

### **A as in Ambiguity**

Just like Stephen Shore's photos of America, you seem to like places and things that are not just unfinished but what Michael Fried has called "unfinishable." I sense that you are interested in situations that can never be fixed up. Somehow you like complexities that cannot be expressed simply in terms of "this is good, and that is bad." It seems that you find these sorts of places and things imaginatively liberating. Combining a surfboard with a bowling ball as a piece of furniture, or provoking us with titles such as "Toxic Ecology," or spinning other theatrical stories seems to indicate that you are interested in ambiguous and even contradictory constellations (at times positively schizophrenic in character). What gives ambiguity (correct me if I am wrong) so much potential?

**Leonard Cohen sings: "Forget the perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." Roland Barthes also tells us that "where the garment gapes" is where the erotic has its locus. One of my first books was titled *Building the Unfinished*. All three offer openings – escapes – futures. The unpredictable.**

**The ambiguous has been with me from the very beginning – I never knew for sure who either of my grandfathers was. I am drawn to the enigma that never disappears, why I don't know.**

**So what happens when you insert a bowling ball into a surfboard and call the hybrid table a "floor-mouse"? You get (aside from its tableness) at least three other trajectories, each leading away from tabledom – stealing its genus. Ambiguity opens the object to others by diverting the designer's synthetic intention. But when you try to make it your own, the table figuratively slips away into a bowling alley, or into the tube of a huge wave breaking toward a beach in Hawaii, or into the world of the computer mouse. Meanwhile the supposed table**

**smiles at us ambiguously, Sphinx-like. Because it knows that despite its versatility, it is simultaneously uniquely itself. Slipping out of any orthodox claim on meaning, it belongs to the world.**

**Architects are hopelessly mired in the perfect object; I guess that prohibits me from claiming the title. Ambiguity is my muse – my escape route – my hope for redemption.**

### **B as in Becoming**

As you have stated elsewhere, you see the dichotomy between city and suburb as a real obstacle to rethinking architecture and with it humanity in our urban age. It is all about the suburban metropolis today, full of unpredictable, wild, and radical becoming. It looks as if – on first sight – that the urban age today, with its endless city, is producing (by itself now) what you always have been looking for: permanent becoming full of ambiguity. What are the risks of such becoming and the potentials of the current urban developments when we understand the city as an entity beyond its fixed form? At times you even celebrate suburbia (*stimdross*)...

**The dichotomy is both conceptual and actual. If we see city/suburb as a Janus face, where the suburb is the “guilty conscience” of the city (since the city couldn’t satisfy the fleeing middle class), and thus make the two umbilically connected, a new consciousness under the rubric of urbanism emerges.**

**The radical becoming that I suggest lies dormant in suburbia is embedded in its incompleteness. In its unevolved “stupidity” lies the hope that with time suburbia will shed its adolescence and come of age. Here I (naively?) put my money on IT – on the virtual – which is beginning to compensate for suburbia’s physical impediments.**

**J. G. Ballard suggests that suburbia is a “huge petting zoo” full of furry animals. This suggests that suburbia may be infantile in its cheery fluffiness, but one day the cute pets may bite back. So we as urbanists, much like good parents, need to affirm suburbia’s well-being by gently petting it, but at the same time urge it to take a larger responsibility for the metropolis – an acknowledgment that suburbia, like a mollusk, now lives in attached symbiosis with the city. Only in tandem will city and suburb meet the challenges of the future.**

**Human foolishness – and suburbia may be one good example – is also our hapless acknowledgment that we don’t really know where we came from and where we are heading. This leads us back to “A”: our destiny is ultimately ambiguous.**

### **C as in Critique**

Can we still speak of resistance or critique in architecture? Are you a supporter of the Projective (versus the Critical), as advocated by Bob Somol and Sarah Whiting? Or is there a third position?

**If I understand Projective practice correctly, it suggests that you criticize by projecting a better future – deed over word. My own “practice” uses analytical descriptions to project a reading that is akin to deconstruction, revealing “where the garment gapes” or “where the light comes in,” while avoiding direct criticism. I must confess that I generally find critique overrated and plagued by self-righteousness. If you look back at my writing, you see that my ambition has been to find “better explanations,” and I have rarely, if ever, written about “things” that I don’t like (which suggests that I am critical, too, but perform this in privacy and reflect it in my choice of work to consider). I have a distinct affection for interpretation and thus hermeneutics, and see my work as a modest contribution to this field.**

**I leave criticism to the young and to brilliant critics like Dave Hickey and Michael Sorkin.**

**D as in Death of Architecture**

At first – on your *arrival* in America– you seem to “hate” capitalism. Like Manfredo Tafuri, you conclude that architecture is dead, and that our permanent values have lost their permanence and their manifestation in the city fabric. But later – confronted by, and living in, Houston – you start to be less pessimistic. You come to the conclusion that the resistance of traditional architecture in the face of radical mobility demands a rethinking rather than viewing it as an escape. Architecture should no longer be seen as a kind of static enterprise but instead as a form of software. Does this mean that somehow through your experiences in America your idea of architecture has changed? You have been a friend of Aldo Rossi – and today his plea for absolute architecture is returning... What is your “definition” of architecture?

