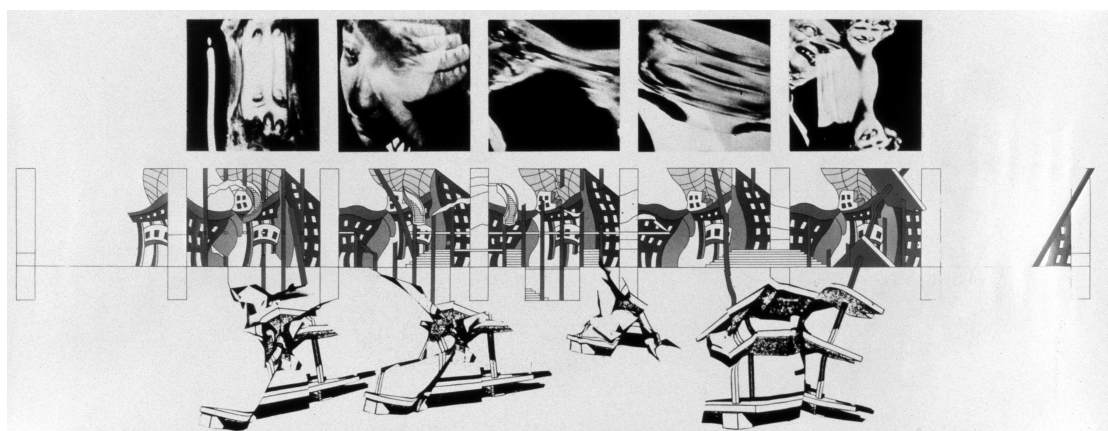




Bernard Tschumi.
Screenplays, 1977. Excerpt.

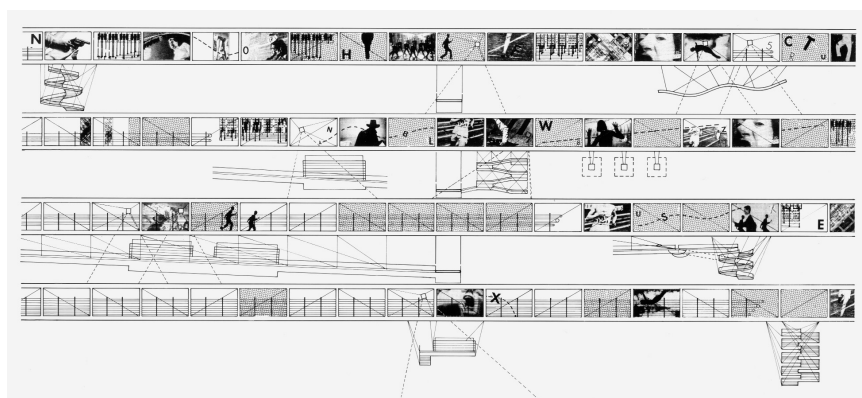
Avant-propos: **Bernard Tschumi in Conversation** **with Enrique Walker**

Enrique Walker: Your work set out from a new definition of architecture based on the confrontation of space and its use. Traditionally these two components were seen as reciprocal; that is, in a regime of mutual correspondence. Since your early essays and theoretical projects, you have systematically aimed at unveiling their essential disjunction and have to that end used the term *event* instead of *function* (which was largely discredited as a residue of functionalist doctrines). Events are by definition unexpected, irreducible to repetition, but by the same token, beyond the reach of the architect. Take the barricades of Paris in May '68, the demonstrations at Tiananmen Square, the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The architect is condemned to operate with just one of the two terms of the equation . . .

Bernard Tschumi: Let me start by taking the list that you have just given. In every one of the cases you mentioned, there is an architectural component. The event is qualified by the particularity of the space. And turning the equation the other way around: the space is qualified by the specificity of the social condition which led to its *détournement*. As you suggested, it is important to distinguish the notion of event from that of use, function, or program. Historically, the latter have been used to designate a repetitive, predictable sequence of activities. The architect can then take advantage of certain particularities of a given program, use it to his or her advantage. We could have that conversation: how to redefine or redesign a program. But an event is something quite different because it is not necessarily predictable. The event itself is not something we can design.

EW: So to what extent is your definition of architecture as space and event operative? In other words, what is your goal when tackling the design of a project, given that events are by definition beyond the architect's grasp?

