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Bernard Tschumi: The Exit Interview



On a very warm Tuesday in July, Log called on Bernard Tschumi at his New York studio, where the blinds were drawn along the bank of south-facing windows to minimize the heat of the afternoon sun. Clad in a black T-shirt and gray slacks, but minus his signature (and seasonal) red scarf, Tschumi, in typical European fashion, turned off the conference room air conditioner to eliminate the drone of white noise in our conversation. The “exit interview,” scheduled to coincide with his last day as dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, had been postponed several times, and was surprisingly still premature. On July 15, Tschumi referred to himself as the “stealth dean,” with all of Columbia still awaiting the official announcement of his successor.

Log: Let's go back 15 years, not only for the benefit of our young readers, but also for my benefit. Where were you before you became a dean at Columbia? What were you doing?

Bernard Tschumi: In 1988 I was working on the La Villette project and commuting between Paris and New York, because I always kept a base in New York since the '70s. La Villette was in a political situation and a new government was threatening to stop the project. During that time Columbia was looking for a dean. That's the history. Prior to that, until '83, I taught at Cooper and at Princeton and before that . . .

Had you taught at Columbia?

Never. I was totally an outsider.

If you were primarily living in Paris but commuting to New York, what did you call home?

Look. I don't call anything home. I had a kid born in New York, right, and the way we used to organize our life – just to get into the nitty-gritty – I was spending two weeks in Paris, one week in New York, and my wife was spending two weeks in New York, one week in Paris. We did that for years. By the age of 21 months my daughter had crossed the Atlantic 21 times. And if you want statistics, in the last 20 years I have crossed the Atlantic a thousand times.

Did taking the Columbia post make you more settled?

[Silence] I don't know anything about settled, right? For me, the whole idea is not having a base.

Did Columbia become a base, though?

It was a base of sorts. Sure. I mean, you inevitably get quite passionate about it. There is another circle of people, a circle

of friends. In a way, it's like another job. My office was another base.

*Why did you want to do it?
Can you remember?*



One reason was that I had been for five years entirely in the world of practice. I had taught for 13 years before that, if I am correct. I always enjoyed teaching. I enjoyed the freedom of exploration that universities were granting me. I knew that in particular America had a rather good education system, certainly better in architecture at the university level than what I knew in France. So, in a sense, being a dean was a way for me to come back to teaching, which I always loved, even though as a dean I taught only occasionally. I hired the teachers. But it was really one thing to be in that explorative context where one could ask: "How can practice be influenced by what is done in schools, instead of schools being influenced by what is being done in practice?"

So your agenda was to have the school affect practice. How did you begin to implement it? Do you think that you achieved that influence?

Well, I achieved it partly, but it is always partial. How to achieve it is very simple, especially in a city like New York. You have extraordinary resources, you have hundreds of talented architects who are young, have endless, boundless energy, and no work. And among these there were some people who were simultaneously extraordinarily creative and very, very gifted educators. So the move was really to encourage that next generation, to place a lot of confidence in them, to give them the means and the encouragement to develop what they were interested in. And yes, I think that worked.

What kind of feedback did you get from practicing architects?

Well, in the early days it was hysterical, because, as usual, they talked about the split between theory and practice, saying that what we were doing was absolutely irrelevant for the licensing board. By the mid '90s they were hiring Columbia students like crazy, because they knew how to do things that people in the offices didn't know how to do.

What kinds of things?

Occasionally jumps happen because of the combination between a design intention and the available technology. In this case I said that we had to bring the computer technology that we saw coming in the early '90s into the studios, not as something that was simply a help in drawing, but more as a conceptual tool. When I succeeded in convincing Columbia, I got quite a lot of help from them. I give Columbia a lot of credit for providing me with a very large grant to jump start computers in the studios. Within two, three years we were ahead of everybody in that field, indeed, *including* practice.

These days, amusingly enough – look, it's 10 years later – those young faculty members that people thought were completely way out, they have commissions. Some are way-out commissions, think of Greg Lynn or Bill MacDonald and Sulan Kolatan; others, like SHoP, do things for commercial developers. And these people, who were considered totally crazy experimentalists, can also show the profession it's real.

What is the current state of the paperless studio?

Everything is a paperless studio. The paperless studios were the experimental field for the first studios where every student had their computer and was working, supposedly, just with the computer. Now it's not only about 50 students, it's all the architecture students. Over 300 students, who soon will all have computers, and they have never produced so much paper. [Laughter] That's what's funny. It's not even an issue anymore; nobody thinks about it.

