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Talking with Bernard Tschumi

Joan Ockman

Few practicing architects have been more deeply engaged with theoretical questions in architecture than Bernard Tschumi, whose career began exactly four decades ago in the aftermath of the events of May '68. We sat down in his New York office in August 2008 to discuss the evolution of architectural theory in the context of his own intellectual and professional itinerary.

JOAN OCKMAN: *In his essay "Periodizing the '60s" (1984), Fredric Jameson proposes to produce not a narrative history of the 1960s – a history "as it really was" – but rather the concept of that history. I wonder if we can attempt something similar here with reference to your career, which coincides with the emergence of a new form of theoretical discourse in architecture. Let's begin by situating you circa '68. You were in Switzerland, France, and then England.*

BERNARD TSCHUMI: In '68 I was in France. I was working in the office of Candilis Josic and Woods. I was still a student at the ETH in Zurich, but it was my practicum year, a required period of professional office experience. I decided to go to Paris.

For cultural reasons? Or were winds of the coming political upheavals blowing into Switzerland? It had more to do with my cultural upbringing. But the events of '68 did not come out of the blue. They were part of a general cultural atmosphere, both intellectual and political. They were also related to being a certain age at the time.

Paris must have been quite a big change from Zurich in '68.

Actually I arrived in Paris in August or September '67. Look, I had lived there for almost 10 years as a child. My father had an office there. So in a sense it was a very familiar place. But as far as being in Paris when the "events" took place, it so happened that I was there at the right time.

Candilis was obviously an important figure with respect to the events at the École des Beaux-Arts. If you made a list of the most interesting and desirable offices to work in, Candilis Josic and Woods was surely number one. At least for me. After their beginnings with Le Corbusier, they did extraordinary work in North Africa. Then they came back to France and undertook very large-scale urban work. I was especially interested in this type of urbanism. Candilis was also involved in education. He ran one of the so-called exterior ateliers at the Beaux-Arts. It was the most progressive and had the best students. I got to know Portzamparc, Grumbach, and others there.

But what exactly were you doing in May '68?

To give you an anecdote, as the situation was becoming increasingly passionate in early May, many of the employees in the architecture offices began going on strike. Candilis, who was an old Greek socialist, absolutely did not want anyone to strike against him. So he called the office one day and said, "Listen, everybody, you all go out in the street and come back in the morning and tell me what happened." That was more or less what took place. Most

architecture offices closed. Some went on strike. Some, like us, sort of joined in the movement.

So you spent time in the streets.

I still have a pain in my kidney because I was beaten up by the cops and held one night in jail.

Afterward you returned to Zurich to graduate. What made you decide to go to London next?

I initially returned to Paris and worked on my own while trying to find a job. But the job I really wanted at this point was in London. While I was a student at the ETH, I tried to invite Cedric Price to speak at the school, but they refused to have him. So he spoke elsewhere in Zurich, at the Heidi Weber pavilion. Cedric and I hit it off well. Basically the idea was that once he had a big enough job he would hire me. But that wasn't happening in 1968–69. So after moving to London I found myself looking for a landing point, and of course teaching was one possibility. Peter Cook asked me to come to reviews at the AA. Eventually he offered me a job there.

I've seen a reference somewhere to a little project called "Do-It-Yourself City." What was that?

That's what I was working on when I was in between Paris and London. I did it with someone whom I had met in the Candilis office, Fernando Montes. It was a competition project I quite liked. The starting point was one of those huge settlements built in France in the late '50s and '60s in the most atrocious way, which turned into what the French call *bidonvilles*. They were one of the things the French architecture students were really upset about. We proposed a project that would increase community interaction. It was about communication, very much influenced by Cedric's work, particularly Potteries Thinkbelt. It was just an ideas competition, but we won a prize, or the prize.

Once you got to London, how did you find it compared to Paris?

You have to ask the question differently. How come in 1970, '71, you find gathered in London so many young, talented, non-British architects? Rem Koolhaas, Dalibor Veseley, Colin Fournier, Zaha Hadid at the AA, etcetera.