BT: I would say that my work is about designing the conditions, rather than conditioning the design. In other words, if I take a certain spatial condition and combine it with a certain programmatic condition in a certain way, that relation might help me design the conditions for an event to occur. But ultimately that will always be an unknown because events are not predictable in any way. Any



concentration of activities—that is, one activity rubbing up against another—implies a certain type of conflict. Most of these entail no danger per se, but as soon as you start confronting them something is triggered. So in this respect the design strategy always seeks to emphasize the movement of bodies through the building. It always starts with this sort of dialectic between the movement vectors and the static spaces.

EW: The uprisings of May '68 were a particularly influential precedent to your definition. In fact, the very term “event” may be traced back to *les événements de soixante-huit*, as people used to call them. Would you say the definition of architecture as a nonreciprocal regime of space and event stemmed from a post-'68 skepticism vis-à-vis the capacity of architecture to transform society?

BT: I do not believe that architecture can change society, though it can either accelerate a certain evolution or slow it down. In other words, the architect can help to initiate or accelerate a set of actions but cannot determine them. And that's all there is to it. In fact, who can determine whether or not a certain activity will take place in a building? The architect may be there in the beginning, but ten years later there is someone else. If I take the three examples you gave—the barricades of Paris in '68, the demonstrations at Tiananmen Square, and the fall of the Berlin Wall—those societies changed entirely between the moment each of those architectural artifacts was built and the moment these events took place. There was no cause-and-effect relationship between the space—the built artifact—and the event. Nevertheless, the event could not have happened in that particular way without that particular place—that is precisely what interests me. As you said, May '68 was tremendously influential. At the time, there was an unbelievable rejection of all the clichés of architecture: “architecture as the place of order,” “architecture as the foundation of society,” or, as was said at the time, “architecture as the expression in space of the social order.” Everything was questioned and, obviously, this questioning implied an interest in what was happening in other areas: what was happening in literature, in philosophy, in art, in film theory, and so on. So first there was the question of understanding architecture as a discipline which is not autonomous, one that took part in the movement of ideas. As I have often said, architecture is not a *knowledge of form* but a *form of knowledge*, just like so many others. On the other hand, there was the intuition that architecture does not exist without program, that architecture does not exist without event, and that led to an interest in the movement of bodies in space, in their relationship to space. Hence the dynamic view of architecture. When Vitruvius used the term *utilitas*, he defined architecture as a static entity, one

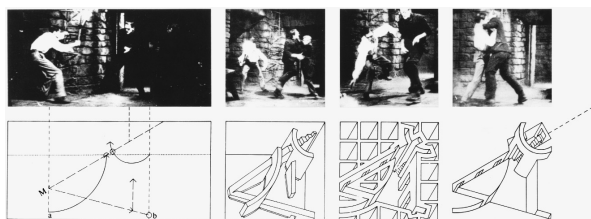
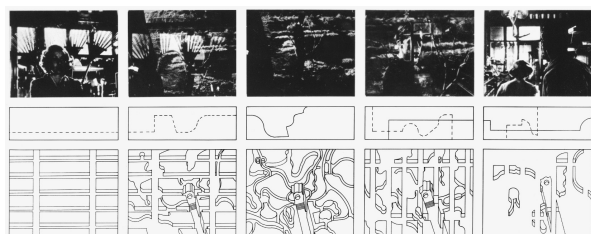


Opposite: Bernard Tschumi.
Le Fresnoy National Studio
for the Contemporary Arts,
1991–1997. Cinematic catwalks.

Top: Bernard Tschumi.
The Manhattan Transcripts, 1981.
Excerpt.

Center: Bernard Tschumi.
Screenplays, 1977. Excerpt.

Bottom: Bernard Tschumi.
Screenplays, 1977. Excerpt.



where every part reinforces and is complementary to the others. What interested me was rather its instability. As you said, I was really interested in investigating a new definition of architecture.