**Yes, my evolution from “hating” to ambiguously “accepting” the current conditions is evident – today it is very hard for me to hate. Living in Houston has made me a compliant victim of the Stockholm Syndrome.**

**Architecture will most certainly remain as long as *homo faber* exists, while the Architect – as some Foucauldian drawing on the beach – may disappear or be transformed until we no longer recognize it. Architecture therefore is a “moving feast” that architects may choose to forego – in the US they have done a very good job at leaving the responsibility to others: construction managers and market consultants are two examples.**

**For me everything artificial, soft and hard, is architecture with a small *a*. At the same time, I would be sad if Architecture with a capital *A* disappeared. I once asked Aldo, “What is your favorite**

**architecture?” To which he answered, holding me in his dreamy gaze, “The architecture of my friends.” I am afraid I am caught in the same sentimentality. Yet I view proclamations about Architecture’s death as premature, not unlike Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history.”**

**Despite my deep affection for the vernacular, my long training in the “finer things of bourgeois life” will not leave me until my vision goes. A finely shaped human ankle – male or female – will catch my eye as readily as the rhino-induced shape of an imaginary shell produced by a student.**

**In the end, my preference is for the broken and the used, not unlike traditional Japanese ideals. However, my own predilections are not messianic; in this sense I have no problem with the practitioners of the absolute.**

### **E as in Education**

Given the current condition of the Metropolis, you have rethought architecture education at the Rice School of Architecture. How do you see the role of the university (as an independent institute educating professional architects as well as public intellectuals who think further than what the client wants), the student, and academic research? Several international schools have abandoned individual (thesis) research and focus instead upon units led by a professor who produces architectural knowledge in collaboration with the students. Mapping the real, along with architectural expertise (technology) and even CAD-generated advanced forms (leading to “blobalization”), has become the trend today. What are the risks and advantages of these trends and shifts of focus in architecture education? And what would you advise the next RSA dean and his/her colleagues to do next? Or is the passion for the real (mapping and technology) enough?

**Let me begin by saying that my tolerance for others’ preoccupations is considerably greater than my tolerance for my own. Therefore**

**intersubjectivity has dominated my teaching, combined with what I call the “kiss & kick” method. (This is particularly important with American students who often confuse life with art.) Thus “kissing the ego” plus tough, direct, and honest criticism has been my way: i.e., “You are a great person, but the project is not good.”**

**So, in terms of the new, I tolerate it – in fact, encourage it – as long as we don’t lose track of the “design activity” so beautifully defined by Herbert Simon. Given that the field of architecture is extremely wide and generous, as educators we must go with this flow. That it helps older people like myself to stay relevant (without really trying) is a side benefit. (In the privacy of my home, I can still drool over minimalism or my preference for the borderline surreal as in the misanthropic interiors of Jean-Michel Frank.)**

**I am concerned by your suggestion that “making” is being replaced by a passion for the real. My concern stems from my belief that “in order to see, we must act,” which, if I am not mistaken, comes from Heinz von Foerster, whose cybernetics is one of my cornerstones. This dictum suggests that we must take the leap before we can really see. Thus making is the vehicle for seeing. This makes architectural education a very important and lucky enterprise. The architect is the embodiment of the *homo faber*. With due respect for the “real,” to abandon this gift is self-destructive.**

**It is clear that architectural practice is always a teamwork process, making collaborative studios an obvious response. But if this means abandoning the evolution of the self in its own space and time, I beg to differ with the obvious. Especially since all real teams have leaders, and unless you choose a leader in a collaborative studio, the experience remains unreal. I have never understood why we always have to reinvent the wheel. We could use a bit more gracious**

**acknowledgment that the new complexity engulfing us all must be managed and navigated with considerably better tools than simple abandonment of yesterday's activity in favor of today's. Just as sex and food are necessary for a good life, making is a necessary ingredient in a design school – I bet this will never change.**

### **F as in Film**

In a film, each character follows a series of paths, which intersect with the paths of other characters, and the spectator classifies different locations in terms of their spatial, social, and psychological relationships with the characters. The same is true of buildings, but architects seem to take the plot (and its programming) hardly ever seriously. I believe there is so much to learn from film – how architecture in film (and theatre) always gives priority to meaning and use instead of “just” form. What architects forget is that reality is all about our emotional inner life – the chaotic, fierce world full of affects, fears, associations, contradictions, desires, and nightmares. According to Slavoy Zizek,<sup>1</sup> cinema is the right medium by which to arrive at the reality in your mind. So what is your favorite film?

**There are a couple of interesting dilemmas that appear when we use film as a metaphor for architecture.**

**Despite all its subplots, a film is determined to drive its narrative to its conclusion. Roman Polanski has said that “movies should make you forget that you are in a movie,” and that is not exactly the case with architecture. In film, you have to have a willing subject who is able to abandon life for the movie's reality. The camera movement is the action that awakens the seeing eye. That is why movies are so compelling – so “real.”**

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<sup>1</sup> See also his 2006 BBC series “The pervert's guide to the cinema.”

**The architect, however, is only in charge of the setting, not the plot. Buildings need to serve diverging and different narratives. And unfortunately, as Martin Pawley once wrote, “Architecture is not a radio.” Architecture cannot create (broadcast) meaning, emotion, or awareness without a willing subject who is able to engage it. The peculiar muteness of a building works in at least two ways. First, it is true that architects ignore the importance of the program and ignore meaning, but when the experience of a building is good, none of those concerns matter: the goodness comes from the interaction between architecture and subject. As is often said (with a slight twist), “a building is only as good as its client” – the client here being the user. Second, the muteness allows for interpretation – action, desire, and determination. Thus, any building can be good provided the subject is inventive enough. A scary thought for the architect who believes he or she determines behavior.**

**In the end, I don’t like to confuse different practices. Architecture is strong enough to survive by itself. This certainty probably stems from my affection for, and belief in, its autonomy (as suggested by its muteness), but also from my long struggles with the various professions that are trying to hijack architecture: social scientists, do-gooders, bankers, psychologists, and artists. The only practitioners I like to share architecture with are philosophers, economists, engineers, and those in the building trades.**

**Since life flows on and memory lapses are one of my devices to stay young, my favorite films are both forgotten and probably ever changing. My first love must have been Robin Hood with Alan Ladd, and a bit later Zbigniew Cybulski in Polanski’s *Knife in the Water*, but I have forgotten the plot (remembering only the cool glasses that Zbig wore). Then Ingmar Bergman, over and over again. But my loves,**