The '68 events, and not just in France, had an enormous vacuum effect on the architecture scene. Nobody wanted to call himself an architect anymore. Architects were seen as part of a repressive and decadent power structure. Among the people who had taken part in the events, or who had witnessed them, there was a sense that one had either to leave architecture altogether, or else to start teaching students to find another route, that they couldn't continue to do architecture the same old way.

It was also right after the death of the father figures – Le Corbusier, Mies, Gropius. Other older practitioners were retiring. So suddenly you had a new generation, many straight out of school. All of us had to rethink what we had been trained to do. The whole definition of architecture was up for grabs.

Was London a good place to be searching for an answer to these questions?

London felt fresh. Unlike Italy and France, it did not go through the cataclysm of '68. You had people like Cedric and, of course, Archigram. I was quite excited by the work Cedric was doing in both the sociopolitical and architectural realms. And the AA seemed a place where you could start to think. I must pay tribute to Alvin Boyarsky, who arrived a few months after I did. He gave the young talent on the faculty lots of independence. You could invite

whomever you wanted to come speak, so I invited the Archizoom group. I talked about Henri Lefebvre. These things related very much to my own interests at the time, and they were also perhaps related to what was happening during the period more generally.

Did you feel there was a need to try to intellectualize and politicize the culture in London more, perhaps carry over the energy of Paris '68 into another place and moment? The special issue of Architectural Design you prepared in September 1971 with Martin Pawley (a student at the Beaux-Arts in the late '50s), "The Beaux-Arts since '68," offers a remarkably detailed and carefully sourced microhistory of the events. Was this primarily a documentary effort?

Absolutely. Even the locals, the people at the Beaux-Arts, were amazed. They had never had a history, had never pieced it together. By now, of course, the story has been retold by others. But the purpose both of this issue and of introducing Lefebvre's writings into London was not really to politicize anybody. It was to find out what happened.

But the issue of AD contains more than a whiff of disappointment and doubt about the future, at least in France. You must have felt some disillusionment in the aftermath of the '68 euphoria. Was there, in your experience, a long morning – or mourning – after? A more general question, which I meant to ask you at the start: do you consider yourself a member of the "generation of '68"? Do you think that label, that identification, is a fair one? By this I mean, do you consider that this was your formative experience, that you were shaped by this moment?

I always have enormous reservations about this concept of generation. I think there are historical cycles. There are preoccupations that characterize a period. But I can find my allies just as much in the '20s as in the '60s. So I would reject the generational label, or hesitate to use it. But my refusal to deal with the notion of "generation of '68" may very well come from the experience of '68.

Let me go back for a second to Lefebvre. Bringing Lefebvre to the ICA and to the AA was a way to introduce and develop a discourse that I was interested in. It was a way of educating not just my students but also myself.

What's interesting is that the discourse of Lefebvre himself, like that of many of his contemporaries, was changing at this very moment. He was moving from "the right to the city" to "the production of space." In other words, the less-than-utopian outcome of '68 caused a shift in his thought. To move a little from your specific intellectual biography to a more general philosophical question about the relationship between politics and theory – not necessarily an intuitive relationship – how does theory emerge out of the political engagement of '68?

Theory does not emerge out of politics. Theory is already there, at least in France. Foucault, Barthes, Lacan: there was an existing intellectual discourse before '68, a body of developed thought, a questioning of rigid ideas. These people all tend to be lumped together too much, especially in American academia. But it's true that they belong to a particular moment of discourse; everyone was feeding off everyone else. And when '68 happened, it created a phenomenon of acceleration for that discourse. Afterward it also brought about a very interesting split. There was a famous slogan in '68, "Imagination takes power." The split occurred around those words. There were those who opted for the world of power and politics, and those who opted for the world of imagination and creativity. Of course, there is always an interaction or oscillation between the two.

So you see an interaction rather than a schism between politics and theory at this moment?

