Kōjin Karatani’s
PHILOSOPHY OF ARCHITECTURE

In his outstanding elaboration of Karatani’s insights, Lahiji analyses the strength and the limit of the architectural metaphor.
– Slavoj Žižek

NADIR LAHIJI
‘Nadir Lahiji’s Kōjin Karatani’s Philosophy of Architecture marks a pivotal moment in the understanding of the relationship between philosophy and architecture. Taking Kōjin Karatani’s work at a starting point, Lahiji shows how theorizing architecture in philosophy allows us to discover precisely how theory and practice intersect in our ethical being.’

**Todd McGowan**, author of *Emancipation After Hegel*

‘Nadir Lahiji’s book is the kind of brilliant, erudite study of Kōjin Karatani’s work that we have long needed. A groundbreaking reassessment of the role played by the architectural metaphor in the history of philosophy, Lahiji shows how, in a series of radical new readings of Kant and Marx, Karatani compellingly defends a thought of architectonic reason against its various postmodern critics.’

**David Cunningham**, University of Westminster

‘Lahiji, one of the sharpest theorists of architecture today, permits us to rethink the philosophical system of Kojin Karatani, from the standpoint of the will to architecture. While insisting on his “theoretical system,” Lahiji reconstructs Karatani’s system in a way that goes well beyond the very complicated and not much discussed relation between architecture and philosophy.’

**Agon Hamza**, coauthor of *Reading Hegel*

‘In our postmodern era, philosophy is often denounced as the expression of some underlying will—the will to power, the will to rationalize and dominate the world, the will to ground ordinary and scientific knowledge in a deeper wisdom. Kōjin Karatani proposes a radically different approach: philosophy as the expression of a will to architecture, a desperate effort to formulate the hidden architecture of our universe. In his outstanding elaboration of Karatani’s insights, Lahiji analyses the strength and the limit of this architectural metaphor. He follows Karatani in focusing on Kant who was the first to deploy the structure of philosophy as the architecture of pure reason immanently divided into three domains: pure reason, practical reason, and their unity in the theory of judgment. But Kant was also the first to clearly perceive the abyss which condemns every such architecture of reason to its ultimate failure. Lahiji thus avoids the trap of providing a “philosophy of architecture”: he does the exact opposite, using architecture to formulate the shaky foundations of philosophy itself. The combination of philosophy and architecture works as an explosive mixture which revolutionizes not only our notion of philosophy but also our elementary idea of reason. *Kōjin Karatani’s Philosophy of Architecture* enables us to understand the roots of the crisis of reason which characterizes our historical epoch. It is a book for everyone who wants to think today.’

**Slavoj Žižek**, Hegelian philosopher and communist political activist
KŌJIN KARATANI’S PHILOSOPHY OF ARCHITECTURE

In this book, Nadir Lahiji introduces Kōjin Karatani’s theoretical-philosophical project and demonstrates its affinity with Kant’s critical philosophy founded on ‘architectonic reason’. From the ancient Greeks we have inherited a definition of the word ‘philosophy’ as Sophia—wisdom. But in his book Architecture as Metaphor Kōjin Karatani introduces a different definition of philosophy. Here, Karatani critically defines philosophy not in association with Sophia but in relation to foundation as the Will to Architecture. In this novel definition resides the notion that in Western thought a crisis persistently reveals itself with every attempt to build a system of knowledge on solid ground. This book reveals the implications of this extraordinary exposition. This is the first book to uncover Kōjin Karatani’s highly significant ideas on architecture for both philosophical and architectural audiences.

Nadir Lahiji is an architect. He is most recently the author of Architecture in the Age of Pornography (Routledge, 2021), Architecture, Philosophy and the Pedagogy of Cinema (Routledge, 2021), Architecture or Revolution: Emancipatory Critique after Marx (Routledge, 2020), and An Architecture Manifesto: Critical Reason and Theories of a Failed Practice (Routledge, 2019). His previous publications include, among others, Adventures with the Theory of the Baroque and French Philosophy and the coauthored The Architecture of Phantasmagoria: Specters of the City.
KŌJIN KARATANI’S PHILOSOPHY OF ARCHITECTURE

Nadir Lahiji
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Building Hubris: The Tower of Babel

