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Performance/Architecture: An Interview with Bernard Tschumi

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# Performance/Architecture

## An Interview with Bernard Tschumi

The notable parade of built, paper, and written projects by New York- and Paris-based Swiss architect, Bernard Tschumi (Figure 1), has been aligned with performance (in the fullest sense of the word) since the 1970s through his oft-repeated mantra: "there is no space without event."<sup>1</sup> Over the subsequent four decades, this attitude toward architecture, as a spatial discourse associated with time, action, and movement, has continued to inform his projects, which broadened from purely theoretical propositions to constructed works. His praxis has contributed significantly to an eventual (and "evental") sea change in which architecture is now perceived more as a dynamic space-in-flux than as fixed and enduring object. In the 1970s, his interests lay in aesthetic performances, influenced by the historical avant-garde, constructivist cinema, situationist practices, as well as conceptual and performance art. Tschumi's work with architecture students at the Architectural Association in London, and subsequently at Princeton University's School of Architecture, combined with his speculative projects to explore spatial scripting and movement notation. By the time the paper architect decided to apply his theories to built work in the influential project, *Parc de la Villette* (1982–1998), Jacques Derrida linked his architecture to the performative as a spatial "acting out."<sup>2</sup> This "event of spacing" was dubbed "event-space" and developed into "event-cities," a medium for investigating and presenting new forms of urban organization.<sup>3</sup> The spatial performativity of Tschumi's architecture continues to intersect with performance practices, including the design of the inaugural fireworks display for *Parc de la Villette* and the more recent creation of specific spaces for the performing and mediatized arts in Europe.<sup>4</sup> As his architecture persists in performing, so does the architect himself, evidenced in his many public lectures, texts, competitions, and provocations, as well as his signature red scarf—a sartorial detail that reflects the thin scarlet line threading through much of his graphics, texts, and Web site.

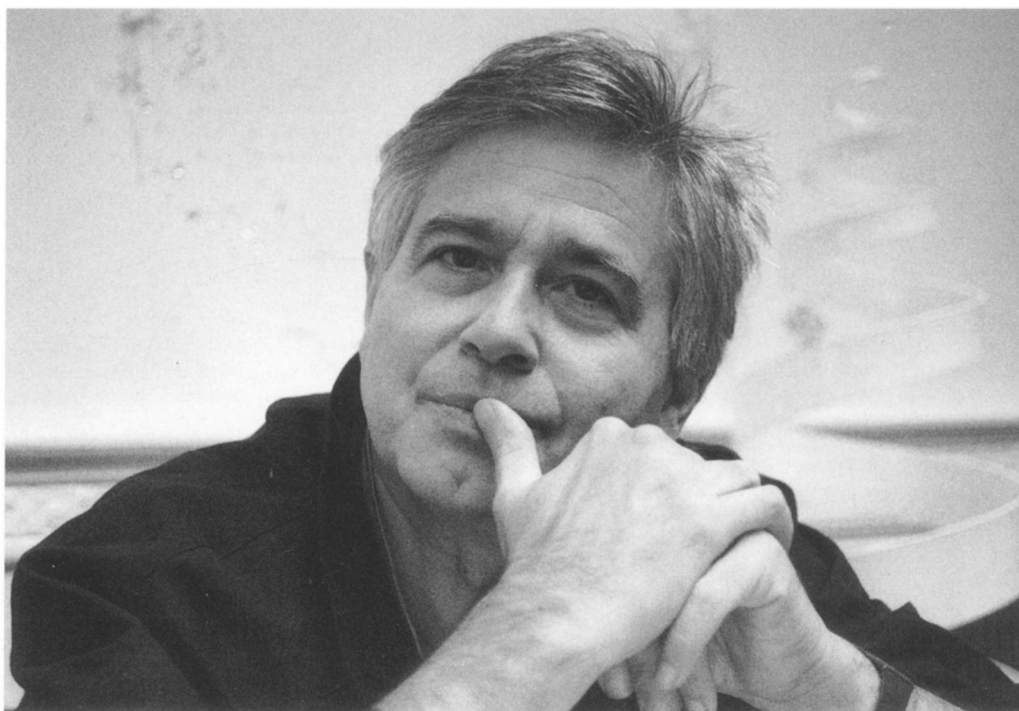
This interview revisits Tschumi's teaching and praxis as it relates to performance. It took place at his New York office on November 29, 2007. It began by reading him the call for submissions for this special issue on Performance/Architecture.