I've heard criticism in some circles that Columbia students are great renderers, but that they can't draw plans and sections.

Ah, I think that was true during a short period. I think it was true between, let's say, '95 and '97. But I would not express it exactly like that; I would be a little more technical. When we started, we had to use software that was from other fields. So you had, say, Greg Lynn, who would use software from fluid mechanics or from physics. You had others who would use software from the movie industry. I remember we had the software that made *Jurassic Park*. The experiment with all the software meant that, indeed, for a short period there was an incredible fascination with the production of images to the extent that many of our graduates were snatched away from architecture and went to work for the film industry or for the video game industry, earning three times as much as they would have earned in an architectural office. But that was only a brief period. Then eventually, as with any new technology, people settled down, so I would say this is not the case anymore. In other words, the conceptual, or the plan, strategy has become important again in the school. But indeed, for a period of time – it was a while – some people were playing with new toys. I used to say that the computer was anticonceptual and the big risk was that you were driven by the machine instead of you driving the machine. I think these days that has changed.



Do you work on the computer yourself?

Everybody around me does. I know how to use its effects, I understand how it works. But I wasn't even drawing anymore with a T square at the time. My little diagrams are all I need. Just hand drawing. Scribbles.

Do you think that's generational or just who you are?

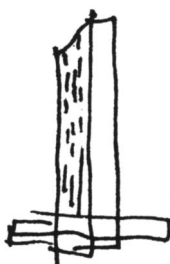
No, temperamental. I tend to always go for a concept, for a strategy, and the image is derived from that.

How many students do you see with that temperament today?

Not so many. But maybe it comes later. It is an interesting question . . .

Can I put it differently? Students have to submit a portfolio to be accepted to Columbia, right? How much of that is hand-drawn today?

Not as much as you would have seen 15 years ago. It's very clear that high school kids are learning Form Z at school; nowadays every kid knows how to use the computer. As soon as you do anything with any degree of precision, you will do it with the computer. If I had to draw a plan, I would never, never use a ruler and a pen, right? I would use a computer. I have recent graduates able to conceptualize something [on the computer]; I do it differently. It's probably the same with the way I write. I don't write necessarily the way certain people write on the word processor. Your question is interesting, because it has in a way major implications about how one thinks and the relationship between the head, the eye, and the hand. And that's crucial. I see people in this office who work conceptually the same way as I do, but they use the computer for it. Just now we are working on a project on a very tight schedule. I've stopped everything else, and for one week, I've put everybody, and we are 20 people here in the New York office, on that project, which is great for morale. Each one of us has an area of investigation. Some work on the computer exactly the way I work. But the advantage is that I am much faster than they are. Because that [gestures to his hand] is still faster than the fastest computers. Except they are a lot more precise. At the next step, they are definitely one step ahead of me.



But it's not just that your hand is faster, your head is faster, too.

Yeah, my head is faster. Do you know why? Because I have been at it for 25 years.

Right. It makes a difference!

This is the huge difference. I am horrified by the discussion about retirement at 55 in France. At 58, 59, I am *just* getting to the point where I am getting good at it.

Let me ask . . .

[Interrupts] But wait. I want to pick up on this age business in terms of education. A faculty member – it was Bill MacDonald, I believe – was asked by an accrediting board why some offices used to complain about students not being good when they come out of school. And he replied, “Yeah, but 10 years after school, they are among the best.” I hire people from Columbia straight out of graduation. Every year I hire two

or three, because they are good enough. In ten years, they indeed will be among the best.

Let's go back to the computer and temperament. Has there been any really good theorization of the computer in architecture? Something that kids would be working through, so that it's not just a prosthetic device?

Are you asking this in the same way as one would have once asked about a good theory of the perspective versus the axonometric or the section? That would be a natural starting point. During the early days of the Modern Movement, people defended the axonometric against the perspective; they were then highly polemical modes of representation. The computer now gives you *every* possible mode of representation, right? So you cannot generalize the computer. There is absolutely no way. Some of it is very static, some is very dynamic. Some is purely about perception, some is about unbelievably sophisticated geometries. So I don't think you can generalize a theory of the computer or it becomes a social theory, but not anything else. I think you can easily identify certain architectural developments that have been made possible by the computer even in the construction industry. There is no question about that. The question is if there has been one of those famous paradigmatic shifts.

Why did you stay at Columbia for 15 years?

I always said that I would stay at Columbia for as long as I enjoyed it and they enjoyed me. And after 15 years they still seem to enjoy me, I still enjoy them but I thought . . .