**directly connected to my purported generosity, are wide ranging, from Benny Hill to Jean-Luc Godard. Oh, I forgot Rita Hayward. So on the subject of favorites, I am hopeless.**

### **G as in Guilt**

You can make an industry out of guilt – Daniel Libeskind has made a name for himself painstakingly recording the trauma of the twentieth century – but what irritates me is how journalists and those in academia attacked Rem Koolhaas for constructing the mouthpiece of totalitarian China (CCTV in Beijing). Architects cannot afford the luxury of retreating into the comfortable space of the critic, but must get their hands dirty in negotiation with reality. In that sense, all architects are guilty... China, says Rem Koolhaas, is still a state. He claims that this allows him to focus on the public interest – rather than using aesthetics as a cover for the sacrifice of personal principles to a capitalist regime that puts the profit motive above all else. “Money is a less fundamental tenet of their ideology,” says Rem Koolhaas. How do you “judge” architecture?

**After a decade of self-righteousness exported by our own political and economic systems, it is hard to enter the guilt industry with much enthusiasm, although architecture may have a privileged status in such a debate. Just as I don't believe there is Fascist architecture – only Fascists – commodious building is a plus in any system. It may become trickier if what you design is housing for alleged terrorists in Guantanamo, although you may escape guilt by making humane rooms (albeit for inhumane activities). If we appreciate Rem's project for its commitment to the “public interest,” the building is clearly “awesome.” But with caveats: what, for instance, have he and the contractors done to diminish the possibility of injury during construction? During 2005, there were some 250,000 work-related accidents in China, clearly a public interest issue. In other words,**

**there are many complex ethical issues intertwined within the fundamentally positive design activity.**

**How do I judge architecture? When I do, mostly in my mind, I look for “the cracks where the light comes in.” I am thinking here of Peter Celsing’s central bank in Stockholm, for me one of the most intriguing buildings of the twentieth century. It is full of surprises and strange gaps of reason, beginning at the majestic granite façade. At first appearing solid and heroic, it becomes upon closer scrutiny profoundly unsettling: is it structure or mere surface – carrying or merely hanging? No visual scrutiny helps here; the eye must rely on faith – *Hinc Robur et Securitas* (In This Rests Our Security), as Swedish paper currency declares. Although I wrote a major research paper on the bank, I never wanted to solve the puzzle, just as I prefer not to know how someone does a card trick. Unfortunately for me, there are very few if any buildings filled with such enigmatic power. The closest I have found is in the field of painting, especially Giorgio de Chirico’s oeuvre, both the radical and the neoclassical periods of his work.**

**Being *halbstark*, or half-strong (referring to the German word for 1950s adolescent rebels), may be a central tenet in my approach to evaluating architecture. Simultaneous weakness and strength. Wise counsel given that a unified theory of everything has yet to account for gravity.**

### **H as in Hesitation**

For a moment I was not sure which word to choose, but then I understood (from your writings on “The Metropolitan Architect” in *After the City*) that the architect’s Hand, his/her principle of Hope, and the architect’s House (habitation proper) only get their true meaning through the concept of Hesitation. Without

hesitation, there is no life for you, no future, and no architecture worth speaking of. Why is that? And could you perhaps give us some hints as to how to produce hesitation? (Can the tools of hesitation be smooth, striated, violent, and/or representational? In what way are the floor plans, framing of the view, tectonics, etc., different from the “norm”?) What kind of specific freedoms do they produce? Albert Frey’s desert house in Palm Springs is indeed amazing, but are there any contemporary architects you can think of who work in this “tradition” too?

**To hesitate is to acknowledge that we don’t yet know, and the only way to overcome not-knowing is to act in a partial fog. This requires a belief in the self, in fate. Fools and heroes may not notice, or appreciate, this moment of suspended animation. Frey, out there in the hysterically vibrating heat of the desert, knew or just felt how to act or let be. Like a puma, he knew, maybe instinctively, when to strike and when to wait. A very unusual sensibility, it is probably found only among architects whose feet and mind are on the site – the rhino-motored architect is a very different creature. (Are there any new pumas? I think we may be breeding some at Rice.)**

### **I as in Immediacy**

Walter Benjamin speaks about the fact that criticism must change and that the model for this change is the advertisement or, simply, anything that creates a “perceived contact with things” – like the space of the street. This approach (beyond critique) taps into the touch of, and fascination with, everyday life: how people are touched by it, blown away by it, or simply “warmed by the subject” and so desire it. In a more theoretical sense, Benjamin tells us that this critical approach, like advertising, should affect the reader and user through visceral projections of “fragmented” intensity that circumvent any form of contemplation. This intensity (distraction) is something like a “burst of energy” that affects the very life of the subject. What seems privileged in this approach is immediacy, that bolus of direct experience, those lines of flight that cannot be reflected by any

dominant social system because they cannot, by definition, exhaust all social experience. The unknown always potentially contains space for alternative intentions that are not yet articulated as social institution or even project. What is the power of the immediate according to you, now that capitalism has discovered the subversive power of everyday life? Several artists, designers, and architects have embraced the everyday and mass culture – like Droog Design and architecture in the Netherlands – but it also has to do with the fascination with cities like Houston, Lagos, and Dubai, and it doesn't stop there. Activism (and with it a return to the sixties), creating networks of participation and interaction among different people, is being advocated nowadays.

