

ARCHITECTURE BEYOND ARCHITECTURE

**Cathryn Dwyre and Chris Perry
in conversation with Bernard Tschumi**

Bernard Tschumi is widely recognized as one of today's foremost architects. First known as a theorist, he drew attention to his innovative architectural practice, in 1983, when he won the prestigious competition for the Parc de La Villette. Since then, he has made a reputation for groundbreaking designs that include the new Acropolis Museum in Athens and Le Fresnoy National Studio for the Contemporary Arts in France. Very early in his career, Tschumi collaborated with RoseLee Goldberg on the exhibition *A Space: A Thousand Words* at the Royal College of Art, which brought together artists and architects as well as students and faculty from both the RCA, where Goldberg directed the school's art gallery, and the Architectural Association, where Tschumi taught design. As evidenced in the conversation, it was precisely Tschumi's exposure to such interdisciplinary exchanges early in his career that served to inform a radical rethinking of architecture. The many books devoted to Tschumi's writings and architectural practice include a comprehensive monograph, titled *Architecture Concepts: Red is Not a Color*, the four-part *Event-Cities* series, and *The Manhattan Transcripts*. Tschumi has taught architecture at a range of institutions including the Architectural Association in London, Princeton University, and The Cooper Union in New York. He was dean of the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation at Columbia University from 1988 to 2003, where he is currently a professor. Tschumi's work has been exhibited in solo shows at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Venice Architecture Biennale, and the Pompidou Center in Paris. This conversation took place in New York on March 12, 2014.

Our questions focus on two general topic areas that we see as forming a bridge between performance art and your particular approach to architecture. The first concerns modes of transdisciplinary practice and the second addresses issues related to movement and temporality. We'd like to start by having you talk about the ways in which the London art scene in the 1970s, and your collaborations with RoseLee Goldberg at the time, influenced your thinking about architecture.

I had always been interested in some of the early Bauhaus experiments in theatre. Later I discovered Artaud as he also touched on a theoretical approach to the body in space. For me, Artaud was one figure among several, surrealism, for example, and

[Frederick] Kiesler, Duchamp, and Georges Bataille, of course. So I would say that to answer your question, much of what I did in London was trying to reconcile two aspects of my work as an architect, what I would call the concept and the experience. One part of the discourse I was interested in was intensely political and the other part was indeed quite intrigued by the art scene. The AA [Architectural Association of London] at the time was quite close to Saint Martin's [School of Art], so there was already some interaction. Also RoseLee Goldberg, then at the Royal College of Art, with whom I organized an exhibition called *A Space: A Thousand Words* at the RCA in 1975, helped organize a series of seminars at the AA that included a number of artists. I was trying to get to architecture without addressing architecture frontally, but rather through its margins; hence, the combination of a fairly theoretical approach, which I put under the umbrella of concept, and a more experiential approach, which was loosely related to the art scene.

You moved to New York in the mid-1970s because of your interest in the art scene where writers and artists were involved in real exchanges. You've mentioned how the only venues to show your work at the time were alternative spaces in the art world, a situation that recalls Philip Glass writing about his early years as an experimental composer in New York when he faced a very similar predicament. What was your involvement with the New York art scene, specifically performance art, and how did it influence your thinking about architecture?

I'll just add one thing. There was another reason for me to come to New York: it's the city. I think that was a fascination for my generation. We did not quite believe in architecture anymore and the city was really important, the city as a phenomenon of density and of excitement. I'll give you an example. When Trisha Brown develops a piece [*Roof Piece*] using the roofs of Manhattan where she's not using the white space of the gallery, but rather the water towers and the fire stairs as the protagonist of a piece, what she does is a rejection of the values that were carried, say, fifteen years earlier. In architecture at the time, there were people who were still designing white buildings inspired by early Le Corbusier, so the word "architecture" was very tricky to use, which is why the word "space" was important. What was happening then was intensely stimulating but very much part of an overall questioning.

