to think of the corner differently, not only as a physical presence, but also as a rhetorical device, particularly as it concerns the corner’s role in the signifier/signified dialectic.

It is often thought that the formal differences in architecture lie in the building’s relationship to the viewer. This is particularly true when it comes to the apocryphal distinction between Greek and Roman space. The assumption has been that Greek space is meant to be seen and conceptualized by a viewer at a 45-degree angle to the building, hence the diagonal approach to the Parthenon. This is echoed in the privileged vantage point in many of Schinkel’s perspectival drawings, which recede into deep space, and even in the diagonal approach to Philip Johnson’s Glass House. Clearly, such a
vantage point has implications not only for the viewer but also for the focus of his or her attention on the corner. In Roman space, on the other hand, partly because of the confined sites that Roman wall churches found themselves in, architecture was required to confront the problem of the subject on an axis perpendicular to the facade. This led to the idea of a frontal relationship between subject and object and the idea of frontality in facades. In this context, the corner becomes a secondary concern. Was it circumstances that unwittingly produced what is now considered this rhetorical and seminal difference between Greek and Roman space, debated by Lessing and Winckelmann in the 18th century and still discussed today? Or did these categories result from internal — that is, autonomous — architectural differences? These questions seem to be particularly pertinent where the corner problem of the Greek Doric order is examined as a first step toward understanding the perhaps cryptic title of this paper.

Initially, the corner presented a problem for which an aesthetic solution was presumed necessary. It first arose when the construction of the Doric temple changed from wood to stone. Historically, the corner was usually thought as a detail, often with the addition of the adjective appropriate, when it was thought at all. Originally, the triglyphs in the architrave of a Greek facade fronted the ends of the wooden beams and were spaced equally in front of the centerlines of the columns. When stone replaced wood, the architrave load was moved to the last outboard column. This created an unequal gap between the triglyphs, as well as an off-center relationship between the outboard triglyph and the outboard column. Two solutions could be proposed. These were no longer lodged in the realm of necessity, but rather were aesthetic, and thus formal in nature. This led to the grammar of the corner. Either the end triglyph could be widened in order to preserve the interior interval spacing between triglyphs, or the outboard column could be moved in, and off-center from the triglyph, as at the Parthenon. When this movement is repeated at the corner of the side facade, the corner bay at both the front and the side becomes equal yet different from the other bays. The seeming continuity of the stoa around the building is preserved, but since the centerline of the bay could not pass through the centerline of a column, the void of the corner bay is slightly narrowed on both the front and the side. This slight difference can only be appreciated from a 45-degree vantage point, where the viewer can simultaneously comprehend the front and the side of the