**Immediacy, proximity, and nearness require what I have called “mechanisms of closeness,” or design machines where people and environments are bound together in conspiracy – in common purpose. There seems to be an aversion against such intimacy in American society – a fear of pollution, of losing the self. Yet, at the same time, the ancient distinction between mind and body is being seriously questioned, and subsequently so is the distinction between finite individual and environment. To experience the “burst of energy,” there can be no distinction between the dancer and the dance, between the dwellers and the environment. Again we must have collusion – a willing subject.**

**I am not sure that everyday life has the particular privilege of being more conducive than architecture to such “hot” interaction. So much of our daily life is driven by agendas that literally use the environment merely as a vehicle because their conclusions lie in the immediate future. Thus getting to the coffeehouse is like a jump cut in a movie, a blank, maybe even an annoyance. And the crowd in the street may promote some togetherness, but unless there is a hot spot – a “flock-event,” i.e., suddenly you encounter Baudelaire with a turtle on a leash – this too is just a blank. In my world humans have to awaken**

**the environment by colluding in its promises, not the other way around.**

**J as in Joke (and Joy)**

Whatever happened to humor, parody, and laughter in architecture? I think architecture takes itself much too seriously, and the critics are even worse. I do know that you enjoy the humor of much contemporary Dutch architecture. I am curious to find examples and a definition of the potential of *jouissance* in architecture, and I would be thrilled if you could speculate upon what architectural laughter could activate.

**Beginning with Celsing's bank, I think it is clear that architecture can provoke "curiosity + puzzlement," while standing in front of the world's longest bridge, tallest building, or longest pool may result in "awe." Looking at Rossi's school in Bologna, Italy, brings out "melancholy," and Coop Himmelb(l)au's "apartment on fire" in Vienna prompts "immediacy." But "laughter" seems much harder to find. Of course, if you turn to roadside architecture, Fast Food Ducks and Giant Sausages evokes "mirth," and when arriving in Vegas, you can even feel "hilarity." But I think you are asking for more. The Lacanian version of *jouissance* in contradistinction to *plaisir*, or enjoyment, is hard to grasp in English (maybe for prudish reasons since *jouissance* has sexual connotations). Jacques Lacan opposes the two to suggest that Freud's pleasure principle limits rather than promotes and enhances *jouissance*, which in turn pushes pleasure to the point where it slips into pain.**

**Again architecture has its media constraints, illustrated by its muteness, and since I side with life rather than art, architecture fails me in this particular pursuit.**

## **K as in Kitsch**

“When I hear the word ‘culture,’ I reach for my gun,” Joseph Goebbels once said. “When I hear the word ‘culture,’ I reach for my checkbook,” says the cynical producer in Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Le Mépris*. And a leftist slogan inverts Goebbels’s statement: “When I hear the word ‘gun,’ I reach for culture.” Indeed culture has become mainstream, almost as big an industry as the military. In that sense the subversive quality of the avant-garde (and its pleasure principle) has become a potent energy source for the creative class, from Andy Warhol to Damien Hirst, and the experience economy it is running. No wonder that “starchitects” and their iconic buildings are celebrated these days. How would you position architecture once it becomes part of this mass culture of kitsch? Does kitsch have potential? Should we ignore the spectacle-ization of life altogether – return to silence and autonomy – or rework it from within, look for the gaps, ride its waves like a buccaneer?

**Kitsch as a way for the elite to separate themselves from those with bad taste has suffered inflation. Now “bad taste” is so prevalent that the word *kitsch* may have lost its punch. I don’t see much hope for kitsch, first because it has lost its ability to differentiate, and second because, when it does distinguish the good from the ugly, it is still just bad taste. My analytical affection for suburbia may have influenced my thought here, since everything built there is “as if” – whether English Tudor, French Provincial, or Spanish Hacienda – but when you look closer at houses built within these narrow stylistic confines, you find innovation that makes it almost okay.**

**The celebrity culture is, of course, deeply longing for more celebrity, now at any cost. Among the momentarily chosen – every year someone is airbrushed away and replaced by some new phenomena – one senses an internal bonhomie that reveals the volatility, vacuity, and fear of fading behind such fame. Having been a backbencher in**

**the reality shows featuring practitioners of the Bilbao Effect, I have concluded all you need is Charlie Rose and a coterie of Peters, Jacques, and Zahas, all indulging in blogging *vivante* – and always acting as if there is no audience. Here bad taste has reached its nadir: the only one who seems to remain unscathed is Charlie Rose. The only feeling left for us sitting in darkness is envy and loss. The venerable architectural discipline has been reduced to providing endless bandwidth to the personality cult. Kitsch has been replaced by vanity.**

**A commodious Tudor, basking in bucolic suburban splendor, is far more consequential to millions of suburbanites than the recent Olympic “Bird’s Nest” stadium, whose image on our TV screens will now be beamed up to the advertising world to sell perfumes and puff pastry. So if I have to make a bet on kitsch, its central locus is still Dallas – silence in this light seems wonderful.**

### **L as in Lars Lerup**

Today’s neo-conservatism (and fundamentalism) makes us believe that strangers – i.e., the immigrant – can only bring harm. I believe the opposite is true: it is the immigrant – the unknown knocking at the door, that which is new to us – who brings innovation. Innovation starts when we are part of at least two cultures. In what sense did the power of exile produce innovation for you? After all, you were Swedish American of the Year in 2004. And how can we understand the cultural interdependence (exchange) between America and Europe (besides noting America’s obvious problems of imperialism). And last but not least, what are your next steps into the future after leaving your deanship?

**As you probably know by now, I reject most categorical arguments. Thus, I have trouble with your premises. Immigrants like myself may work hard, and be occasionally effective, but we are also lost souls. We have lost our culture, our language, our bearings, to become**

**chameleons capable of turning any color. My personal loss has been considerable, leaving me with an ever-returning melancholy for a lost paradise. First, I found an American Utopia That Never Fails to Disappoint the European in Me, and simultaneously Sweden faded in favor of that Utopia's constant volatility. So I became a navigator in search of a harbor. And at all my landfalls, I have found unusual acts of both cruelty and kindness in all populations regardless of their status.**

**When I look out my office window here at Rice University, I know that most of the Mexican-Americans that cleaned up the campus after Hurricane Ike have no power at home, no ice and no water, and no schools open for their children. As in New Orleans, FEMA is doing a spotty job. Hovering over their heads is also a set of anti-immigrant policies recently evolved in a country that would not exist without immigrants. Clearly absurd. During a recent visit in Sweden, I saw rows of idle Iraqi immigrants twirling their worry-beads, amply supported by the Swedish welfare system and worrying about the demise of their own country. Clearly absurd.**