*Having admired the collaborative work of Philip Glass and Robert Wilson for some time, we were finally able to see *Einstein on the Beach* at BAM when it was restaged in 2012. You referenced that work in your lecture last year at Pratt Institute and in your book *Architecture Concepts* as well. How did that production in particular influence your thinking about architecture?*

In one of the opening sequences of *Einstein on the Beach* you have Lucinda Childs walking in a diagonal across the stage and she does it again, and again, and again, to such a degree that at one moment her movement becomes a solid, becomes literally a wall, and to me that was an extraordinarily direct experience. In other words, I was quite aware of some of the statements of Oskar Schlemmer, who says that dance is like carving butter with a knife, carving space. That did interest me.

It seems that there is only one time in your years of being in proximity to the art world that you performed yourself, with Brian Eno.

We were two people who enjoyed each other's company and decided to do a piece together, but I'm not going to claim any sort of historical importance to this! The idea was that I would give a talk and I would start the talk and Brian Eno would be in the background on his synthesizer while I would just be talking. It would be background music at first and then it would slowly be as loud as my voice. And then I would speak not so loudly and finally at one moment the music would take over and my voice would be drowned.

Were you reading from a text?

I don't think I was reading, no. He was just playing and at one moment, when my voice started to be drowned by the music, someone in the audience shouted from the back, "Stop the music so we can think!" and then immediately someone else said "Stop the talking so we can listen!"

Which was probably more or less what the two of you were after! Eno's someone who is presumably a kindred spirit as he's very much interested in the crossover between disciplines, namely art and music.

Yeah.

Returning to the concept of "space" and the development that allowed you to disregard architectural traditions and instead connect with other forms outside of architecture also using the term "space," such as music, dance, and performance art, how do you distinguish this conception of space from a more conventional use of the term in architecture?

Indeed there is a conventional use of the word "space" in architecture. You could write a book on that, and some people have. For example in German, "raum" means room, as well, i.e., space is defined as enclosure, while in other languages space is diffuse or everywhere.

Space as open-ended.

Yeah, totally. And, so you probably are familiar with my publication *Questions of Space*, where I went through different uses of the word as it appears in different contexts, but mostly philosophical contexts, which ask the question "What is space?" The idea of space is something that permeates the discourse of many different disciplines, not only music, dance, and architecture, but also literature and film. So I was consciously looking at those different disciplines, although I don't like using the word "discipline," but those different *fields*, to see to which extent one could get a different understanding of what one was doing. I would not say that it was particular to a certain form of art or a certain form of architecture, but rather it was a much larger question.

Just quickly, your preference for using the term “field” instead of the term “discipline,” is this because “discipline” suggests something more definitive or restrictive; “field” is open while “discipline” is closed?

I think you can leave it at that. And you have to be very careful, by the way, not to turn performance art into a discipline.

Precisely because it's a form of questioning disciplinary boundaries.

Exactly.

In your early theoretical project Advertisements for Architecture, you appropriated the medium of advertising to produce what you have referred to as “architectural propaganda.” You’ve talked previously about parallels with the work of artists like Barbara Kruger, whereby a system of communication designed to reinforce meaning is used instead to question it. How did this project originate? What was its general reception within the art and architecture scene at the time?

Again, I would say that the use of words as a complement or as something that would parallel images was interesting to me then and still interests me today. In other words, to try to qualify a space through a statement or to question it, is in a sense a device which was used in performance art, for example, and was also used by people who were interested in pop imagery and advertisements in the city. So, of course, Barbara Kruger, but you had artists like Victor Burgin in England who also used that device, and you can even go back to the Situationists. Again, nothing happens completely out of the blue. In my particular case, I was interested in the idea that architecture was not only what was built, even if one was somehow referring to it, but that you could do architecture through a book, you could do it through a drawing, a general claim that the history of architecture has been as important in terms of what was not built as it was in terms of what was built.