EW: Coming back to the notion of opening up the discipline, you addressed the architectural debate precisely from the margins of the discipline, by importing concepts and strategies from philosophy, literature, and film theory, and later on by using the system of art galleries. How certain were you at the time that you were able to work inside the margins; that is, to remain within the discipline? In film, for instance, as opposed to architecture, you can define both the space and the event. That is, you are not condemned

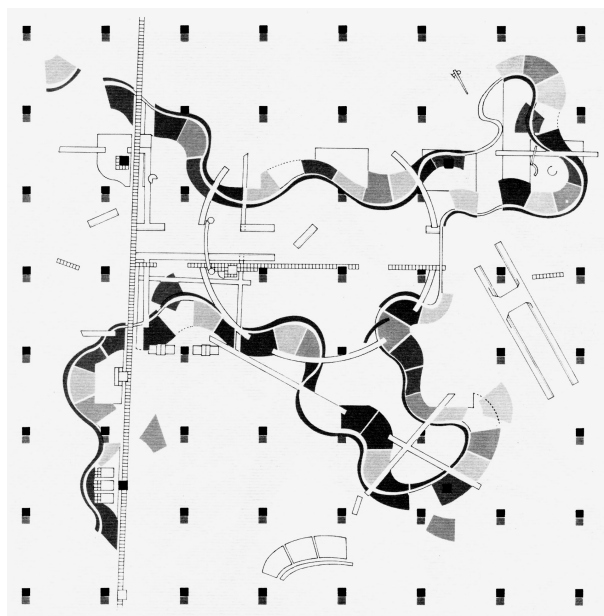
to an unknown component . . .

BT: I remember at one point I said I did not believe in the discipline as such—that is, I did not believe in the specificity of the field—but that at the same time I would use it as my reference point. In other words, my reference point would not be literature, theater, film, or art, but architecture. That was clear from the very start. And even though I have been fascinated by the margins, they have always been specifically the margins of architecture, not the margins of anything else. I feel that, in many ways, the field of architecture is one which is still bound to develop enormously. There is a vast territory of investigation. In that respect, I think it is a very young discipline.

EW: It was precisely from the margins that you embarked on a series of paper projects by the mid-seventies, after your early writing stage. *Screenplays* (1977) and *The Manhattan Transcripts* (1981) were a first attempt to test concepts and to reformulate some of the traditional means of architectural representation through the inclusion of the dynamic component. Thus you explored the use of notation primarily by importing tools from film theory, choreography, and sport diagrams . . .

Right: Bernard Tschumi.
Parc de la Villette, 1985–1997.
Conceptual site plan.

Opposite: Bernard Tschumi.
Le Fresnoy National Studio
for the Contemporary Arts,
1991–1997.



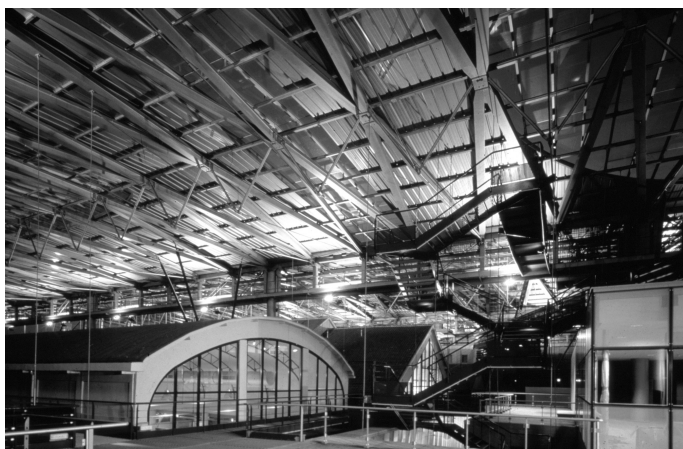
BT: Since I had embarked on a redefinition of architecture and this redefinition implied the notion of movement, I immediately discovered that I had to develop a mode of notation that could represent it. In the beginning it was mainly about choreographic movements—literally the movement of bodies in space—in their infinite variations. Later, when designing buildings, it concentrated less on random movement than on more specific vectors.

EW: You have said that Parc de la Villette was an ambiguous territory somewhere between a theoretical building and built theory; that is, a turning point from that early *paper architecture* phase to one of materialization. What was the retroactive effect of building on your theoretical work?

BT: When I finished *The Manhattan Transcripts*, I started to become aware of the fascination for the line: The logic of drawing was bringing more drawing. For instance, I could do certain transformations from one line to another that could mean different things on paper, but which had actually no implication in material terms. Then I realised the enormous danger of going further, of ending up doing what I would call papier-mâché architecture or Sheetrock architecture—that is, an architecture which has no concern whatsoever for the way in which materials are put together. So I would now say that each of the concepts that I developed at the time of *The Manhattan Transcripts* is still valid for the work, but there was a component missing: materiality. I would say that architecture is the materialization of a concept; so I tend to search for the most appropriate constructive means to express each concept. Take La Villette, for example: The key elements were the movement vectors; that is where we used very sophisticated technology. Likewise at Lerner Hall at Columbia, with the system of ramps.