**Here is where I resort to *pensiere debole*, or weak thought, suggesting that human existence – immigrant or otherwise – is a cold that we can never overcome but must learn to cope with until it kills us. The notion that either of the Left/Right political duality has some dormant potential to solve our deeply imbedded weakness is, of course, absurd. Consumerism will heal all wounds, at least momentarily, while catastrophes like Ike will awaken us – at least momentarily.**

**M as in Myth**



I think there exists an unbridgeable distance between arguments, which appeal to our capacity to become enthusiastic, and our feeling for concrete, practical aims. A growing mytho-aesthetic dimension has made our Western culture *inoffensive* to an extent we have never seen before. Of course, says Franco Moretti, “*inoffensive* does not mean useless. But here it is a *usefulness* with a different function from that usually attributed to culture.” The *usefulness* of architecture produced by the cultural industry includes the theories (discourses) of academia, the many exhibitions, the endless mappings of reality as found, the never ending talks about everything and nothing avoiding judgement, and the publications and symposia on architecture and the city, etc. In our civilization, we do not use culture to orient ourselves – for good or for evil – but instead we live in order to consume culture. And I agree with Moretti, who says that “this consumption is no longer useful to assure a ‘consensus’ centering on the values capable of directing the individual’s behavior in those fields which we consider fundamental – political life and, especially, work – but rather to empty those fields of all symbolic value: to reduce them to mere means lacking all intrinsic value. The frantic vogue-driven curiosity which dominates within the system of mass culture is symmetrical and complementary to the bored and slightly obtuse indifference nourished with regard to work and politics.”<sup>2</sup> We seem to enjoy the fruits of late capitalism as a sort of miracle without asking too many questions. The gap between culture and politics has become grotesque. The Right acts big, while the Left has lost its hopes and aspirations to give significance to the world. Do you agree with me that this “talking shop” culture is a rather disquieting state of affairs? Aren’t we in need of alternative forms of social, political, and ethical engagement: experiments and experiences that are useful and even offensive in character? Shouldn’t we develop another “Mythical Method” that can be useful for the world? Perhaps you can speak of examples/ideas/methods that work toward this direction today (a fruitful mix between myth and reality; if I remember well, the last chapters in your new book are about this too).

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<sup>2</sup> Franco Moretti, “From the Waste Land to the Artificial Paradise,” in *Signs Taken for Wonders* (London: Verso, 1983).

**Architecture has always had a mythic dimension because of its future orientation. Architecture has never been possible without hope. In this sense I feel that architecture is insulated from politics – when you assess a palace for a dictator, the building itself is guilt-free, even if its construction used resources that could have fed the poor. This argument is, of course, very dicey, yet I must admit to subscribing to it. Here I am probably deeply Rossian, or better Tafurian, who thought that the paper architecture of the New York Five or “whites” was okay in the face of the collapsed project of the Left. The very positivity of making is profoundly human – once the dictator has been toppled, the palace will be a school for the disadvantaged.**

**My favorite writers, Jorge Luis Borges and J. G. Ballard, write about possible worlds that have not yet arrived but very likely will. I like the fulcrum between reality and myth, since it is the source of interpretation – my own core business. Is it useful for the world? Beats me. But I will say this: B & B have made my life a lot more interesting.**

### **N as in Nature**

All the fashionable buzzwords I associate with green politics I find highly problematic. They take ideology out of the equation of political life. Al Gore ‘s plea against global warming – although his facts are “correct” – avoids any debate about the logic of late capitalism itself. Instead of being Red, the Left has become Green, celebrating consensus and management (just like the Third Way politics of Tony Blair) as if it is just a matter of fine-tuning the motor of neoliberalism. What is your concept of Nature? How green are you? How toxic (political) is your ecology?

**Nature as we have conceived it during my lifetime no longer exists. Progress has seen to that. Now life is a complex fusion between**

**Nature and culture. In some areas one of the two dominates. In the case of the city, culture dominates, particularly so in the traditional city. The suburban city may be a place where both equally rule.**

**Your political concerns seem to stem from the need to find and challenge the culprit destroying Nature. Having seen the Baltic's gradual dying, largely because the Left (Russia) has slowly but surely polluted it, suggests to me that "human progress" rather than "political ideology" lies behind its demise. (The armchair leftists who sit in comfortable seats all over the Western world are to be neither counted on nor blamed since they have zero power.)**

**The green issue is much larger and more complex than the squabble between political ideologies. Of course, this does not mean that this greening is not a highly charged political issue, and that capitalists without a conscience, just like state industries without one, will not do everything in their power to ship (or sell) their pollutants down the river. Being both a pragmatist and skeptic, I believe it is necessary to "build as naturally as possible," rather than use "sustainability" as the goal – sustainability is unattainable and always will be since we don't really know what it means. If you allow me a metaphor: "Society, whether steered by the Left or the Right (or anything in-between), is a very large ship that will take enormous effort to turn." So those in power have to exercise both patience and cunning to do the turning. Toxic events, like the one I am sitting through at this moment (Hurricane Ike), are sobering and will result in change, so if you have any heavenly connections, ask them to "bring it on."**

**O as in Oppression**

Antonio Negri's choice for O in his alphabet (*Negri on Negri*<sup>3</sup>) is the word *Oppression*. He states that oppression has become invisible. One no longer knows where to look for oppression. One finds oneself suffering from a kind of mental block regarding the definition of oppression. New forms of immaterial oppression can be found in the media, new technologies, and the service sectors, or emerging from the flexibility and ferocious mobility of the labor market. "The big difficulty," says Negri, "is that it is no longer possible to identify a specific form of oppression capable of provoking an equally specific form of resistance. Perhaps the term *oppression* should be replaced by *exclusion*, or perhaps by *destitution*, *suffering*, or *poverty*." And "Oppression is so nebulous that it can't be named, so diffuse and so gray that responding to it is hard. (...) The same army drops bombs, propaganda, packages of medicine and supplies: liberation or oppression?" This is difficult to answer, says Negri. "What we have to do is find a way to dispel the fog of oppression, to invent new alternatives, to learn to struggle against an invisible enemy, a non-identifiable oppressor." How do you see this? Are there invisible enemies in architecture? Should we indeed teach students to fight, build alternatives, and dispel the fog of oppression in architecture?