Yes. But the real point is, how do you define politics? That was exactly the question then. Did it mean joining a political organization? The '68 movement in France was by definition against political organizations. It was as much against the Communist party as against the Right. Of course, some strange alliances occurred during the strikes.

Yes, there was the great desire, grand illusion if you like, to forge a rapprochement between the intellectuals and the working class. This didn't come to much, despite the aspirations of some architects. "Three deaths a day on the construction site" and all that. But let's flash forward and talk about the academicization of theory, and even of politics, that takes place a few years later, certainly in the American context, around figures like Foucault and Barthes, Lefebvre and Derrida.

Well, ironically enough, all these people were, in a sense, mavericks. They were not part of the French university system. They didn't have positions. Nanterre was an outpost. Derrida had no university appointment. What happened after '68 in France is that plenty of structures were left in place, both in politics and in the university, and they became even more rigid than before. That's one of the reasons I was attracted by the more fluid situation in London, which was suddenly providing a platform for exploration. And the reason I was fascinated by Archizoom is that they were trying to combine a level of creativity and invention with a political discourse.

Of course, you can't really compare the politicized projects of Archizoom and Superstudio with the discourse of Archigram. But they all basically stopped functioning as groups right around this moment, circa 1970. The individual members of Superstudio began doing work that was affiliated, at least stylistically, with what was coming to be called postmodernism.

Archizoom did No-Stop City and Superstudio did the Thirteen Ideal Cities, I think, between '70 and '72.

Okay, let's say the turn comes around '72.

Well, '72 is an interesting moment. That's the year of the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, "Italy: The New Italian Landscape." And it would not be the first time an exhibition at MoMA has put an end to the politicization of something. And you're right about Archigram changing at this time. But Archigram was never political. Or if it was, only in a very English way. In other words, it approached things from an eccentric point of view. Of course, if politics is also about changing the mode of thinking, isn't this a viable strategy too? But they certainly did not take part in post-Marxist thought the way groups like Archizoom did. These were the so-called years of lead in Italy. Serious stuff was going on there – deaths, kidnappings, the Red Brigades.

But undoubtedly a new intellectual paradigm begins to take hold in architecture in the beginning of the '70s. Poststructuralism succeeds structuralism as the cultural dominant. Textuality supersedes language. And theory itself starts to expand and become a category all its own. I wonder to what extent we might understand this expansion and inflation of theory as a compensatory device for a political discourse that was no longer sustainable.

What you describe is, I think, more an American development. Theory was never understood as a separate category in France or Italy or even England at this time. The term *poststructuralism* was invented here in the States, in American universities. This usage didn't exist in

France. Theoretical discourse was part of the culture. Everyone my age read Lévi-Strauss, everyone read Barthes. And the evolution, the transformation of structuralist thinking, was not understood in such an antagonistic way.

I agree that theory as a category of knowledge – Theory with a capital “T” – is really an American fabrication. And its full-fledged institutionalization probably doesn’t occur in the US until the ’80s. The thought on which this shift is based, though, is already occurring in France by the mid-’60s. For intellectuals like Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, there is a desire to get beyond all-encompassing, total explanations, beyond universal science, well before ’68. In fact, you might say that the suspicion of totality already makes Marxism philosophically untenable. It implicitly undercuts the revolution before the revolution.

Think of Derrida’s lecture “Structure, Sign and Play,” written in ’66, where he talks about the center no longer being a place, but a function. Or Barthes’s essay of 1967 on semiology and urbanism, where in the space of about six pages he makes the move from a rational and scientific approach to the city, citing Kevin Lynch, to an “erotics” of the city based on chance and indeterminacy. All this eventually couldn’t help but have implications for modern architecture’s master narrative.

Absolutely. Things were changing. Other things were also being rediscovered at this time: writers like Bataille and Blanchot, Kafka also. Lacan played his role. Lyotard. There were a number of colloquiums. Everything was being related to writing, to textual practices. Barthes had the extraordinary talent both to write about the pleasure of the text and at the same time to write in a style, using a mode of expression, that embodied that pleasure. The boundary between the literary and the theoretical was dissolved. It was very exciting.