If I regard the sum total of all cognition of pure and speculative reason as an edifice for which we have in ourselves at least the idea, then I can say that in the Transcendental Doctrine of Elements we have made an estimate of the building materials and determined for what sort of edifice, with what height and strength, they would suffice. It turned out, of course, that although we had in mind a tower that would reach the heavens, the supply of materials sufficed only for a dwelling that was just roomy enough for our business on the plane of experience and high enough to survey it; however, that bold undertaking had to fail from lack of material, not to mention the confusion of languages that unavoidably divided the workers over the plan and dispersed them throughout the world, leaving each to build on his own according to his own design.²

Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*
Human reason so delights in constructions that it has several times built up a tower and then razed it to examine the nature of foundation. It is never too late to become reasonable and wise; but if the insight comes late, there is always more difficulty in starting the change.  

Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*

The story of the Tower of Babel goes back to Genesis 11. As the story goes, God at first visited the Earth and witnessed the construction of this structure as a sign of the unity of the people speaking one language. God saw this as the intervention of the Earth into the affairs of Heaven. He therefore decides to cause confusion and tumult by scattering people across the surface of the Earth and make them speak different languages. As a result of not understanding each other’s tongue, people had to stop constructing the Tower, leaving it incomplete. ‘Men could no longer understand each other, and the project of finishing the tower was put to rest for good. The humans then separated from each other as they could no longer live peacefully. And since the term “Babel” in Hebrew means confusion, the place was called Babylon, and the tower Babel’. Sibyl recounts the story: ‘When all men were of one language, some of them built a high tower, as if they would thereby ascend up to heaven; but the god sent storms of wind and overthrew the tower, and gave everyone a peculiar language, and for this reason, it was that the city was called Babylon’. The Greek historian Herodotus claimed to have seen the Tower during his visit to Babylon. He reported it as a tall Tower with twenty stories and eight levels.

Building the Tower of Babel was considered to be both ‘an accomplishment and a sign’, as Daniel Purdy writes. ‘The construction of the Tower parallels the compilation of a metaphysical system’, which Kant demonstrated to be untenable. It became a metaphor in the eighteenth century for the *hubris* of metaphysics and the absolutist state power. Yet, mankind – starting with the tyrannical King Nimrod who was said to be responsible for building the Tower of Babel by manipulating his people to turn them against God – has tried desperately to reach Heaven over and over again, thus repeating the hubris of trying to build the Tower.

Significantly, it was Fritz Lang who, in his film *Metropolis* (1927), presented a *filmic* critique in the twentieth century that can be taken as a counterpart to Kant’s *philosophical* critique of the Tower of Babel. Recall the *technological* imagery that stages the ‘completed’ version of the ‘Tower of Babel’ in *Metropolis* with designers behind the work causing the revolt by the workers that would lead to the destruction of the Tower. It is the division, or better, the *conflict* between ‘hands’ and ‘brains’. As Andreas Huyssen, invoking this conflict in the film, writes, ‘The imagery
of the tower of Babel (the machine center of Metropolis is actually called the New Tower of Babel) relates technology to myth and legend. The biblical myth is used to construct the ideological message about the division of labor into the hands that build and the brains that plan and conceive, a division which, as the film suggests, must be overcome. And further, ‘The capital/labor conflict is present in the sequence showing the Master of Metropolis in his control and communications center and the workers in the machine room, with the machines being subservient to the master but enslaving the workers’.

All the unreasonable attempts at building a Tower of Babel will have to be submitted to a Kantian philosophical scrutiny—The ‘nature’ of its ‘foundation’ must be re-examined all over again: ‘It is never too late to become reasonable and wise’.

Notes

1 Cornelis Anthonisz, a Dutch painter, engraver and mapmaker, was born in Amsterdam around 1505. His ‘The Fall of the Tower of Babel’, dated 1547 is credited to Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. He is well known for his detailed maps of medieval Amsterdam. The text in the top right reads “Babelon/Genesis 14”. Originally it read Genesis 11, which makes more sense as that is the chapter where the construction of the tower and the punishment are described. The number 14 probably refers to the chapter about the Last Judgment in the Book of Revelation. The tower is destroyed by winds and fire from heaven, announced on trumpet by an angel. In the foreground people lay mortally wounded by falling masonry while others flee in all directions. The text in the top left banner is somewhat strange: “When it was at its highest / it should not do fall”. The stone in the bottom left is inscribed with the date 1547. Compare Anthonisz’s depiction of the Tower of Babel with that by Brueghel the Elder’s 1563 depiction which portrays the Tower as a complete and a magnificent structure standing on the ground.