EW: Many architects of your generation inherited from the debate of '68 not only an interest in programmatic issues but also a rejection of formal concerns. Writing about Le Fresnoy, National Studio for the Contemporary Arts you celebrated having achieved architecture without resorting to design—a concept which becomes architecture without the mediation of form. Does your usual attack on the notion of composition entail a rejection of form altogether?

BT: I would not say I reject formal concerns. However, I do always try to use form as the last resort. Eventually form is the result of a concept. In other words, it is never the starting point. Architecture is about concepts, about ideas—form



is actually secondary. Duchamp used to say that art must be anti-retinal. In other words, he sought an art that had more to do with the mind than with the eye. I would certainly subscribe to such a search.

EW: To what extent would you say you work on strategies of repetition? Repetition is largely discredited in architecture because it is seen as personal style or formal continuity, whereas in art it is equated to rigorous conceptual research . . .

BT: I think that the notion of signature or *stylistic* repetition still exists very strongly within a certain

architectural ethos. And some people even strive to achieve it. In America, for instance, many architects talk about being *signature architects*. There is a tendency these days to bypass contradictions and achieve signature synthesis. In fact, I have always had a problem with many of my friends who seek a stylistic identity. Basically the respective work of most of the so-called *avant-garde* today is formally homogeneous. Conversely, I am interested in the heterogeneity of the work, even in the contradictions within a single project. Homogeneity is precisely what I am trying to get away from. We just talked about the debate of '68; one of the slogans was *assumer les contradictions*, "to take responsibility for the contradictions." I am interested precisely in not trying to fuse everything into perfect synthesis. Our design work in the studio contains a lot of juxtaposition and superimposition. We deliberately use strategies of opposition within the same building. In fact, this is often the case in the urban condition. And I would say that most of the projects we do are so-called concentrated cities. In the case of Lerner Hall, for instance, we did not hesitate to extend the norm of a neoclassical nineteenth-century building—to play with that normative framework. And against that constraint we put the very contemporary system of the ramps. It is very similar to the strategy at Le Fresnoy, except that in Le Fresnoy the old building already existed and the new one was simply juxtaposed onto it. Coming back to your previous question, since for me the most important thing is the concept and not the form, the form may in

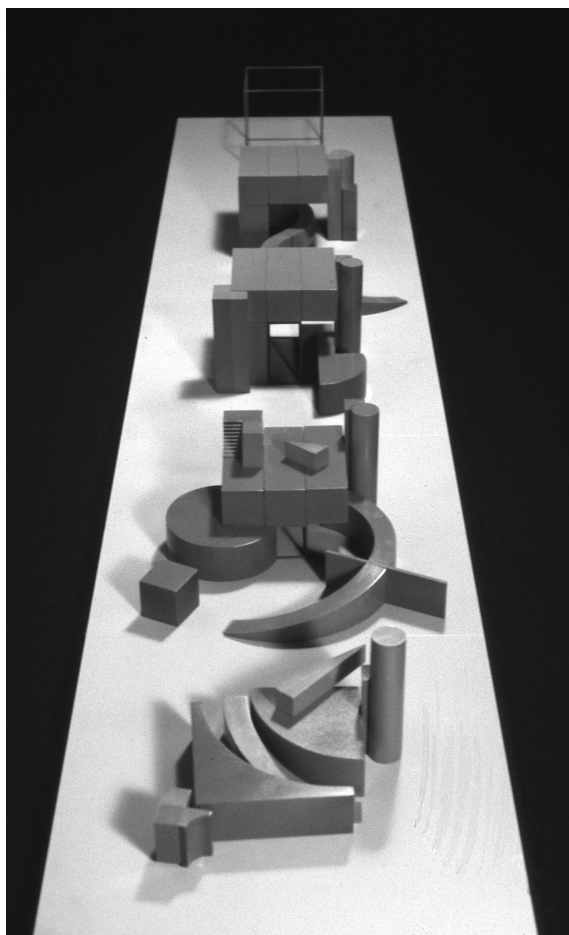
Right: Bernard Tschumi.
Parc de la Villette, 1985–1997.
Models of folies.