Let’s jump to your initial experiences in the US. You arrived in New York when?

January ’76. I was at the AA until summer ’75. That summer I went on a road trip through the States to the West Coast. I lived in Los Angeles for a few months. I returned in the fall to London. That’s when the Conceptual Architecture conference took place at Art Net, Peter Cook’s recently founded gallery. I gave a talk and Peter Eisenman was there. He asked what I was doing and I said, “I’ll be in New York in January for six months.” “Why are you going there?” “Because I’m interested in the art scene.” That’s a whole other conversation – for me at this time it was very important to get involved with the art scene; I saw it as an escape from the restrictive political dimension of architecture. And I was fascinated by what was happening in New York in the ’60s and ’70s. So I was coming to New York for the art scene, but Peter said, “Why don’t you sit in on things at the Institute?”

So you arrived at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies at the beginning of ’76. Just the same time I did. Tell me your impressions of New York and the Institute.

The New York architecture scene was pretty interesting back then. Look, any reasonably well-informed, intelligent person would have wanted to find out what the New York Five were about, what they were doing. But that wasn’t where my head was, not at all.

New York in 1976 was not in great shape. It was on the verge of bankruptcy. The country was dealing with an oil crisis, recession, the Watergate scandal.

Maybe that was one of the reasons the city was so fascinating. You could do things you couldn’t do anywhere else. You could live for \$15,000 a year, pay rent, and have a big loft.

What about the intellectual and cultural situation?

Well, in retrospect, everything is clearer. But at the time it seemed to me that what was happening in the art scene was a lot more significant than what was happening in architecture. Conceptual art was evolving into performance art. You had writers and artists who were involved in real exchanges. Artists like Kosuth and Rauschenberg were expressing themselves in inventive ways. And a younger crowd, people like Craig Owens (who later died of AIDS), Douglas Crimp, Kate Linker, were engaged in serious conversations. But I also found what was happening at the Institute extraordinary. It produced, or it permitted, intellectual and theoretical and historical thinking about architecture that was far more interesting and developed than it was in Europe at this date.

You had people like Mario Gandelsonas and Diana Agrest, South Americans who had a certain French culture. You had Vidler and Frampton and a number of other British intellectuals. And then Peter's discovery of the Italian scene, of Venice, was so important. It really developed into something. This has always fascinated me about American academia, the way it plunges into research so intensely. I would hate to call it professionalism. But suddenly there was a serious intellectual discourse.

Yes, and it was catalyzed to a very large extent by the Institute. Why do you think, though, that it took so long for this discourse to coalesce in the US compared to Europe? Why was there almost nothing here prior to '68? Venturi's Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture was published in '66, of course. But it's questionable whether you can really call that a work of theory. It's more the polemic of a professional who is trying to explain his own formal predilections to himself.

By contrast, Rossi's Architecture of the City, also published in '66 and written by an architect, was intended as a new architectural "treatise." Of course, Italy has a long history of this kind of discursive culture in architecture. England too, if to a slightly lesser degree. And France?

In France the whole history of the École des Beaux-Arts, back to its invention 300 years ago, is marked by anti-intellectualism. While there were always incredibly intelligent people there, they were highly suspicious about bringing conceptual thinking together with architectural practice. This is still the case. Somewhat like in America. Little credibility is given to the practitioner who writes too much or to the writer who does a little practice on the side.

How do you account for this uneven development, this variable geography of theoretical production in architecture?

I'm probably not the one to ask about the States because I know it only after the fact. One thing that interests me, though, is the role of Colin Rowe. That's a history you know very well, that of the so-called Texas Rangers, their incredible influence on architectural education. And not just in this country. I have a personal connection to it. The person who taught me architecture at the ETH was Bernard Hoesli. Hoesli was heavily influenced by American architecture. He's the one who translated Rowe and Slutzky into German. I read "Transparency" in my third year of architecture school. Ideas in architecture circulate in strange ways.