4 For the quoted passages see *Tower of Babel: The Biblical Legend of Babylon*, copyrighted, 2020 (no author and no publisher’s names), 46–47.


6 As mentioned in *Tower of Babel: The Biblical Legend of Babylon*, 55.


In ‘Transcendental Doctrine of Method’, the last part of *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant employed a ‘building metaphor’ for a most ‘pedestrian understanding of architecture’. The *hubris* of building the Tower of Babel had to be confronted with a simple ‘plan’ of building, with the materials readily available, with what is at humanity’s disposal—no more, no less. This had been lost to the philosopher and the architect both. Hence the reason for a Kantian *transcendental critique*. As there is a *limit* to reason, so there is a *limit* to building. This is the fundamental necessity of Kant’s critical philosophy in any investigation into the relationship between *philosophy* and *architecture*—a much misconceived relation. Kōjin Karatani is a prodigious thinker who has brought out the Kantian *critique* to expose the *limits* of architecture as metaphor by invoking Kant’s *architectonics* as *transcendental* structure. In the present work I take up Karatani’s thesis for an expanded analysis.

My first exposure to the work of Kōjin Karatani began with reading his *Architecture as Metaphor* when it was published in 1995. The central thesis of his book goes as follows: Philosophy as the *will to architecture* exposes the limits to architecture as metaphor, which is omnipresent at the foundation of Western thought. Karatani informs us that his works have been ‘interventions’ that critically examine ‘architecture as metaphor in order to expose its limits’. In the ‘Introduction to the English Edition’ of the book, Karatani reveals that it was by looking back at his previous works that he realized that he was ‘unwittingly’ engaging in ‘a kind of Kantian critique all along’. He tells us that he became aware of Kant only when he targeted the dominant modernist ideology of a ‘grand narrative’. With the fall of the grand narrative, all other alternative narratives or ideologies appeared on the scene, as he notes, under the rubric of the ‘end of history’, and an ensuing cynicism when the ‘metaphor of architecture’ collapsed. He became aware of Kant, he informs us, only after ‘architecture as metaphor’ collapsed. Therefore, ‘it is the Kantian
transcendental critique that is called for’, which led him to reevaluate his previous work.\(^5\) This Kantian transcendental critique will include Marx. Marx appears on the stage unambiguously to be named as a transcendental thinker whose Capital is in essence nothing but a transcendental critique. Kant and Marx are conspicuously present in Karatani’s Architecture as Metaphor.

With Architecture as Metaphor, Karatani proclaimed his arrival at Kant’s critical philosophy. A more comprehensive exposition on Kant had to wait until his later book Transcritique: On Kant and Marx, published in 2003.\(^6\) In the latter he offers a novel interpretation of the ‘Kantian Copernican turn’ and transcendental philosophy and a rigorous reading of Marx with Kant through a conceptual category he coined as transcritique. In his work, Karatani renews the much-forgotten ‘Kantian Marxism’. In Architecture as Metaphor, he would nevertheless use the occasion to foreground the much-contested Kantian notion of the ‘thing-in-itself’ that he will treat more comprehensively in Transcritique. However, it is in the earlier book that we come to understand Kant’s philosophy as the ‘critique’ of a long tradition of the old ‘architecture metaphor’ in philosophy.

In the present book I am mainly concerned with the theses in Architecture as Metaphor on Kant and Marx later enriched in Transcritique: On Kant and Marx. Here I should point out that Karatani referred back to Architecture as Metaphor only in Transcritique: On Kant and Marx. The central argument here is that Kant inaugurated a break in the traditional notion of the ‘metaphor of architecture’ in philosophy. We owe this insight mainly to Karatani. On this point, today, we must read Kant through Karatani, not only for the idea of the relation of philosophy to architecture but more importantly for an interpretation of Kant that bypasses most of the academic interpretations, which are abundant and copious. We must grant it to Karatani that he is an architectonic thinker.