The *Advertisements for Architecture* were a way of using a format that was trying to address a question to a larger audience than just architects. When I would write an article for a magazine, I would always ask the editors to let me publish ads. There was an issue of *Architectural Design* in London where I wrote an article called “The Pleasure of Architecture” and I had negotiated that the back cover would be one of the ads. Of course, I couldn’t get the front cover as they were really into historicist postmodernism, so they had a Leon Krier cover, and then at the last moment I think they got cold feet to have my ad on the back cover. So they put some nostalgic watercolor rendering instead and put the ad on the inside back cover.

What was the primary distribution for the Advertisements for Architecture?

At first it was whenever I published an article. I did it for a Japanese magazine. I did it for *Oppositions*, which was a very good, serious history/theory architecture magazine, and in various other architecture publications. Then I had the idea of turning

the advertisements into postcards, so several thousand were made and sold. I have no idea who was buying them and who they were sending them to, but there was a little postcard shop on Spring and Broadway, I believe, that was selling postcards of all kinds, artist postcards as well.

So it was in part about expanding the discipline, or expanding the reach of architecture?

I didn't even think in terms of that. I go back to the city, the city both in real physical terms as well as an analogy to something that has a lot of unpredictable dimensions. For example, if I take *The Manhattan Transcripts*, during the first two episodes, I was really testing as I was drawing. It's only by the last two episodes that I knew ahead of time what I would be doing. So there was an unpredictable dimension to the early work. For example with the thirty-two-foot-long drawing of the second episode, I was never sure where I was going and what it would look like. I'll be showing that work-in-progress drawing at the Centre Pompidou, the first draft version of it. MoMA has the final version, but with the first version there is much scratching and erasing, because there were no computers at the time. So you would do it all by hand and you would erase and draw again and the paper would get really thin.

In terms of situating your work within a history specific to architecture, Cedric Price took an interdisciplinary approach to design in the 1960s, privileging the dynamic and unpredictable qualities of use over more traditional preoccupations with form. How has Price influenced your thinking?

Sometimes you can tell a long story through a couple of anecdotes. Around 1967 I had seen Cedric's work being published, and as one of the student representatives at the ETH [Swiss Federal Institute of Technology] in Zurich I wanted to have him invited for a lecture since we were allowed to suggest names. But the response by the people running the architecture department was, "No you can't, it's not architecture!" So I would say, "Well if you think it's not architecture then that's a very good reason to invite him, right?"

Just as a side note, Grahame Shane told us a very similar story with Price coming to Columbia in the eighties, before you became dean, and no one wanted to introduce him so Grahame ended up doing the introduction himself.

Right! Cedric had a major influence on me, beginning with my thesis project at the ETH. Amusingly enough it is inside an existing building, so it combines the old and the new, which I think in retrospect is quite interesting as one did not do this type of thing at the time.

You ended up doing something very similar with your Le Fresnoy project in the 1990s.

Which, amusingly enough, some people have said, "Oh it's a very Cedric Price building!" And so I was really interested in what he was doing because of his ability to develop serious architectural thinking that went beyond simply the idea of form

and could touch upon other issues. For instance, how you contain an oil spill in the ocean. I saw him a few times and eventually I offered my services to work for him and he said, "OK, as soon as I get that job you'll be working on it!" He never got the job, so I ended up teaching at the AA. One morning after I saw Cedric, I went to the AA. I had my little portfolio of things and I was sitting in the member's room and there were a few people there. I was showing my work and there's Peter Cook [of Archigram] who sees my portfolio and says that it's sort of interesting and a few weeks later he invited me to a review.

Price looked beyond traditional methods of architectural representation in an attempt to describe his "architecture of performance." Similarly, Lawrence Halprin appropriated music and dance notation to describe human activity over time. Your early theoretical project The Manhattan Transcripts also borrowed notational systems from choreography in addition to visual methods from film as a means of describing time. Can you talk about how these works evolved? What were the influences of film, dance, and performance art on the development of your notation systems?