Leave while they still like you!

[Laughter] Right!

Where do you think education is going to go? Are you still going to teach or will you step back for a while?

Well, I am certainly going to step back for a year, just to allow for a lot of room for my successor. I have a lot of new projects that I want to focus on. At the moment, I plan to go back to teaching, but how and in which way I don't know yet.

Will you teach at Columbia?

Yes. I would not teach anywhere else. I enjoy the dialogue, because there are certain things you can do in a university context that you cannot do in an office context.

What would you teach?

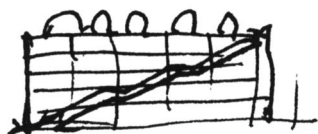
Two possibilities. One, of course, is a studio, but the other one is to teach a lecture course. Not a seminar – well, we will always teach seminars, right? – but more of a lecture course on the contemporary.

On the contemporary?

Yeah. Amusingly enough, we teach architecture 1750 to 1850, and then 1850 to 1950 and then there is nothing! So I would be interested in reexploring 1950 to the present.

How much do you think you were able to effect the changes that occurred at Columbia and how much do outside factors determine what's happening in education? How did you keep Columbia in the forefront?

A player?



As you correctly ask, it is always a combination of what is happening outside and what you want inside. There is no doubt that we benefited from the outside. From the inside, it was clear that I wanted to take the school to the next step. In other words, that it is ideas in architecture that keep it moving, not from one generation to another, but every five, seven, 10 years. I wanted Columbia to be a player in this dynamic.

A player. Not even a leader. A player. Then, little by little, circumstances helped to make it among the leaders. What were these circumstances? They were one: New York City. The fact of being here, where every good architect often lives or passes through. To get visitors in this city is so easy. To have a dialogue and discussion with people from all over the world, from Europe or from Japan, was absolutely straightforward, very easy to put together. Then also I tried to bring – despite enormous internal difficulties – people who would not have been allowed otherwise. Since I could not have them on the full-time faculty, I hired them every semester. That's what people called – you may remember – the “Columbia-rent-a-theorist program,” right? So the combination of the “rent-a-theorist program,” the young adjunct studio faculty, and being in New York could allow those changes to take place. Then, on top of it, the situation outside was very interesting. One perceived clearly a shift, a change from the postmodern to something else. So starting in '88, the MoMA show – it's a total coincidence, but it's an interesting coincidence that the “Deconstructivist Architecture” show was also '88 – also meant the discredit of all the people who were doing little hats on buildings. Hence there was a certain eagerness in inventing, in developing a new type of work among the young architects. This momentum was somehow implicit among the students we were getting and the faculty I was hiring. So that was something more like a historical moment. The fourth thing was, of course, money. When I arrived, the school was heavily in debt and had a so-called structural deficit – every year another quarter million dollars. Through technicalities and one idea, I was able to stop that and turn it the other way around. Then the economy became quite good and therefore we started to have money as a school, which allowed us to hire anyone we wanted and allowed us to reinforce the computer momentum, the fifth point being the technological breakthrough.

Is the end of the Tschumi-as-dean era another historical point?

There is absolutely no way you can identify a historical point when it's happening. It may very well be that, 10 or 15 years from now, we will look back and say whether 2003 or 2004 was a historical point or not.

Broadly speaking, what will be the biggest challenge in education for your successor?



Broadly, I believe that the schools nowadays are where the new takes place. In other words, if architecture is a territory, schools are where you explore the boundaries of that territory, push them further or break through them. The schools are the first place where that happens, whether it is because you have invited a person who is doing research somewhere, moving in this direction, and comes and shows it to a receptive audience, or it's the schools by themselves that produce it with the younger faculty members. I think that role of a school is crucial, and therefore the challenge is to keep using the school as a means to move to the next step. But always within architecture; it's too easy to go into advertising or into filmmaking or into whatever, to work as a rocket scientist. I think that architecture is still the reference point. If I were to say there is one challenge, that would be it.

If the school is the place that moves things, where did the school move you?

Me, Bernard?

Yes, you, the architect.

[Thinks] Okay, ask me in 15 years.

WE SAW BERNARD TSCHUMI DOODLE THE SKETCHES ACCOMPANYING THIS INTERVIEW DURING THE COLUMBIA EVENT, "THE STATE OF ARCHITECTURE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY," HELD MARCH 28-29, 2003. HE OFFICIALLY STEPPED DOWN FROM THE DEANSHIP ON AUGUST 31, WHEN MARK WIGLEY WAS NAMED ACTING DEAN.