**JAE:** You have often used the terms "experience" and "event" in your writings, but you have not referred so directly to "performance." It would be good to get your take on how you see performance in relationship to your work.

**BT:** In many ways, the history of architecture is a very static history, one that is almost exactly as you describe when you said that architecture is about structure, solidity, stillness, etc. But it was not always like that. And at one moment—probably triggered by all the changes that happened in society and in criticism at the end of the sixties—a radical questioning took place in a number of fields:

not only in architecture of course but also in other art forms. As a young architect at the time, I was very suspicious of the message conveyed by the schools and by the profession that architecture, as a dictionary of received ideas, is about coherence and continuity. The discourse on autonomy was nothing but another discourse on continuity. Maybe because of all the changes in society at that time, it became interesting to look at what was happening not at the established center of architecture was but rather at its margin. Now, the problem that I will have in this interview is trying to avoid intermixing it too much with my own history, but I was of a generation that, post-1968, tried to question all those received ideas of what architecture was. And if I did not want to fall back on the clichés, then it was necessary to look to these margins. I was quite fascinated by certain issues

1. Bernard Tschumi. (All photos and drawings courtesy Bernard Tschumi.)



that did not have to do with architecture per se—because the word is culturally loaded—but simply with the idea of *space*. We start by defining space. We start by activating space. That is what architecture does. And hence, with other people at the time, who were devising artworks of the most abstract nature, I became interested in dealing with conceptual art, which was about redefining art itself. Another dimension, as I mentioned, is that architecture is about activating space through the movement of bodies. Some artists were also interested in this question of the movement and presence of the body. Performance art was another interesting area of investigation at the time, especially in New York. Another interest of mine included film: there is no cinema without the movement of the camera, the movement of the protagonist in a particular space. I found very quickly that research such as Eisenstein's was very close to my own interests. I remember here in New York going to the Strand bookstore and accidentally finding a literal library of about forty books on film theory, within which were the two major books by Eisenstein (*Film Sense* and *Film Form*) with modes of notation that were attempting to reconcile very different types of information, not only the image but also the movement, sound track, and so on. This is exactly what I was trying to do with architecture because my hypothesis was that architecture was both the space and what happens in it. Hence, at no moment could one say that architecture is the container; it is as much defined by movement. Work in the art scene, for example, used the word "performance" outside of sports or industry, which is why RoseLee Goldberg's book on performance art is important early research.<sup>5</sup> Artists—whether it was Robert Wilson or performers like Lucinda Childs—were useful examples for a young architect.<sup>6</sup> Not to imitate their work but translate and transport it into architecture. They were more like allies, people who, through their own investigations, were able to help further a discourse that was specifically architectural. Contrary to what people

thought at the time, there was a crossover between art, architecture, and other disciplines. I think the discourse was really about architecture, but architecture in an expanded sense whereby the movement of bodies in space was just as important as the space itself. Hence the definition of architecture as space, movement, and what happens in it, that is, the action or what I later called the "event." In a sense, Space, Event, Movement—SEM—as a semantic dimension of what architecture really meant, was always based not on a homogeneous definition of form but a heterogeneous definition of these three very different things. There was also a lot of discussion about this in the twenties, when the relationship between architecture, the theater, and film was much closer than it is now—now it is a forced relation. There is nothing I hate more than those "collaborations."

**JAE:** To pick up a little on your history, the work at the AA when you were engaging in actual embodied staging of scripts in existing architecture—sometimes from a literary text—what was the pedagogical objective there?

**BT:** The one device that I used very consciously was that of trying to get out of architecture, which is always determined by a program. There is no architecture without a program—most of the time, the program is a clumsy list of square meters defining banal activities like the bathroom, kitchen, living room, dining room, and so on. In reality, much of the spaces with those names have been determined by culture and history. So I asked why not go directly to things that precede those clumsy lists of square meters? Why not give students a short story, which already hints at the making of spaces but without being literal about it? So I would take a text by Jorge Luis Borges, Edgar Allan Poe, or Herman Hesse, etc. eventually going to relatively complex texts like James Joyce. And whether it was at the AA or Princeton, the students were to try and invent a building based on their interpretation of the story. It was interesting because it was allowing us to avoid the