Well, without trying to produce an explanation for the belatedness of intellectual discourse in the American context, what do you think its effects were? Do you think the fact that it arrived late caused it then to be picked up with extra intensity, extra enthusiasm? And what about the distorting effects that occurred in the process of translation? I'm thinking about the way the ideas of people like Tafuri

and later Derrida got transformed in the American context (and I'm not speaking literally, although the early translations of Tafuri were notoriously awful).

That's right. When I got to New York I found it amusing to discover that an article of mine, titled "The Paradox of Architecture," written in '75 for the British art magazine *Studio International* and aimed at the art scene, had found its way into a number of American architecture schools. And I was invited by them to come and talk. On the strength of this interest I realized I could easily continue what I had been doing in my early days at the AA, when I was teaching the politics of space and using literature as a starting point. At the same time, by the early '70s, much of the important French theoretical literature was being translated into English. French thought was getting stronger and stronger within the different departments of the American university. Eventually it spilled over into architecture.

Both Rowe and Tafuri argue that there was a hunger on the part of American architectural culture for something it hadn't ever had before. And a sense of inferiority that had to be overcome. When did Derrida enter your consciousness as a philosopher with profound implications for architecture?

I would say probably in the late '60s . . . wait, profound implications for architecture? That's something else. I would not put it that way. He too would be shocked to hear it put that way. While his thinking perhaps has profound implications for the law, for the way the legal system works, architecture is, I think, something else.

I first met Derrida in London, around '73 or '74. After hearing him speak two or three times, I was absolutely fascinated. It didn't occur to me at the time that there was a way to turn his ideas into a point of departure for architecture. His thinking belonged more to the general intellectual climate. It was very different from that of Foucault, say, who was writing specifically about institutions, places like prisons and hospitals. There you could make a direct connection to architecture, and people did.

With Derrida it was more complex. But certain links began to be made. For example, Jennifer Bloomer, who was fascinated with James Joyce, read my *Studio International* article and invited me down to Georgia Tech where she was teaching. This was around '76. Derrida was invited at the same time, and there was a discussion on Joyce. But the discussion with Derrida did not take an explicitly architectural turn until later, around '84, '85. Perhaps partly out of my own interest in questioning architecture – I would not have used the word *deconstructing* at the time, although it was already in fashion – I decided that one of the gardens at La Villette should be designed jointly by a philosopher, an artist, or a musician, and an architect. At first I tried to get Jean-François Lyotard to do a garden with Daniel Buren and Alexandre Chemetoff, the landscape architect. But at the last moment Lyotard begged off. I was able to get Derrida to come to my office and talk. We talked at length and I showed him a number of my articles. I suggested he could work on a garden with Peter [Eisenman]. He expressed complete surprise that architects were interested in him and his writing.

Apropos of interdisciplinary collaborations, or the desire to infuse architecture with ideas from philosophy and other aesthetic practices, do you think this occurs especially at moments when architecture senses its own creative exhaustion? Is there a kind of pendulum swing in architecture between moments of autonomy, when the discipline pulls its horns in and chooses to rely on its own resources, and more expansive moments, when it seeks to go outside itself and break down barriers with other fields?

I wouldn't be surprised. It would be interesting to do a historical investigation of the last 150 years in those terms. But openness to import and export is, in my opinion, very good and

absolutely necessary. The perennial problem with architecture is that it very quickly turns into a set of rules about what is good and what is bad.

Apropos of which, once a full-blown Derridean discourse emerged, a whole architectural machinery of appropriation seemed to occur – almost a little industry. It culminated with the “Deconstructivist Architecture” show at MoMA. Like “The New Domestic Landscape,” or “The International Style” in 1932, the arrival in the museum seemed more to mark an ending than a beginning of something. Then what? To ask this more generally, how, as an architect and thinker, does one deal with accelerating cycles of innovation and absorption and innovation again? How does one move beyond an initial engagement with a discourse and go on to the next one?