**Michel Foucault suggested a long time ago that centralized power is now atomized and that the "disciplinary society" lives in (and is performed by) all of us. Closely associated with discipline, oppression (as Negri suggests) comes in a multitude of versions, from family to society. Having struggled philosophically with the oppressive consequences of architectural form, as played out in my book *Planned Assaults*, I have come to believe that, yes, we will stumble over Marcel Duchamp's coat hanger nailed to the floor (*Trebuchet*, 1917), but real oppression comes from *human beings employing architectural form to oppress each other*. Any building can be turned**

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<sup>3</sup> *Negri on Negri: In Conversation with Anne Dufourmentelle* (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2004).

**into a torture chamber. Meanwhile, form itself retains autonomy by virtue of “not being a radio.”**

**In terms of teaching, I do not believe that we should teach students guerrilla tactics, but we should stick to excavation, deconstruction, hermeneutics, and analysis to allow them to freely project. We must refrain from oppression, in this case ideological oppression, and rely instead on “caring for others” – rather than “speaking for others,” which Foucault saw as the worst of sins.**

### **P as in Postmodernism**

While I champion your idea of ambiguity and your deliberate method of postponing judgment when you excavate reality (as in Houston), it is less clear to me where you stand. After all, no regime is more in love with the multiple and the dynamic than late capitalism. Ambiguity can be easily misunderstood as the ultimate postmodern *jouissance*: to “enjoy,” to realize your potential, to take delight in all manner of ways, from intense sexual pleasures through social success and spiritual self-fulfillment. Ambiguity can also be associated with Gianni Vattimo’s “weak thought”: the interpretation-is-all celebration of difference, otherness, and endless diversity. Alain Badiou said somewhere that our worlds lack a “point,” that we have arrived at “atonal” worlds. Anything that imposes a principle of “ordering” into the world, the point of a simple decision (yes or no), has disappeared in our confused reality. Simply put, then: Are you a postmodernist or do you believe that a new social order is already latent within our existing condition? Is another modernity perhaps arising from the creative destruction inherent in capitalism itself? Can your idea of ambiguity – as part of the open city (open work) – have a social direction or enforce a standpoint? (I know you are fully aware that the very forces that make for human misery and oppression can also make for emancipation and well-being, but what do we need beyond what postmodernism advocates?)

**Many years ago Vattimo told me after he heard my lecture on the Parthenon that I was “more postmodern than he.” Since then I have come to realize that it is harder to know oneself than to have coherent views of others. So I think that you – in a subtle way – are suggesting that I am hopelessly postmodern, a sufferer of “weak thought.” It is also clear that my public persona is much more provocative than my private self, where I am instead hopelessly bourgeois – often even snobbish. I like these two states, since invariably one feeds the other. Both states are informed by “a hope for liberty for all” – for freedom – and by an intense need to be intersubjective, a need that has often driven me to take other people’s views much more seriously than my own. I became a teacher because I like to be on the stage, but also because I am deeply interested in others’ thought. If this makes me postmodern, so be it.**

### **Q as in Quasi-object**

Architects love to talk about objects. It is their matter-of-fact world, while users are more concerned with what objects produce. With the term “quasi-object,” the continuing interplay between objects and people is emphasized by thinkers such as Bruno Latour, Michel Serres and myself<sup>4</sup>. It is mentally easier to divide humans from objects, but I do believe we have to start to understand objects as comprehensive and interdependent, in much the way you also speak of the erasure of the distinction between subject and object. We too often have looked to the world and declared: people are alive, while objects are dead; people can think, while objects just lie there. In fact, this taxonomical division blinds us to the ways in which, and means by which, objects do change us, and it obscures the areas where architecture can intervene to reshape things. For that reason I prefer to talk about the quasi-object instead of the classical object. Those quasi-objects are both social and technical. Agency is the key to understanding and creating them. The quasi-object establishes and enables relations through its assemblages and

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<sup>4</sup> “The Quasi-Object. Aesthetics as a form of politics”, by Roemer van Toorn in *Die Realität des Imaginären. Architektur und das digitale Bild*, Verlag der Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Juni 2008.

aesthetic complexity. Quasi-objects invite the user to complete them through action – by relating to them in movement. In that sense they also have a moral obligation: after all, they need to be used. How do you see the architecture object? Some of your furniture designs seem to act like quasi-objects (*Room*, 19??): they migrate into the field of the sensory, one that is tactile, auditory, and visual. Meanwhile your housing designs, like the Nofamily House, Love/House, Texas Zero (*Planned Assaults*, 1987), “function” like sentences, creating fiction (drama) out of familiar narratives. Did your perception of the object change over time, from telling stories (representation) to enacting events (presence)...?