By his own admission in his later work, not discussed in the present book, Karatani becomes a ‘systematic thinker’. He once declared that ‘We must never give up the “will to architecture”’.\(^7\) This very statement constitutes ‘Karatani’s philosophy of architecture’. He never claimed that his Architecture as Metaphor is a text for architects. For that matter, I aim the present work primarily at philosophers and only secondarily to scholars in the field of architecture.

Architecture as Metaphor and Transcritique: On Kant and Marx were both written, as Karatani says, in his capacity as a ‘literary critic’. In this regard, his important book on Marx first published in Japanese in 1974, translated into English in 2020, entitled Marx: Towards the Center of Possibility, was also written when he was still a literary critic.\(^8\) It is only
with his major ‘monumental’ work (as Fredric Jameson calls it) entitled The Structure of World History, published in 2014, that Karatani abandoned his academic position as a ‘literary critic’ to become, as mentioned, a systematic thinker writing as a theorist. In the Preface to the latter work he writes:

Accordingly, in taking up the problem of the structure of the world history, I felt the need to construct my own theoretical system. I have always disliked systematic undertakings and was never particularly good at them. Nonetheless, I am now for the first time in my life venturing to construct a theoretical system. This is because the problem I am wrestling with here can only be explicated systematically.

Karatani later published his Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy. This book was intended to clarify and expand on the notion of ‘Isonomia’ that he had mentioned only in passing in The Structure of World History. It is a work which stands on its own in posing an enormous challenge to the reception of Plato at the origin of Western philosophy and has radical political implications. In between these works, Karatani published Nation and Aesthetics: On Kant and Freud in 2017, a book of collected essays he had published in previous years, in which he applies his transcritique to read Freud through Kant in order to shed light on the notion of nation in relation to aesthetics.

In the present work I am mainly concerned with Architecture as Metaphor with occasional references to Transcritique: On Kant and Marx. To reiterate, this is an investigation into the relation of philosophy to architecture and the concept of architectonics in a sustained reference to Kantian philosophy as read and interpreted by Karatani.

Notes
3 Kōjin Karatani, Architecture as Metaphor, xl.
4 Kōjin Karatani, Architecture as Metaphor, xl.
5 Kōjin Karatani, Architecture as Metaphor, xli.
7 Graciously responding to my invitation, Karatani made this statement in an article that I asked him to contribute to the book I was editing; see Kōjin Karatani, ‘Rethinking City Planning and Utopianism’, in Nadir Lahiji, ed. The
(xiv) Preface


10 Kōjin Karatani, The Structure of World History, xvi.


12 This book is to be followed by a forthcoming one which will be devoted to Karatani’s singular reading of Marx, tentatively titled Kōjin Karatani’s Reconstruction of Marx, An Introduction.
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Kristina Wischenkamper went through the early draft of the manuscript. I am grateful to her for the thorough and meticulous editorial intervention she made.
From the Ancient Greeks we have inherited an understanding of the word *philosophy* as *Sophia*—‘wisdom’. Thales, a friend of Anaximander, was known as a sage—*Sophoi*. He was a mathematician and a technologist, but also a politician, and as such it would be wrong to limit his *Sophia* to a technical expertise. At the same time, ancient Greek philosophy was always concerned with what we call the ‘theory of knowledge’, or *epistemology*, derived from the Greek *epistēmē*, and *logos*. Hence we obtain the ‘opposition of knowledge to wisdom’. The theory of knowledge, to put it precisely, is the problem of ‘how to formulate a systematic theory of philosophy’, which has become central to *critical philosophy*. Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, making a distinction between ‘philosophical wisdom’ and ‘practical wisdom’, wrote that

philosophic wisdom is scientific knowledge, combined with intuitive reason, of the things that are highest by nature. This is why we say Anaxagoras, Thales, and men like them have philosophic but not practical wisdom, when we see them ignorant of what is to their own advantage, and why we say that they know things that are remarkable, admirable, difficult, and divine, but useless; viz because it is not human goods that they seek.