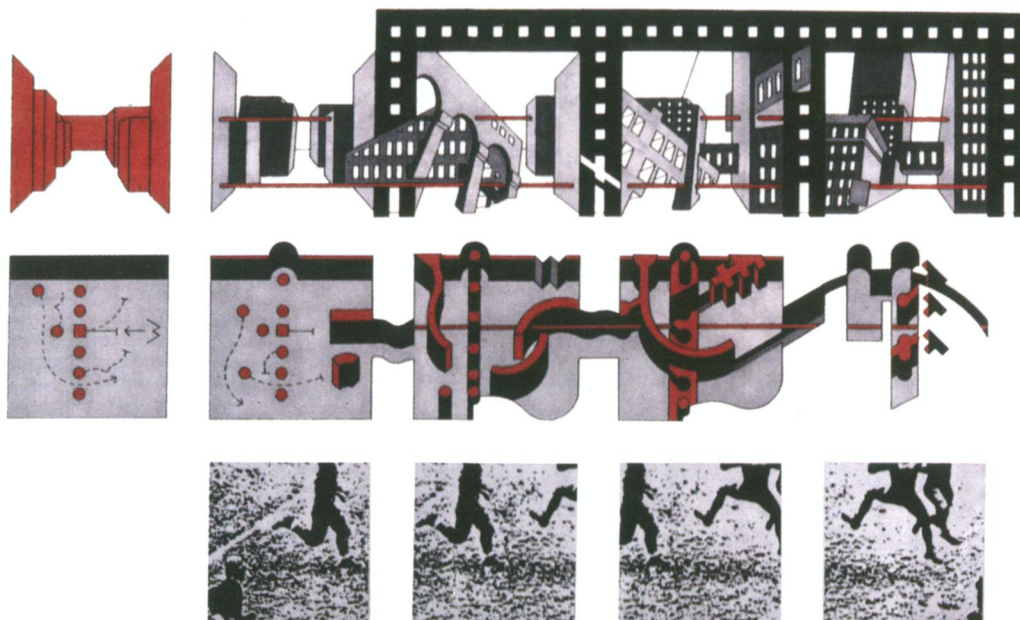
preconceived ideas of what a building should look like. In the course of this, the students were encouraged not to use the traditional tools of plan, section, elevations but the tools of documentation, documenting the movement of their bodies in space. Another example was to use the tool of photographs to talk about what is going on in a space. Today, we would use electronic media much more. We were simply trying to deal specifically with what architecture is supposed to be—space and use, space, and its experience. As I would always say, concept and experience is what makes architecture. There is one part of architecture that is highly abstract and one part that is highly experiential, and much of the work that I was encouraging the students to do was to bring these together in whatever form they would discover.

**JAE:** And to follow up on that, when we look at your architecture advertisements, there is a staging of the photograph accompanied by a text that implies or suggests a certain experience of it. Was there a shift there from saying that one cannot continue to work in the realm of embodiment and experience and that architecture works in representation, works in communicating through representations; hence, one must move experience into representation?

**BT:** Before I answer, you have used a word that I would like you to define (you have used it several times)—the word "embodiment"? What do you understand by "embodiment"?

**JAE:** Embodiment is the perception of space fundamentally through the actions of the body—its corporality and materiality within a particular context. It is less ideational or conceptual and more about the body's interaction in the space, fundamentally contributing to its understanding of that space. That is how we interpret the distinction you make between concept and experience, where the concept is projected onto what we want to do in space and experience is what negotiates that through our physical presence.

**BT:** Okay, it is interesting because I feel pretty comfortable with everything that you are saying but



2. The Manhattan Transcripts.

the word I feel uneasy with. Without looking at the actual etymological definition of the word, “embodiment” does not mean the actual making into a body; in other words, if you have an idea and you embody this idea, you materialize the idea. I am not interested in taking an idea and materializing it, maybe to give it a materiality, yes, but that is different from embodiment. The issue for example with the *Advertisements for Architecture* is simply developing a body of ideas, which you are trying to communicate not only to others but also to yourself. It is really important that by stating these ideas, you can take them to the next step. Depending on how you state them, they have a slightly different life. If I draw something, I do not quite say it in the same way as if I write about it. It might be the same object, but the logic of drawing is quite different from the logic of writing. I may write an article, I may write the same thing as a manifesto, I may use contemporary means of information using the rhetoric of advertising. This introduces another dimension of the words juxtaposed with the image, which mean totally different things without this juxtaposition. We are exploring the idea that architecture is about space, movement, and the event through different means. Every one of the *Advertisements for Architecture* is a way to continue this investigation through a variety of means. Eventually, there is a moment when—after finishing the *Manhattan Transcripts* (Figure 2)—I have to try it in real life. I enter a competition and, instead of inventing the script, I have the script from somewhere else. And by chance, I win that competition, which is another story all together. The point, in terms of this investigation, is working with different means.