You use the term *appropriation*. I don't think architecture ever truly succeeded in appropriating the Derridean discourse. The intellectual and cultural complexities of Derrida's philosophy have remained outside architecture's purview.

When I told Derrida that a few architects were seriously interested in taking on the ideas of deconstruction, he said, “How can architects do that when deconstruction is antiform, antihierarchy, antistructure?” Of course, we can talk endlessly about misreadings or misinterpretations, sometimes intentional ones by intelligent people, which is what the show became. There was an intentional game being played, and I think it both ensured the success of whatever it was promoting and also made it impossible to look very deeply into deconstruction's architectural implications, which should have involved a questioning of the discipline.

These packaging operations, which would include the Five Architects, occur, of course, for promotional reasons. The work of the New York Five only looked alike for a brief moment – Michael Graves almost immediately started going in his own “pomo” direction, Hejduk moved into a kind of Russian poetics, and so forth. With the deconstructivist show, what I recall is that everyone included in the exhibition felt compelled at the time to protest that they were different from all the others.

Nonetheless, the package created a great deal of interest.

Yes, but do you know why? Of course, “Deconstructivist Architecture” differed from the New York Five, which was a self-organized group. The show was a crowd of different characters put together by others.

It was curated, in other words.

Yes. But as it happened, all the participants in the show were very interesting architects. And if you look at it that way, it appears more significant, at least compared to what else was around at the time. Forget about the rhetorical glue that artificially bonded them.

The anteroom of the exhibition was devoted to MoMA's collection of Russian constructivism, which created an ersatz if eye-catching pedigree.

Exactly. But do you know what is fascinating? People like Rem, Zaha, Coop Himmelb(l)au, and myself, who found ourselves confronting a vacuum during this period, all had an interest in constructivism 10 years before the show. This is where the show was perverse but interesting after all. There were no good role models in the '70s. Maybe some people saw Rossi as one. I found my friends, or let's say allies, in the early 20th-century avant-garde. And not only the architectural avant-garde, but that of painting, film, theater. I was not the only one to do so, even if we had different trajectories in terms of that fascination.

But from the standpoint of theory, I think it's correct to say that you and Peter were probably the only ones for whom theory was really driving the work. Also Rem, I suppose, to some extent.

No, I think it was history for Rem. Leonidov, Wally Harrison, John Portman. Rem was always much more historically astute than anyone else around. But my own interest was specifically in theory, yes.

Apropos of the politics of avant-garde architectural culture, I wonder whether in retrospect we can look at the Deconstructivist show as the inception of today's international star scene. Half a century earlier the International Style show was, in contrast, an effort to bring European modernism to the United States, and in doing so, a bid for American legitimacy. A lot had changed by 1988. Of course, Philip Johnson played his role as impresario in both shows.

The comparison is very interesting. I remember saying at the time that the show was the beginning and end of deconstructivism. This was so even though few of us had built anything yet – Zaha nothing, Rem very little, Coop Himmelb(l)au was doing funny things on the roofs of buildings, Libeskind may have already won the competition in Berlin, I was just starting on La Villette. But the exhibition never gelled into a real set of ideas. Only into a style in the schools. And much later – in fact, today – into the kind of architecture others are building in places like Dubai. At the time, of course, the architectural establishment, the mainstream, was locked in an embrace with pseudohistorical imagery.

Yes, deconstructivism explicitly presented itself in the late '80s as a polemical alternative to mainstream postmodernism, understood as a "historicist" style. The culture wars were really heated back then, as we know. Meanwhile, what happened to the more political discourse that came out of '68? We haven't talked about the Venice School and Tafuri, which in some ways was eclipsed by the Derridean, or deconstructivist, current. One of the reasons Tafuri's writing initially resonated so strongly with some of us in the US was as a counter to postmodernism. But it's hardly surprising that once professional practice started to take off and there was an increasing amount of work around, practitioners ceased to be so interested in critiques of ideology and power. Actually, both practice and theory took off in the boom years of the '80s, although in divergent directions: the "real world" and academia. And politics more or less dropped out of both.

