

# WHAT IS CONCEPTUALISM?

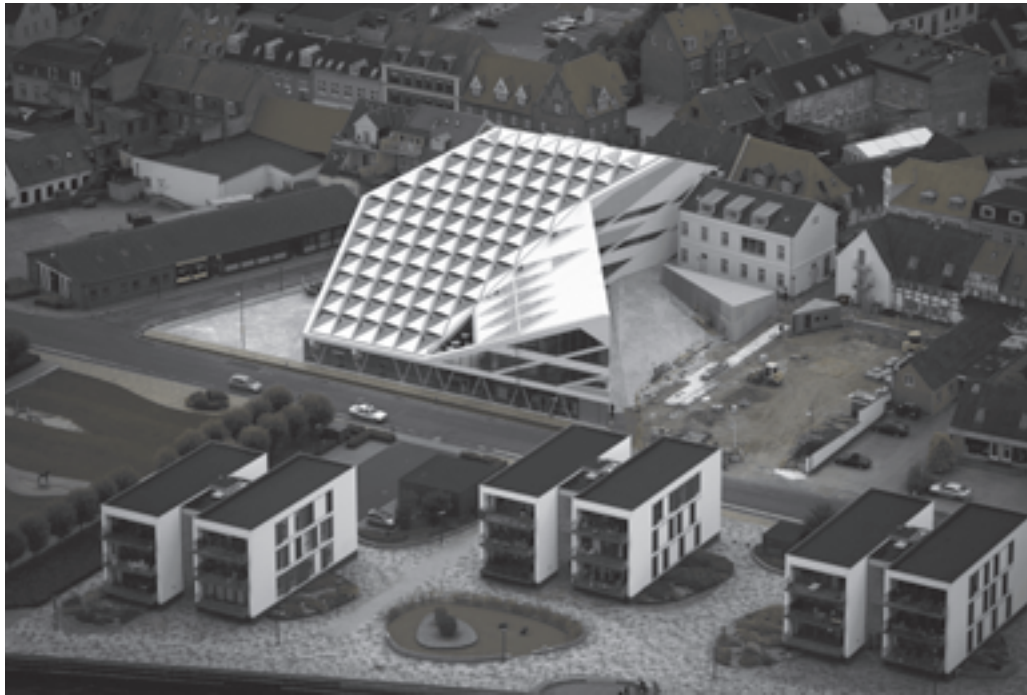
Essay by Boris Brorman  
Jensen

The use of the notion concept within architectural theory has a wide range of connotations dating back to Antiquity and the foundation of classical philosophy.<sup>1</sup> The term is both used as an adjective (conceptual) and a noun (concept) in so many different contexts, embracing so many different understandings and preconceptions that the very notion of concept has become a floating signifier.<sup>2</sup> Even the relatively well-defined modern tradition of conceptual art after Marcel Duchamp has so many branches of specific implications that any attempt to unfold the scope of conceptual thinking in contemporary architectural practice appears to be a near impossible task. So why introduce yet another term to the notion's wide spectrum of more or less implicit meanings? And what is conceptualism in this context?

The expression as unfolded in this context does not attempt to overwrite any exciting variation of the notion or introduce a new understanding of the nature of conceptual artistic practice. The term is meant as a quite simple proposition. A fairly hands-on effort to define and describe a set of similar methodological procedures which are applied by a diverse group of contemporary architects. A term that tries to capture an apparent methodological consistency among a certain group of contemporary practitioners that for some reason has attracted very little attention from architectural critics and academic researchers. Maybe because the processes of creative discovery and the logics of cultural justification which it is trying to unveil are considered a bit banal or too much of an internal matter to be of any relevance

1 For further reading, I recommend the peer-reviewed "Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy", which provides a short but splendid overview: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/conc-cl/> (accessed 23.03.2017).

2 See Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Introduction à l'oeuvre de Marcel Mauss" in *Mauss, Sociologie et Anthropologie*, Paris, 1950.