**JAE:** So you are saying that there is a different means between exploring space through the lived body—that is the body experiencing it—and the mediatized performance through film, which is also really important in your work.

**BT:** At the time, I was working one step back from that. Film-like architecture brings together concepts and experiences. I would start earlier saying that there is no architecture without some level of abstraction. It is not exactly the same as going through the forest running and jumping; there are a lot of other dimensions to it. Architecture is very abstract; it belongs to the realm of the most sophisticated intelligence of mankind, which is not quite the same as an immediate experience of the five senses. So by bringing together the opposing forms of intellectualized thought in its abstract dimensions, and the most pleasurable form of experiential perception, something interesting seems to be happening. The discourse of architecture has always touched upon these things. We all know that Gothic cathedrals are extraordinarily sophisticated in a mathematical sense and at the same time very powerful in an experiential sense, hence providing an inherent definition of architecture. Then, you look at other disciplines like film or art that have similar problems and you learn from them. It allows you to take yourself to the next step. This notion of import and export between disciplines is always very interesting. I have never been one for autonomy.

**JAE:** But you are not one for collaboration?

**BT:** No.

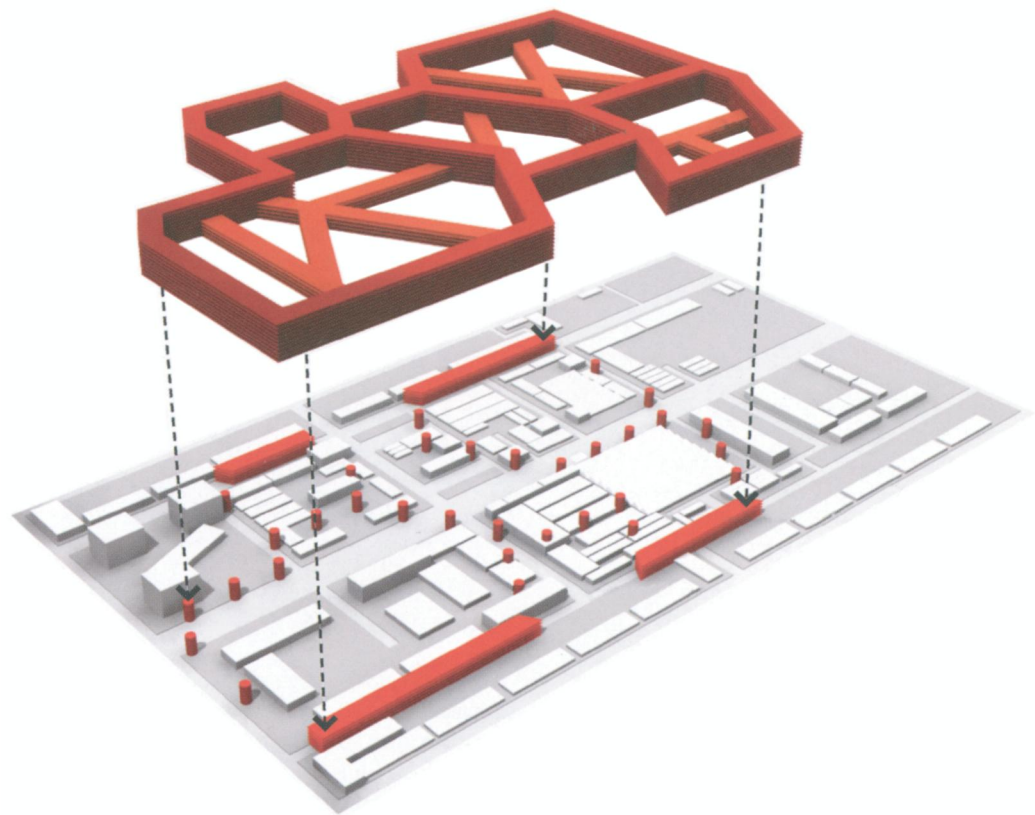
**JAE:** And why is that?

**BT:** I do not like the word to start with. I do not necessarily like the idea of two people coming together with their autonomous disciplines and starting to bring them together. I am much more interested in seeing how with your different sensibilities you might expand your search into an idea, but I really have a problem with the notion of disciplinary fields. I know they exist, but collaborations always implied a static means of bringing together the static order of one kind with the static order of another. And that was exactly what I was against. Instead, I was very interested in crossovers in mixed media. Collaboration sounded very much like the way the Museum of Modern Art is organized—you have a department of sculpture, department of painting, department of drawing. I do not believe in that because if the department of architecture collaborates with the department of prints, it is not that they are going to generate a new concept of say . . . archiprint.