‘Practical wisdom’, Aristotle added, ‘on the other hand is concerned with things human and things about which it is possible to deliberate’, and further on,

political wisdom and practical wisdom are the same state of mind, but their essence is not the same. Of the wisdom concerned with the city, the practical wisdom which plays a controlling part is legislative wisdom, while that which is related to this as particulars to their universal is known by the general name “political wisdom”; this has to
do with action and deliberation, for a decree is a thing to be carried out in the form of an individual act.\textsuperscript{4}

Under the term ‘Wisdom’, Aristotle further wrote that

(1) in the arts we ascribe to their most finished exponents, e.g. to Phidias as a sculptor and to Polyclitus as a maker of portrait-statue, and here we mean nothing by wisdom except excellence in art; but (2) we think that some people are wise in general, not in some particular field or in any other limited respect, as Homer says in the Margites, “Him did the gods make neither a digger nor yet a ploughman Nor wise in anything else.” Therefore wisdom must plainly be the most finished of the forms of knowledge. It follows that the wise man must not only know what follows from the first principles, but must also possess truth about the first principles. Therefore wisdom must be intuitive reason combined with scientific knowledge—scientific knowledge of the highest objects which has received as it were its proper completion.\textsuperscript{5}

Prior to this passage, Aristotle stated the following about architecture:

Now since architecture is an art and is essentially a reasoned state of capacity to make, and there is neither any art that is not such a state nor any such state that is not an art, art is identical with a state of capacity to make, involving a true course of reasoning.\textsuperscript{6}

Still, for the same philosophical notion of Sophia, we must go back a bit in time before Aristotle. Jean-Pierre Vernant in his The Origins of Greek Thought discusses certain aspects of the ‘Mycenean reality’, the origin of the search for a ‘balance and accommodation between the opposing forces’, between the ‘silent demos’ and the ‘palace-centered system’, between social forces with which the power had to come to terms, the elements indicating a time of troubles that would give rise to ‘moral thought and political speculation’ that constituted an early form of human ‘wisdom’. He explains that

This sophia appeared as early as the dawn of the seventh century, and was associated with a rather odd assortment of figures who came to be clothed with an almost legendary radiance and whom the Greeks continued to revere as their first true sages. Sophia was concerned not with the universe of physis [nature] but with the human world: the elements that made it up, the forces that divided it against itself, and the means by which they might be harmonized and unified so that their conflict might give birth to the human order of the city.\textsuperscript{7}
In Athens, ‘democracy’ was established and Athenian society was known as a place for the art of rhetoric, oratory. The teachers of this art came to be known as Sophists, persuading people by ruling them. But the art of rhetoric had been developed in Ionia. In Athens, Socrates was labeled a ‘sophist’. But Socrates, being such only theoretically, had opposed the sophists. Being more concerned about the moral nature of man he would change the name ‘Sophia’ to ‘Philosophia’, philosophy, or the love of wisdom. We need not go any further into this etymological history. It is sufficient for my purposes to make the point that it was Kōjin Karatani who some 30 years ago introduced a different definition of philosophy in his \textit{Architecture as Metaphor} published in 1995. There, Karatani critically defined philosophy, not in association with Sophia, but as the will to architecture. In this novel definition resides the notion that in Western thought a crisis persistently reveals itself with every attempt to build a system of knowledge. Karatani begins \textit{Architecture as Metaphor} by bringing out a new interpretation of Plato’s specific use of the ‘architecture metaphor’ by pointing out that ‘For Plato, architecture meant, more than anything else, an active position that enables one to resist or withstand all “becomings” by reconstructing them as “making”’. He cites Plato from \textit{The Republic}:

\begin{quote}
By its original meaning \textit{poiesis} means simply creation, and creation, as you know, can take very various forms. Any creation which is the cause of a thing emerging from non-existence into existence might be called \textit{poiesis}, and all the processes in all the crafts are kinds of \textit{poeisis}, and all those who are engaged in them [creator].
\end{quote}

Plato, Karatani reminds us,

likened philosophers who took such a position to architects. Yet, like other Athenians of his time, Plato despised the manual labor involved in building. Unlike the substantial materiality of architecture, which belongs to the realm of what we might call ‘semi-becoming,’ Platonic architecture is metaphorical’. Karatani makes a central argument with which I will be concerned in this investigation, that is, ‘Plato’s use of the metaphor of architecture, like that of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel who followed him, should thus be understood as the will to construct an edifice of knowledge on a solid foundation’ [emphasis mine]. Noting that this ‘will to architecture’ is attributed to Plato, Karatani briefly describes that in ancient Greek, the term \textit{architectonicé} (architecture) is ‘constructed from architectonicé techné, which signifies techné of architectón, architectón being a compound of