The characteristic roof of the savings bank Midelfart Sparekasse is a geometric feature with references to both the maritime environment of the Little belt strait and the local timber-frame houses.

to the outside world. But the point is not to scrutinize all the trivial aspects of the tortuous processes of conceiving architecture. The point is essentially the opposite. To demystify architecture. And the term is not really contradicting any established attempt provided by art historians, philosophers or other academics to post-rationalize and retrospectively understand the cultural impacts of architectural interventions from an external perspective. The term conceptualism, as applied here, tries to label a *modus operandi* among a number of architectural practitioners that apparently seem to justify their spatial inventions with direct reference to the complex and often messy context of creative discovery. An emerging tendency to dismiss the cover of applied theory and representational reasoning, including the formal representation of function as championed by early modern pioneers. Conceptualism is interested in how architects reflect "in action",<sup>3</sup> promoting

3 See Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner – How Professionals Think in Action*, Basic Books, New York 1983.

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an architecture of direct and perceived spatial impact, generated affects and other unmediated dynamics.

Conceptualism might, to a certain extent, be regarded as a prolongation of the so-called pragmatic turn of the 90s. Rem Koolhaas' wake-up call from the "semantic nightmare" of postmodernism and his efforts to re-vitalize the modern legacy by new means are certainly part of conceptualism's origins. But there are important differences and distinctions to be made. Conceptualism – as represented by the various contributions in this book – seems to reject the slightly sarcastic and ironic detachment of the stemming 'Dirty Realism',<sup>4</sup> which cultural critics like Liane Lefaivre accused of being a disguised kind of market cynicism propelled by a spouting neo-liberal ideology.<sup>5</sup> Conceptualism is not pragmatism version 2.0. The body of works introduced here indicates a community of contemporary practitioners who apply a related set of pragmatic *methods* as a machine for spatial invention, while at the same time trying to formulate a normative stand for different kinds of spatial intervention. The term is furthermore an attempt to highlight an emergent architectural discourse that does not formulate its continuous critique and revision of the modern legacy from a specific regional or fixed and localized position. The term conceptualism denotes a community of contemporary practitioners that seem to operate from a more complex glocalised position. A new generation of architects who to some extent "go with the flow",<sup>6</sup> responding to global jet streams of cultural dynamics while retaining a reflective normative ground for creative negotiations and reactions.

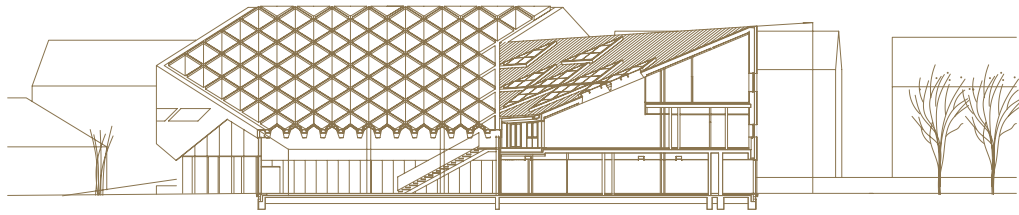
4 See Rem Koolhaas, "Dirty Realism – A Mini\_Farce", in Mau et al (eds.): *S,M,L,X,L*, New York/Rotterdam 1995, p. 570.

5 Liane Lefaivre, "Dirty Realism in European Architecture Today" in *Design Book Review* 17, 1989, p. 17–20.

6 See Gilles DeLalex, *Go With the Flow – architecture, infrastructure and the everyday experience of mobility*, University of Art and Design Helsinki, 2006.







### A “HISTORICALLY EFFECTED” PERSPECTIVE

Loosely defined as a secular “rival” to cosmologies, the notion of concept seems to convey a set of entangled narratives or logics anchored within a particular realm. Where cosmologies can be defined as providers of an all-embracing ontology or *grand projection* conveying an authoritative interpretation of its representational system – concepts can be seen as more open and limited epistemological figures containing a less dogmatic system of associative or interpretive logics. According to this simplistic, categorical comparison, concepts can be defined as a kind of cognitive trigger or creative machine with certain methodological dynamics imbedded. Taking for granted that concepts in this understanding of the notion do not imply a predefined morphological world, rigid parametric procedures or a set of dogmatic architectural action plans. This overall and crude distinction between cosmology and concept offers a simple, but nonetheless helpful framework that enables us to distinguish the different isms of early postmodernity from the subsequent pragmatic turn leading up to the current adventures of conceptualism – as exemplified by this book. A basic distinction offering a more unpretentious, historically effected alternative to the number of great attempts of the past to sort out the plurality of postmodern architecture by variation of style and/or difference in