**JAE:** One thing that interests us in terms of performance/architecture is that architecture can be an active force. You have also spoken about activism, spatial activism from the sixties. We noted that your recent work—the Beijing project (Figures 3 and 4) and Athens (Figures 5 and 6) projects—are indeed activist projects in relation to how they deal discursively with the problematics of site and history. Can you talk a bit more about your work’s relation to activism?

**BT:** Again, I would not use the word “activism.” It is the same as with the word “embodiment.” I understand the word “activism” as a militant expression. Let us put it this way . . . if I belong to a political party, I can either register myself as a Democrat or I can be an activist, in other words, a militant. It is slightly different in the case of architecture, which I utilize to reveal certain hidden conditions and, taking advantage of these conditions, turn them to the advantage of either architecture—the end purpose is to have a great building—or potentially to effect the society in which the building is located. If I can do

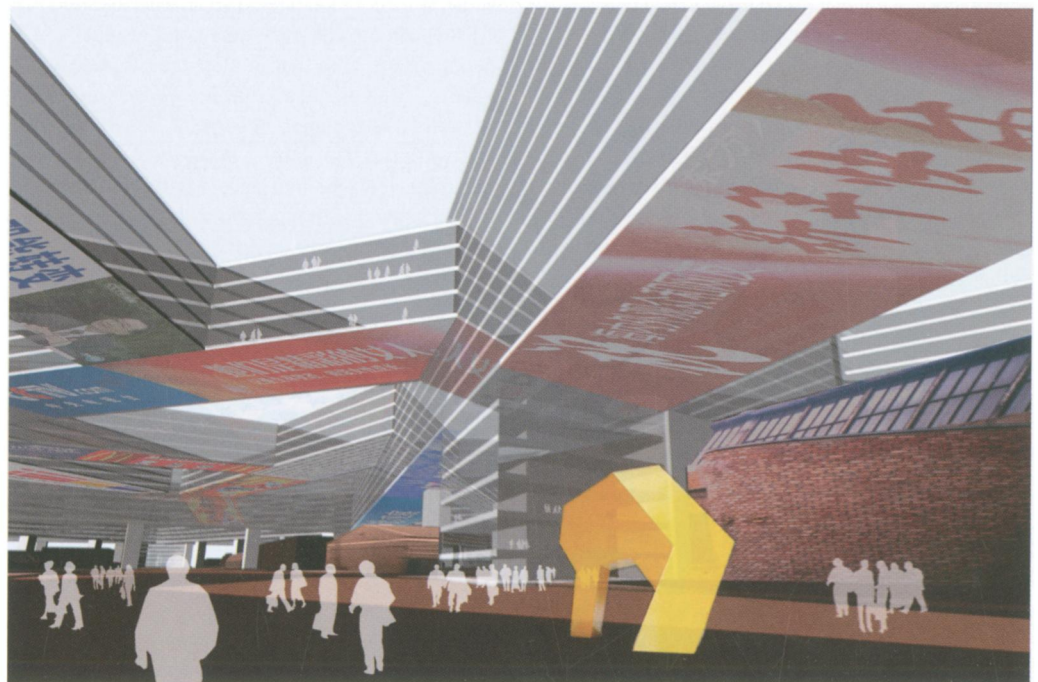
both, then I am very excited, and it happens more often than we think. The two examples that you give are exactly that. In both cases (Beijing and Athens), you have a site that is simply impossible in terms of what people want to put on it, in this particular case for very similar reasons physically and very different reasons socially and politically. Physically the ground is already very busy; in one case, there are already existing buildings; in the other case, there exist archaeological ruins. They are totally different socially and politically because in the first case, in Beijing, the state wants to demolish those buildings and replace them with something entirely different and, of course, in Athens, they want to keep the ruins. Physically both projects challenge how I can put a building in the interstices of what is forbidden. In the case of Beijing, it is in order to keep a public space and combine it with another economic model that is required, that is, ten million square feet of housing. In Athens, it is about preserving an important piece of archaeological history and combining it with a museum, which celebrates other moments in history. So this means that the starting points are accepting certain difficulties, seeing them not as negative but as positive. Then saying “how am I going to do it?” leads to a certain architecture . . . to a very good building . . . after all I do love architecture and I do like to build. But when you combine it with a further agenda—which in the case of Beijing is to provide a new form of public space in relation to a large community where people live and to do something the Chinese had never thought possible, which was to combine the new with the old rather than destroy and start again—then architecture is beyond simply a building. In the case of Athens, I know that if the building is good enough, it may succeed in doing what thirty years of diplomatic negotiations did not succeed in doing—making it inevitable that the (Elgin) Marbles are brought back. This double thing happens more often than we think.