Let's for a second separate theory and politics as practices. Theory can be done at any time. Politics is touchier ground. Namely, you don't build a major project without interacting with power, whether it's the power of money, or of private institutions, or of the state. Every architect who was in the Deconstructivist show eventually became successful and had to find a way to work with those large power entities.

And at that point one's role as someone who questions the system becomes paradoxical, ambiguous. On the one hand, you have to embody some of the system's values while you may be attacking them. And quite often, the power entity is fully aware of this and takes advantage of the critical dimension of architecture to give itself an edge. It can be very tricky, leading, for example, to discussions like whether one should build in China at this moment and that sort of thing.

But I think the issue is elsewhere. How do you define architecture? Do you define it simply as the translation into stone of society's values? My own answer is no, not at all. For me, architecture is always about public interactions. It has the capacity to force these interactions. It can slow them down. It can act as an accelerator. Hence architecture has very much to do with one's interpretation – one's theory – of society. We could take each of the architects in

the Deconstructivist show and look at their work in terms of their view of society. The work of each architect is, in fact, very different in these terms.

My own interest has always been in understanding architectural space in terms of program, event, movement. In other words, as something that shifts all the time and at no one moment can be frozen into a canon, a symbol, an icon.

It's interesting how the discourse is always shifting within itself, reworking some of the same material but moving it and pushing it. I was thinking about your idea of program in relation to John Summerson's 1957 lecture, "The Case for a Theory of Modern Architecture." His argument about what distinguishes modern architecture from everything that preceded it rests precisely on the concept of program. But program for him was basically a reworking of function, or of functionalist theory. When you picked up the idea of program 20, 25 years later, it was not about form following function, not about "fitness" at all, but the opposite: about the possibility for new things to occur when seemingly disjunctive programs or functions are put together. I still remember the studio we taught together at Yale in 1987, when we had students literally pick programmatic combinations out of a hat. There were projects that combined things like an ice hockey rink and an aviary.

Program is really nothing more than a set of utilities that can be repeated again and again. Back to a conversation with Derrida, this time in public, where he corrected me for using the terms *program*, *function*, *event* interchangeably. Program, he said, has to do with habitual, predictable activities. Events are unpredictable. This is incredibly important in thinking about how architecture works, how space is used. Whether you go along with or challenge habitual values. But one way to challenge existing ideas of program is through unexpected juxtapositions. That's why I want to insist that any discussion of space also has a political dimension. It has nothing to do with form. Well, it has something to do with it, because how space is used cannot be separated from what it looks like. The two are intertwined.

By the way, the other architect who is relevant here, who talks about inventing new programs, is Hejduk. We used to joke at Cooper Union that a typical thesis project was a house for a fisherman in the Gobi desert. Hejduk's concept of inventing new programs dates to about the same time as yours. Yes, absolutely. But our concepts came from totally different sources. Interestingly enough, I'm working right now on a zoo and have been thinking of Hejduk. You probably know the extraordinary thesis project he did as a student. The snake house, the monkey house – it was all about program. I'm sorry to bring up the obvious, but the dimension of use is one that just cannot be separated from any work of architecture. And I would say that this is what gives every building an inherently political dimension.

And an institutional dimension. Or these two things are the same.
Absolutely. Because you may very well question the institution.

Yes. And this is also true in another realm, that of architectural education, where one has to rethink one's relationship to the academy as an institution, to the school, how one works in it or on it. The whole problem of inside versus outside is a very big issue. It had to be a traumatic issue for architects of the generation of '68, if you'll let me use that expression for a moment, who defined themselves as being anti-establishment and against the system in the '60s. As they rose to prominence in the schools and the profession in the '90s, they had to figure out how to act without being totally hypocritical or contradictory with respect to everything in their past.