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contextual belonging. Presuming that most variations and experiments of the early postmodern era were carried out within strict stylistic conventions and methodological prescriptions defined by authoritative examples – just like the modernist forefathers. Indicating that postmodern architecture continued to operate via more or less explicit manifestos which found expression in certain stylistic features. No longer representing function as such but rather: complexity and contradiction, mainstream and pop culture, the presence of the past, a new rationalism, deconstruction of great narratives etc. Stylistically defined isms which in this context can be described as quasi-cosmologies or manifestos of what architecture ought to be. Generally speaking, replacing the *grand projection* of the Modern Movement with regional ontologies and an eclectic palette of prescriptions disguised as new radical methods.

Focussing entirely on external characteristics and the continuous critical revisions of modernist dogmas, these classical readings of recent architectural history never really look behind the rhetoric of post-rationalizations delivered by the various architects to justify their creative inventions. Most likely because these inventions always had to serve a higher purpose and therefore had to justify its relevance beyond the apparent idiosyncratic realm of creative discovery – unless, of course, the “product” was trademarked as Starchitecture. The term conceptualism suggests a new possible stand in between these two extremes that dominate the current scene. A less dogmatic and more explorative position, as opposed to the pragmatic (neo-liberal)



The cultural centre in Dhahran, like several Snøhetta projects, revolves around balancing elements, volumes or sculptural lines against each other. Sparking associations to the traditional stone beacons that are omnipresent in Norway's hiking areas, the Center for World Culture consists of four stones fixed against each other.

modus of reasonable reasoning and the authoritative stand of the genuine brand, solipsistic artefacts and their cognate, more anonymous, endemic architecture, representing an undisputed aura of *genius loci*.<sup>7</sup>

#### ENGAGING THE CONTEXT OF DISCOVERY

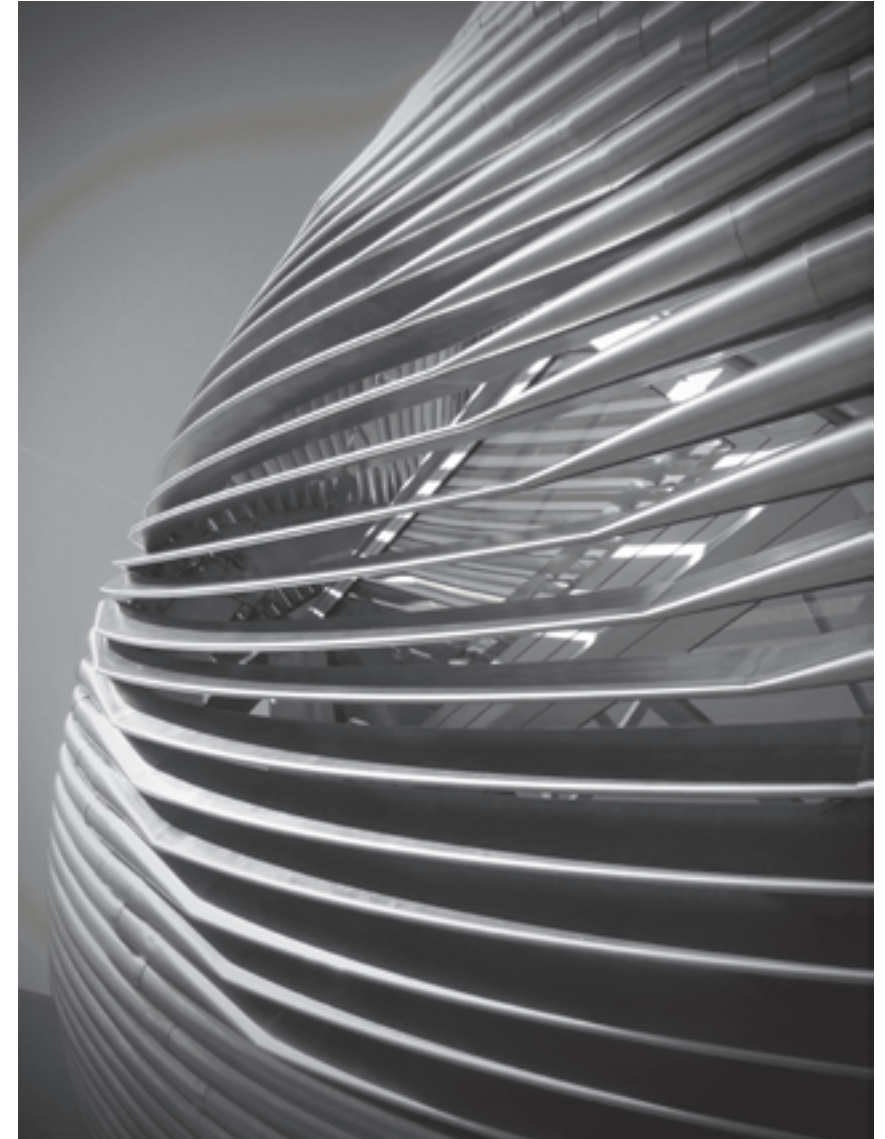
As briefly stated above, the term conceptualism denotes a certain open-ended understanding of the notion of concept. Suggesting a more direct correspondence between the context of discovery and the context of justification, emphasizing a prevailing, heuristic *modus operandi* and a less dogmatic approach to the question of style. Clearly inspired by Rem Koolhaas' introduction of Salvador Dali's "paranoid-critical-method"<sup>8</sup> as a creative engine for architecture, conceptualism has managed to adopt a concept that's neither purely rational nor entirely auto-poetic. Conceptualism is in this way trying to overcome the cultural burden of architecture; its obligation to serve as an applied art by marking a symbolic order, representing