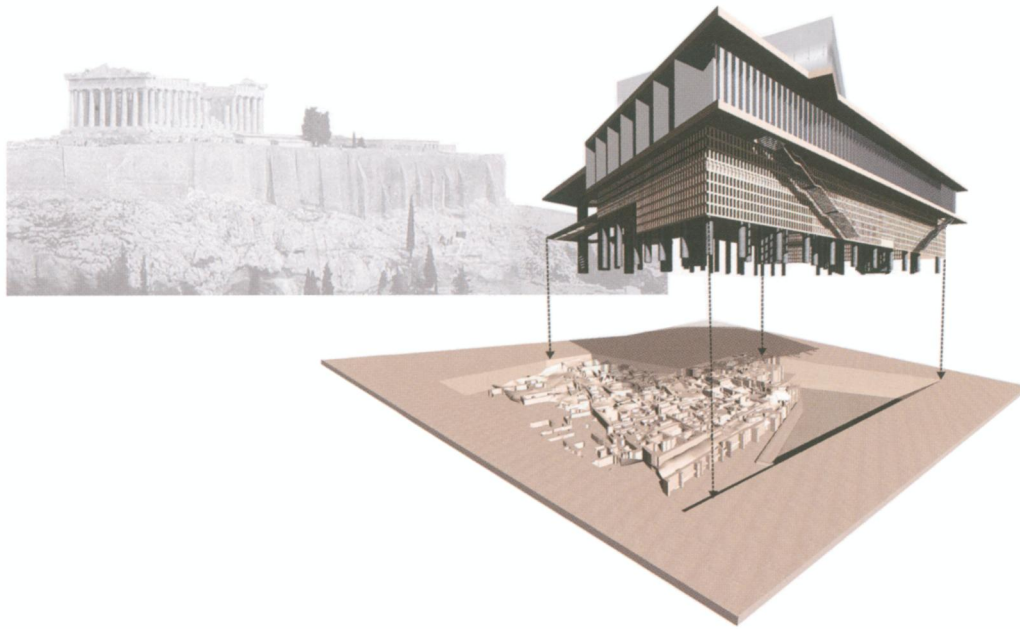


**JAE:** So in relation to this notion of activism, is it more architecture and its practice as an active force rather than an activist force?

**BT:** Yes, maybe I prefer the term active force as opposed to activist force. All the “ists” worry me. Just as I am for reform I worry about reformists, I am for

4. Factory 798, Beijing, perspective.





5. New Acropolis Museum, Athens.

context but I hate contextualists, I have always been interested in certain dimensions of deconstruction but I hate the term deconstructivist. Modern, modernist goes along the same way. Architecture is not about form or the knowledge of form but is a form of knowledge. Hence, it can have an effect on society. I am learning about the world we are in through architecture. I have that specific knowledge, just like mathematicians and physicists who tell us about the world we live in through that particular corner of their brain. I believe I can do the same thing with that knowledge in architecture. So inevitably at one moment, you may have influence, even power. Architects have far more power than they think they have, for the simple reason that they have a mode of thinking that allows them to bring things together that others cannot. In other words, to get back to the beginning of the discussion, they work from the most abstract and conceptual to the most physical and experiential. In this respect, there are plenty of projects—sometimes they fail miserably, as in Ground Zero, and sometimes they do change things.

**JAE:** Much of your discourse is centered on the event, also the multiplicity of the event, and the idea of in-between spaces that generate productive encounters in ways that centralized space cannot. In bringing performance and architecture together, the most overt space of the event is the auditorium (concert hall, etc.). How do you apply your ideas to such event-spaces?

**BT:** Regarding the space of performance (theaters, etc.), you can easily go back to the history of the last four hundred years where almost everything has been said. Today, another dimension

has taken place through information conveyed by the media, the Internet, and so on. Hence, there is another virtual space that is part of the reading of the work, which is quite different. But I have discovered, having built two very large concert halls (for political gatherings and sports events as well as music), that certain concepts can be developed, which would not have been developed a hundred years ago (Figures 7 and 8). The notion of the double envelope is one that comes simultaneously from an architectural and from an ecological sensibility, which I was exploring again with that notion of juxtaposition. The in-between and residual spaces are the ones that interest me the most because, as an architect, they are always the ones that you have complete freedom to do what you want with. But you want to make them a space of encounters—maybe unexpected encounters—thereby dealing with my interest in the architect's responsibility to a certain notion of public space at a time of increased privatization. Through in-between space where interaction takes place, I could embody that notion of public space.