Opposite: Bernard Tschumi.
Parc de la Villette, 1985–1997.
Folie.

fact be very different every time. I work on repetition but not repetition in terms of style. If you take La Villette, Le Fresnoy, the Groningen Video Pavilion, or Lerner Hall, they are all totally different in terms of form. But if you look at the concept, there is a lot in common.

EW: As a matter of fact, in La Villette you deliberately aimed at erasing traces of authorship through various strategies: on the one hand, the superimposition of the three autonomous layers; on the other, the combinatory system for the *folies*—the cube divided according to the nine-square problem plus the ramps, the stairs, and so on. These procedures clearly overlap with those of the Oulipo group, which since the sixties has been exploring the use of self-imposed constraints as a tool for literary production—as a matter of fact, you quote the work of Perec and Queneau in *Cinégramme Folie* (1987). To what extent do you use restrictions as an overall strategy for production?

BT: If you are interested in the more self-conscious *transformations oulipiennes*, these were echoed at La Villette. The freedom that we had with the production system there was an opportunity we might never get again. The possibility of building twenty-six different *folies* with every possible permutation was quite unique. (By the way, you may know that even though we built twenty-six *folies*, we designed about forty of them.) In the case of Le Fresnoy, for instance, the rule of the game was defined by the space between the old roofs and the new envelope. That *in-between* space was already so strong that we decided not to touch it, only activate it through the movement vectors—the game of the ramps. To do so, we went through a number of permutations of densities and eventually selected one. I am currently very interested in the relationship between envelopes and events. I have been lately tempted to talk about an *in-between* condition which is generated by residual spaces of different envelopes—either between existing envelopes and new envelopes as in the case of Le Fresnoy, or between two new envelopes as in the case the Rouen Concert Hall. These *in-between* spaces are then activated through movement vectors—ramps, stairs, and so on—together with the placing of activities.





EW: In the introduction to your book *Architecture and Disjunction* (1994) you say that the essays collected therein were originally meant to be successive chapters of a coherent book in the manner of Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* (1923) or Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966). To what extent do you still believe in working based on the logic of the manifesto; that is, on a set of principles which are defined prior to the work and independently of it?

BT: I used to believe in manifestos enormously. In retrospect I find that there is one great thing about them: their genre requires precision. In other words, you have to be concise; you have to achieve a very tight structure. I like that format. However, the tricky thing about manifestos is that historically they have entailed the idea of prescription, and that is something I am not too interested in. Any generation which prescribes is bound to be followed by another which is against that prescription. I have always been more interested in the notion of theorem or hypothesis, the way mathematicians work. That is, you state a theorem or a hypothesis, and then you must use the work to prove it. So in this respect I could have actually called those texts *a series of theorems*.

EW: Over the last two decades or so there has in fact been a growing skepticism toward the logic of the manifesto. In your essay "Illustrated Index: Themes from *The Manhattan Transcripts*" (1983) you said concepts can either precede or follow an architectural project. What role would you assign to your writing today?

BT: First of all, as you know, I tend to write a lot less now than I used to. And it is not because I do not want to write. I think it is crucial for me to bounce back and forth . . .

EW: To redirect the program . . .

BT: Absolutely. And also to reformulate it. The logic of words is not the same as the logic of buildings, so questioning the work through writing is crucial. At present I spend most of my time working on projects; one project is immediately followed by another, which to some extent brings in the next theme. The risk is, however, that the themes stop being articulated in the way they used to. And the reason

why I call this a risk is not so much that people might say I am succumbing to the fate of all architects who start to build and stop writing or exploring. The risk is actually much bigger, for it would provide a confirmation of what society expects of people; that is, that the writer writes, the architect builds, the filmmaker does films, and so on. I have always wanted to eliminate the division between, on the one hand, the architect-designer, and, on the other hand, the architect-theoretician. I think these territories merge with one another. As it happens, the project work carries its own logic too, which in turn informs the theoretical argument and takes it to the next step.

Based on an interview carried out on July 30, 1999 in Paris. A previous version of this text was published in Spanish in *Summa+* No. 57 (12/2002–01/2003): 36–43.

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