<sup>7</sup> See Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*, Rizzoli, New York 1980.

<sup>8</sup> See Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam 1994.

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power and wealth or something purely rational and functional. To reconcile the profession's original sin – the urge to justify its very existence from an external position. To invent a context of justification despite the powerful creative dynamics and the huge cultural potential embedded in the context of architectural discoveries. As for science, these two domains ought to be

separated. Scientific discoveries must be justified beyond the context of discovery. But even though modern architecture may envy science its undisputed legitimacy – there seems to be no reason to neglect the associative dynamics and creative energy at play in the context of creative discoveries.

The discourse of a diagrammatic architecture may be seen as an abortive effort to engage the context of creative discoveries by reducing its dynamics to simple equations. And the introduction of the term conceptualism is not a belated attempt to re-introduce the idea of a diagrammatic architecture,<sup>9</sup> nor is it an effort to promote a new discourse aligning with the growing criticism of diagrammatic rationalization.<sup>10</sup> Conceptualism frames a growing interest in the unmediated impact of architecture. A way to re-habilitate architecture as a self-evident creative undertaking, which may or may not be legitimized by external systems of justification. Claiming that good architecture always will adjust to different demands and utilizations and that spatial inventions – just like scientific discoveries – sometimes occur coincidentally, solving problems beyond the very context of justification that might have initiated the experiment. Conceptualism, as vaguely defined in this sketchy description, has the potential to unlock architecture's iterative powers. As a possible strategy for conveying creative discoveries from one legitimate context to another. As a way of breaking free of the inherited and rigid systems of representation, the anachronistic idea of grand authorship and the recent attempts to invent more or less

<sup>9</sup> See Stan Allen, 'Diagrams Matter', in *ANY* 23, New York 1998, p. 16–19.

<sup>10</sup> See Pier Vittorio Aureli, 'After Diagrams', in *Log* 6, 2005, p. 5–9.

“agnostic” methods like algorithms and parametrically defined design solutions to disentangle more or less well-defined problems. The term may not be very precise and it certainly does not indicate a set of formal characteristics that identify a distinctive group of practitioners. It is a tentative outline of an emerging strategy to demystify architecture by directing attention to the idiosyncratic context of creative discoveries – daring to justify its inventive apparatus in a straightforward way.