**JAE:** Do you think it is possible to think of those in-between spaces and these moments of encounter as a form of research that can then be applied to the more proper spaces?

**BT:** Yes, I think so. Whether you can formalize the research, to say that there is a cause and effect relationship between the research and the way you want to apply it, is more difficult. It is not impossible.

**JAE:** Because spaces like concert halls, theaters, and opera houses are very resistant to change.

**BT:** Oh absolutely . . . the space of the hall itself, yes. They have very specific requirements, like a certain sound quality, a certain absorption, certain reflections, you have to empty the room in ninety seconds, etc. etc. The chairs have to be strong enough for a rock festival yet comfortable enough when you have a classical concert. These objective requirements are very strict but not too difficult to handle. I still feel I have complete freedom to do anything I want while respecting every one of the constraints. When it gets harder is when you know you can do something quite intelligent by using asymmetry in the hall and then somebody says that in the contract of certain artists, they refuse to sing in an asymmetrical room. So we have to redesign it, otherwise the city would not get its multimillion dollars in euro grant, etc. Hence, this type of thing restricts some of the freedom you want to have in those halls. However, there are some places where you have complete freedom in all access and circulation areas, although problems arise such as when I cannot have a curved space because a security guy requires six cameras with straight laser beams watching the whole building. But architecture is the art of managing constraints and subverting them, which is what we do all the time.

**JAE:** Another interest in your recent work is with the architectural surface. Currently, there is a lot of discussion about the surface of architecture and its performative role in space making. What is your take on the "architectural surface"?

**BT:** For many of my colleagues, who often do very good work and make great discoveries, the surface is a decorative surface. They are fascinated by a certain way that Muslim architecture dealt with the articulation of the surface at a microscale. In my particular case, it is back to the definition of architecture as vectors and envelopes. If I want to say that architecture is about space and movement (i.e., activity in that space), which is defined by an envelope, then invariably I have to talk about the surface of that envelope. I much prefer dealing with words like surface and envelope rather than

6. New Acropolis Museum, Athens, under construction.  
 7. Rouen Concert Hall, Rouen, France (1998–2001).

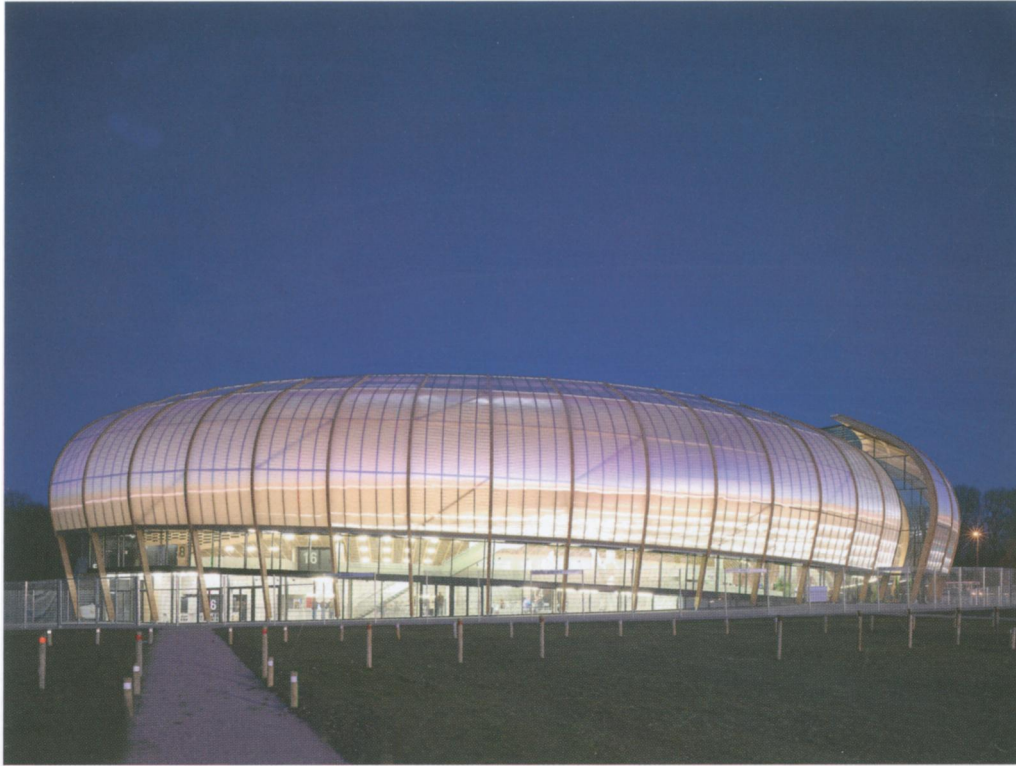
façade because I do not want to fall into the expected. So you start to look at the surface of that envelope as a deep surface. It is not a visual surface, it is a surface that has a materiality, and to me, one of the characterizations of architecture is that its materialization has an effect on the concept. Regarding the two concert halls, we finished a concert hall in Rouen about five to seven years ago that has a steel outer envelope and a concrete inner envelope with, of course, the movement vectors in between. I then won a competition to do another hall with exactly the same program, and it made a lot of sense to use the same concept. But then I said, hey I am not going to do the same building twice . . . let us take one variable and completely change it, which is the materials of the building. So this becomes a discussion on context, with a fascination to see what happens when you have exactly the same program, exactly the same concept, but you simply change the materials. You have a building that, instead of being steel and concrete, is translucent polycarbonate and wood but is the same building.