How did you work this through in relation to becoming dean at Columbia? How did you go from defining yourself as an outsider to becoming a consummate insider, dean of an architecture school in a major American university? Do you believe that détournement and acceleration and other such subversive strategies are still operable from within a position of power?

You know, it's very similar to designing a building for a major institution or a powerful client. You try to push certain things where they haven't gone before. I never thought of myself as the guardian of institutional values at Columbia. At the same time, I certainly had an admiration for the quality of some American universities, and this was one of them. But my main purpose was to try to stimulate the discourse within the world of architecture. Whether we succeeded, whether the discourse went in the direction I myself would have liked, is another question. Nevertheless, the intention was to open new doors, and in this respect I think we were effective. One is always trying to open new territory.

This raises the whole question of the avant-garde. There's the problem of perennial newness, of having constantly to be moving to stay ahead. Is that a modus operandi that established institutions can sustain, or is the question an oxymoron?

In a way it's more important to have an avant-garde in the schools than in the building world. Schools should be places where students have the freedom to explore the discipline, to take it to places where nobody thought you could take it. That's why it's necessary to bring new blood in, to nurture it, whether the energy comes from within architecture or from other disciplines. When you build, on the other hand, things depend so much on circumstances and conditions. If you try to do every single building as an avant-garde project, as something entirely new, it becomes, very quickly, a sort of narcissism. In other words, there are times when a really rigorous, really defined building is more challenging and provocative than an avant-garde experiment. My interest in the notions of concept and context, and the relation between the two, stems precisely from this. This brings me back to the beginning of our conversation. We talked about what was called poststructuralism in America and the decontextualization that occurred when that thinking was taken outside its frame of reference. By the time those ideas ended up in the architecture magazines, they had become superficial images and icons.

Is there anything from the thought of the '60s that has been lost in the shuffle, that needs to be recuperated? What about the legacy of Debord and Baudrillard? Do they appear more prophetic than ever today, or outdated? What about Marxism? Does it get relegated to the dustbin of history?

By the way, one idea that I've always wanted to hear you out on, something that you've repeatedly cited as an architectural strategy, is that of acceleration. It's a Marxist idea, isn't it, that one can make change happen faster by pushing the contradictions, forcing them to a point of crisis.

Indeed, revealing your opponent's weaknesses. But such strategies are practiced by politicians of all kinds, I think. I'm back to my strong opposition to generalizations like the notion of generation. It's like saying we live in a post-Marxist era. Sure, in my generation – now I'm just talking biologically, about people born around the same time that I was – there were those who were true believers in Mao Zedong's ideal of the intellectual as a worker. All university professors should go work in the mines, and so on. But at the very same time, other people were thinking, "Hey, Dadaism and eccentricity are the way to express your view of the world." There's no one zeitgeist.

Certainly the concept of revolution is one that at this point seems to be dead, right? Unless you happen to be a fundamentalist.

Well, you certainly could not name an architectural magazine “Oppositions” today.

No, you could not.

Once upon a time there was the modern versus the classical. The postmodern versus the modern. The deconstructive versus the postmodern. No more. Something quite radical has happened. And it's not necessarily bad.

But does that mean there is no longer any possibility of an oppositional or critical culture?

No, there can be a critical culture. There has to be a critical culture. But it's harder to oppose something that is increasingly multiple, that is so complex that it actually contains part of your own position. This is also what makes the problem interesting. Interestingly enough, the “post-theoretical” was already elaborated in film studies at Columbia in the '80s.

Yes, and in literature, in Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michael's essay “Against Theory,” which came out of neopragmatist discourse at the time.

Exactly. So the post-theoretical isn't a new idea in architecture. It's more a polemic, and one that is closer to the entertainment type of polemic than to real reflection. You ask what should be recuperated from the moment or the spirit of '68, and here, yes, I will say one of the key things is the necessity of the critical, the necessity of questioning.

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