I would say that's a central question now, given that this is a time when we are using modes of representation that are prepackaged by computer software whereby we all share the same visual language. I'll put both the art scene and the architecture scene in the same bag when I say that for generations there has been a direct correlation between what one says and how one says it. In other words, if you drew an architectural project, the way you drew it was quite different if you were Bob Venturi or if you were Peter Eisenman, while today we are all using the same hyper-realist representation. The reason why I start with the present is that when a critical process claimed there is no concept without experience, that there is no architecture without movement, the implication is that in saying it you then had to draw it, and drawing it implied not quite being satisfied with the conventions of architectural representation, i.e., the plan, the section, the elevation, the perspective, the axonometric, etc. So immediately you test other things. You don't necessarily know where you're going, and because it's not simple enough to put little dotted arrows on the drawing you try to test out a number of different possibilities instead.

I think I defined the issue by saying that architecture is made of what happens in it. In other words, the program and eventually the word "event" came about, i.e., the movement and the space, which was about notation. But notation to me is a generic term that I would still apply today when you use a certain type of computer language because it's also a mode of notation. The advantage of not having predictable codes but having to invent the codes means an incredible process of discovery.

The discoveries you made with the Transcripts eventually converted into your winning competition entry for the Parc de la Villette in Paris, where you deployed methods of framing and sequencing borrowed from film as a means of designing the "episodes" of the Cinematic Promenade within the park. How do you view this act of translation?

Again, there's so much that went into the Parc de la Villette that we could talk forever, but I'll talk now about the idea of sequence, the idea of movement, which was fundamental to the way the park was organized. The *folies* themselves were about a discontinuous set of transformational sequences while the Cinematic Promenade had more continuity. Its idea was to make it into a random act, literally taking a piece of string, a la Duchamp, in order to mark its configuration. The Cinematic Promenade was organized as a sequence of frames. It allowed us to bring people from other fields working together in a sequence. I was very critical of the landscape profession at the time so I thought it was more interesting to bring a philosopher, an architect, or a musician to invent a new way to look at the idea of nature; nature being of course an entirely cultural artifact.

Jacques Derrida used his concept of "transarchitecture" to describe La Villette.

Yes, you had a few prefixes at the time, de-, dis-, ex-, trans-. I talked about "trans-programming." In terms of Derrida, he's someone who was raising a number of questions, questions on the nature of, and here I would use the word "discipline." That's probably why he was extremely receptive to my questioning as an architect, and generous about it; questions, for example, about the binary structure of thinking, which in architecture is always figure-ground, interior-exterior, etc.

Your 20th Century Follies project from the seventies explored the concept of "useless architecture," which you distinguish from architecture as well as from art. This suggests a design approach that avoids what Derrida refers to as the "axiomatic expectations of architecture," thus operating within architecture while simultaneously without it. How do you differentiate between the 20th Century Follies and the folies at Parc de la Villette?

It's good that you mentioned the *20th Century Follies* because while I was doing the *Screenplays*, the *Transcripts*, and so on, I got a call from a curator who had seen my show at Artists Space [1978] who asked me if I might be interested in doing what was called at the time a "site-specific installation." I was interested in trying now to turn into three dimensions something that I had been developing only through the means of drawings. So the first folly was constructed at Castle Clinton and then there were several others, and some that were never built. Altogether I think four were made. The reason I called them follies was at the time not at all in reference to the follies of the eighteenth century, or maybe it was but totally in a secondary manner. It was simply that I didn't want to call them sculpture as I'm not a sculptor. I was also very interested in the idea of madness and a philosophical dimension that was also very much a part of structuring the research, or the search in my case; it was a search more than it was research. So Foucault's book *Madness and Civilization* was unbelievably important and, in general, the notion of reason, which has a strong place in the history of architecture. So it was playing on the ambiguity of the word, *folie* in French, which is the same: madness and folly.

How do you regard our contemporary moment, and whether or not any of the issues we've been discussing, the practice of questioning and of looking outside of architecture as a means of rethinking it, are still an active part of contemporary architectural discourse?

I don't want to use the word uncritical or post-critical or non-critical. Let me address the question differently, namely suggesting that architecture is part of the construction of ideas as well as of society, the construction of concept as well as of materials. Architecture is not a pure art. Architecture is about concepts that need to be materialized, and only then is it about form or about what it looks like, but that would be another discussion.