**JAE:** Formally as well?

**BT:** Up to a point, because the respective topography of both sites made us run the ramps and stairs slightly differently in the two projects, yet the organization of the building—the concept again (I rarely talk about form) is the same—as a theater, an amphitheater, a semicircle, a sort of torus with curved walls and with a double envelope—and structurally similar with large spans, etc. in both projects. The issue then becomes changing entirely the nature of the surface, which, for me, has a certain depth. If I change from solid steel envelope to a polycarbonate one, through which the light shines inside, then it becomes something else. This shows that words are important because you have to be careful that they do not block you. That is why I rarely use the word “surface.”

**JAE:** Comparing that to your ZKM project, which was an LED screen, now it is possible to do such large screen surfaces.





8. Limoges Concert Hall, Limoges, France (2003–2006).

**BT:** Yes, it is possible now but then it would have been outrageously expensive. About ten years after ZKM, Toyo Ito was doing something like that and now it is everywhere. You have a building here in New York whose façade (other than some strip windows) is entirely advertising. Unfortunately, it is not very interesting, but it could have been. So we return to a discussion about the nature of the envelope as static or otherwise, and we get back to the event.

**JAE:** We note you did not in our conversation use the terms “performativity”?

**BT:** Performativity is something else. The performance of buildings is again another discussion that would have taken us somewhere else. In terms of computer technology, the word has different connotations as well. I have used only the one, the relationship of the movement of the body and space in an art practice. But you will have somebody else talk about that.

#### Notes

1. Bernard Tschumi, “Spaces and Events,” *The Discourse of Events* (London: Architectural Association, 1983) reproduced in Bernard Tschumi,

*Questions of Space* (London: Architectural Association, 1990), pp. 87–95. On the mandate of his architectural circle in the 1970s, Tschumi writes, “Our work argued that architecture—its social relevance and formal invention—could not be dissociated from the events that ‘happened’ in it.” Ibid, p. 88.

2. Jacques Derrida, “Point de Folie—Maintenant L’Architecture,” in Neil Leach, ed., *Re-Thinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 333. In his analysis of Parc de la Villette, Derrida links Tschumi’s “architecture of the event” to J.L. Austin’s performative speech acts as something that performs rather than describes. Ibid, p. 335.

3. Bernard Tschumi, *Event-Cities: Praxis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), Bernard Tschumi, *Event-Cities 2* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), and Bernard Tschumi, *Event-Cities 3: Concept vs. Context vs. Content* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

4. Rouen Concert Hall, Rouen, France (1998–2001) and Limoges Concert Hall, Limoges, France (2003–2006).

5. RoseLee Goldberg is author, critic, curator, and current director of PERFORMA, a multidisciplinary arts organization and New York–based performance biennale. Her seminal book on *Performance Art* (first published in 1975) is a key text in the visual and performing arts fields: RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001).

6. Robert Wilson is an American avant-garde stage director who graduated with a BFA in architecture (Pratt Institute, 1965) and went on to practice as an internationally acclaimed “theater artist,” working as a choreographer, sculptor, performer, painter, and scenographer, as well as a sound, video, and lighting designer. Lucinda Childs, who has collaborated with Wilson, began her career as a choreographer and performer with the Judson Dance Theater in New York before forming her own dance company in 1973. She is a leading choreographer in modern dance and opera.