**I am entirely in agreement here. I find the idea of quasi-objects extremely useful. One of my fundamental beliefs, as I have said, comes from cybernetics and Heinz von Foerster’s dictum that “in order to see, we must act.” This makes it clear that our existence is driven – indeed motivated by – action, by leaps of faith. It suggests in turn that inanimate objects are incredibly important because they may help us to see things in new and inspiring ways. In this sense I am all for the exploration of new form. Maybe more intriguingly, objects can be more or less “quasi.” An all too familiar object becomes just a servant in our daily errands – a mere tool to be used up – while unfamiliar objects are more alive, more tentative, more ambiguous, and therefore more “quasi,” suggesting that new form is essential for our advancement. As you say, these objects begin to infiltrate us and become more lifelike, more like verbs...**

### **R as in Ruins**

Cities are full of fabricated memories at the expense of the original experience. Hidden and controversial memories of a place often disappear. Peter Eisenman’s recent war memorial in Berlin not only dismantles but also neutralizes much of war’s horror with its formal architectural gesture. He creates a ruin without memory. What role does the memory of the city – the idea of history – play in your work? Walter Benjamin in his *Arcades* project represents and critiques the

bourgeois experience of the nineteenth century and, in so doing, liberates the suppressed “true history” that underlies the ideological mask. Benjamin finds the lost time(s) embedded in the space of things. In your *Toxic Ecology*, you represent and critique the urban landscape of the twenty-first century in Houston in a similar manner and, in doing so, propose possible routes to come. What kind of potential ruin is Houston? And how should we understand memory in this middle landscape?

**It is interesting that you call Eisenman’s Berlin project “a ruin without memory,” since I see it as the opposite: a dead city where everything is petrified and turned into inanimate matter – truly frozen music. For me, every horror from the ultimate hurricane to the Nazi tortures can be read here in its most dour form. The undulating, seemingly unstable ground, giving all the gray boxes a more or less precarious tilt, reveals how ephemeral everything is. Is this not the ultimate purpose of memory – to remind us, and to remind us collectively? Every time I have been there, masses of people are wandering through, and everyone but the youngest ones look thoughtful. As I have said above, often the more abstract an object is, the more it becomes a true quasi-object.**

**If Houston loses power in all its various forms, it will look like Eisenman’s project.**

### **S as in Suburbanization**

With globalization, a certain cosmopolitanism has arrived in our lives, something the elite in the nineteenth century could only dream of in their Parisian cafés. The human condition has itself become cosmopolitan, says Ulrich Beck. “A sense of boundarylessness, an everyday, historically alert, reflexive awareness of ambivalences in a milieu of blurring differentiations and cultural contradictions emerges. It reveals not just the ‘anguish’ but also the possibility of shaping one’s



own life and social relations under conditions of cultural mixture.” The result of this cosmopolitanism is a patchwork of urbanities who are quasi-cosmopolitan and simultaneously provincial. Beck calls it “banal cosmopolitanism.” The modest, familiar, local, circumscribed, or stable – in short, our protective shell – is becoming the site of broadly universal experience; place, whether it be Houston or Moscow, Stockholm or Amsterdam, becomes the locus of encounters and interminglings – or alternatively of anonymous coexistence and the overlapping of possible worlds with global dangers. All of this requires us to rethink the relation between place and the world. What we need, according to Beck, and I fully agree with him, is a new cosmopolitan outlook where the intermingling between us and them, the national and the international, the provincial and the global, is developed through a new political vision. Am I correct that your new book, *Toxic Ecology...*, instead of discounting the world of suburbia as an arena of action, sees it as a potential place for just such a political vision, a place full of ingredients to counter banal cosmopolitanism? Do you see Houston as the powerhouse of the political?

**Yes, you are correct. I am fully aware that my suggestion that software (IT) will reanimate the stolid carcass of suburban hardware and that a new quasi-urbanity will result is extremely naïve and hopeful. In fact, I believe that “urban form” is much less localized than it used to be. It is now possible to “be human” all across the inhabited landscape, from the totally wired tractor that plows fields in Kansas to the apartment in New York. Is this banal? Well, intellectuals have always had a tendency to view whatever happens outside their own sphere as banal. Given that this “banal cosmopolitanism” is actually what will elect a new president in my country, I am less inclined to see it that way. (By the way, my book is now renamed *One Million Acres and No Zoning*, which may be interpreted as a stepping away from toxicity to increased neutrality.)**

### **T as in Technology**

Two kinds of “technologies” in particular have reemerged in architecture: one is mapping (*data-buildings*), and the other is parametric design (*blobalization*).

What are the potentials and risks of such new technologies in architecture (beyond its caricaturing)? Does the future of a progressive architecture depend on the development of innovative (computational) technologies?

**Knowing well that hammers can be used both to build houses and also to kill, I am sure that new misuses of technology will be possible and will take place. The fact is that the new technologies can probably wreak more havoc than a hammer. So firewalls become more urgent.**

**I have in all of my adult life been unimpressed by fads and purported salvations of any kind. So I remain relatively unmoved by hysterical reactions to these new technologies. In the end, we are humans, which means that we will commit horrible crimes as well as acts of utter selflessness, all in an unpredictable order – with or without new technology.**

### **U as in Ugliness & Urgencies**

Two (related) questions:

1. Rem Koolhaas once said, “Talk about beauty and you get boring answers, but talk about ugliness and things get interesting.” What’s your concept of the Ugly and the Beautiful?
2. Do you believe architecture should relate to the urgencies of the world? On the one hand, we are lost in paradise; the upper middle class has no idea how to dance now that it has *everything* (too much beauty avoiding the ugly). On the other hand, the public sphere has been sold to private corporations, and most of the world population lives in urban slums. Public housing is a lost cause to fight for as architect. What kind of

urgencies could architecture help to resolve? And is your concept of ambiguity a part of the solution?

**Well, I think you caught me! Let me put it simply: “When architects gave up designing housing, we lost Architecture.” And I lost interest and moved on to urbanism. Redemption lies in waiting. In fact, any building designed to house a collectivity is part of this redemption (although I am skeptical as to whether museums should be counted here). I therefore take Rem’s suggestion to mean that architects should take on the ugliness – these forgotten domains of hospitals, supermarkets, post offices, public housing, slums, motels, new towns, back offices, suburbia, etc.**

**My own sense of beauty is still fully intact; it took years to construct and hovers, as I have said, somewhere between minimalism and Japanese traditional design culture. Broken beauty is far more beautiful than its undamaged other. So, since so much is broken, my aesthetic pleasures are still abundant.**

### **V as in Violence**

I agree with Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière that the political only emerges when disagreement (dissensus) is part of the system you build. A certain foreignness (violence) is needed to liberate the user from within. Through disagreement *within* a system, and not just opposition or critique, a final answer can be avoided and a liberating kind of agonism realized. How exclusion – i.e., what you experience standing in front of a the Berlin Wall – can make you wonder what happens on the other side (while demystifying the role of institutional powers), or how a strange (violent) form by virtue of its inconsumerability can provoke you to complete it in movement (like the CCTV building in China by OMA), all can push you to look beyond the cliché. Voyeurism, the perversion of the look, framing the view, can be yet another act of

violence. Should architecture indeed be violent? Or is violence a force located elsewhere that architecture can capitalize upon?

**Just as I don't believe that there is Fascist architecture (Giuseppe Terragni), I do believe there are Fascists (Benito Mussolini). Your elaboration above is a bit too obscure for me to really understand. Clearly I think "foreignness" is of utmost importance to my sense that action precedes seeing, while at the same time I think architecture is too mute to be violent, leaving it always a bit clumsy and lumbering.**

### **W as in Words**

Are words still essential for architecture? Should an architect still write, or can she or he do without? Theory had its moment (we know it all)..., isn't it time for practice experiments now (America needs change),... now that the media (the world of images) tells it all...

**Well, for a wordsmith it is really hard to think that we no longer need words. And this by now long dialogue between you and me is in itself a piece of architecture – the only architecture I get to do. So, I hope not. As for the real architects, well, of course they must attach words to what they design, since those words are the preambles of the actions later taken by the dwellers.**

### **X as in SeX**

Architecture is – like the political arena today – often forced to “sex it up.” How do you see the relation between sex (desire) and architecture? What are its risks and advantages? Frank Gehry's pornofication does lure visitors in, but it is nothing like the giant “Hon-en Katedral” sculpture installation, which Niki de Saint Phalle designed in 1968 in Stockholm, where you entered via her vagina, or...

**When I as a young man “entered” Niki’s sculpture sprawled outside the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, I never thought of myself as a phallus. Neither do I see Bilbao as pornography. In fact, I seem to always have trouble with the metaphoric. I like the real thing and respect the media constraints that give all our different practices their peculiar autonomy. On the other hand, intoxications breaking through from one to the other are both possible and occasionally very exciting... ambiguity returns.**

### **Y as in Youth**

The period before and after May '68 was a very rich, liberating, stimulating, and creative moment in history. Many things were discovered. To speak with the voice of Friedrich Nietzsche: a collective in history did shoot a liberating arrow through space, and eventually it will fall even if it must pass through a desert for a while. Do you see anything new emerging – moving through our desert of the real today? And what inspires you most, including examples of the young, the fresh, and the cool?

**Since I count myself as a child of the sixties, I have considerable nostalgia for that peculiar window of opportunity. I also feel that this era still lives in me in the form of both a certain youthfulness and an often naïve hope. Mix this with my deep skepticism/pragmatism, and you have a facsimile of the Lerupian apparatus. (I see my hair’s refusal to either fall out or turn gray as a sign of the aforementioned youth and hope.)**

### **Z as in Zigzag**

Linear developments, or points in space, no longer seem to make sense. Today we prefer to model reality through folds, multitudes, black holes, assemblages, flow

dynamics, and quantum theory. Several mathematicians<sup>5</sup> have shown that puff pastry is a rather accurate model to explain what happens. Puff pastry contains all possibilities, both positive and negative, in a topological mix that initially doesn't allow any clear division to occur. The pastry develops (puffs up) in a layered mix of jumping points, which travel adventitiously away from each other only to – nobody knows when and which detours they took – meet again. Many recent practices in architecture behave and even look like puff pastry, are of a kind of *And Architecture*. Although these creations often resemble a large croissant, it is not always a matter of literal form, but instead one of a refined system of layers that are stuck on top of or under each other, or assembled in a heap. It is an architecture of the free section, where ceilings become floors, walls become hills, rooms turn into fields, etc. And we, the user and the program, are the freely moving raisins in the puff pastry. It is up to us to make all kinds of possible ends meet through our zigzag route. The puff pastry concept is a porous, compact, and performative construction in which mass moves fluently.

Oppositions and paradoxes are applied in different mixtures. It is a game where the puff pastry concept (re)activates all manner of ambiguities and unintended consequences through a rather “primitive” form that can be constantly infiltrated and reevaluated. The puff pastry concept is construction as infrastructure, in which different sorts of circuits both can be built and can appear spontaneously. It is a heterogeneous landscape where the walls and floors act as a kind of foam. The puff pastry concept allows a greater amount of complexity in use and programming. It is specific and undetermined at the same time. What do you think of the many contemporary puff pastry concepts full of zigzag routes that are enacting ambiguity? As in the work of Foreign Office Architects, MVRDV, Diller & Scofidio, Eisenman, Greg Lynn, Lars Spuybroek (NOX), UN Studio (Ben van Berkel), and many others. Is the puff pastry indeed the route to take, or are we in need of another kind of zigzag-enacting ambiguity?

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, George David Birkhoff, Vladimir Arnold, and Stephen Smale.

**Need I say more? I leave the cooking to you. In a puff of smoke, our just completed Abecedarium is blown into the eyes of our readers. While they cough, I am going for dessert – but it will probably be low-fat vanilla ice cream with a snifter of Courvoisier to motivate the digestion. Pastry is too rich for my aging constitution.**

In: *Everything Must Move: 15 Years at Rice School of Architecture 1994 - 2009*.

Luke Bulman, Jessica Young, published by Rice University, Houston, 2009.