

HORIZONS OF THEORY: INTERVIEW WITH SARAH WHITING

KHÖREIN: You rarely explicitly speak of philosophy. You use “theory,” “theoretical,” and sometimes “intellectual.” Then, architecture *and* philosophy – how do you see this relation?

SARAH WHITING: We’ve used *theory* for a long time, which is also a little bit more embracing than philosophy. Theory is not just the discipline of philosophy, it includes legal studies, literary criticism, etc. – it is a broader field than philosophy. And I think architecture relates to that broader field. Architecture and design are inherently cultural, and so I think we have a responsibility to understand that cultural landscape. And for me that cultural landscape includes writers who make you think about relations between people, relations of how we live in the world, relations between subjects and objects, and for me also, politics. That’s why I reference certain writers.

In terms of the *and*, I’m fascinated by your journal focusing on that conjunction. Those 3 little letters can have so much impact. Although honestly, I would probably resist and say I see architecture already having this cultural realm *within* it.

KH: You often mention Rorty, Deleuze, Derrida. Did you read the French philosophers? And, since your mother is French, have you read them in French?

SW: Yes, both in French and in English. It’s also because my father taught French and French literature. I’ve read Derrida and Deleuze more in English than in French, but I love to consider the importance of translation, and like looking at different versions. I like reading these writers, especially Derrida, for the sheer pleasure of language, as well as the sophistication of argument, that I think is very present in their writing.

KH: I studied the issue of translation in architecture, and I still think it is undervalued. Because it’s not only a question of translating a drawing

into a building. With Antoine Berman, I think that translation became an autonomous form of knowledge. One can understand things due to translation, just like you can understand many things by reading or writing. But I think that architects often don't have the consciousness about that.

SW: Exactly, Manuel. I would say that translating, and also the work of editing, is very important, and that both are very much part of our work as architects as well as our work as writers. There's nothing more exquisite than a beautiful sentence, and the same is true in architecture. Translation is part of that, it's also the almost physical work on and of language. I am attracted to certain theorists is because I feel that their writing *constructs*. It's too easy to use that parallel "it's like a building," but there is a real craft to writing.

KH: Where do you see the significance of the conjunction "and" in the field of architecture and politics, or architecture and society? You have paid particular interest to how the built environment shapes the nature of public life – where do you see the capacity of philosophy to help architecture in this "shaping?"

SW: I'm interested in philosophers, theorists, and writers (novelists even) who are interested in the question of the social and the public. How do we interact together in a world? How do we live together in a world? Philosophy helps us understand that. One of the people you don't mention here, who is incredibly important on this question, is Simone de Beauvoir. As she constantly reminds us: you think you know the other, but actually you're always kept from fully knowing the other. That gap is something that is very easy to forget as a designer; we can make the mistake of assuming a generalized other or a generalized public. If you read someone like Simone de Beauvoir, or if you think of this idea of Deleuze that I cite in the introduction to the texts of Ignasi de Solà-Morales, where Deleuze is saying that it is the idea of the group not as a bond that homogenizes everyone, but the group as something that pushes against the individual, that compels you to de-individualize yourself. To me, that's incredibly powerful and not easy as a concept. If you drop that specific idea into how we think about the city, it makes you understand the city better, and it also makes you think about how to design for individuals and for groups in a given city.

KH: Here is the quote of Deleuze from the Introduction to the book you have just mentioned, *Differences*: “The individual is the product of power. What is needed is to ‘de-individualise’ by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combination. The group must not be the organic bond uniting hierarchized individuals, but a constant generator for de – individualisation.” The significance of the group: does the group serve to de-individualize the individual or on the contrary, does the individual create the group? We think that architectural engagement is important to you.

SW: Yes, that’s the very quote I was talking about. And yes, engagement is important to me. Buildings that are *projects* engage a public. They are buildings that you can’t ignore, and that actually have an impact on you – on your perception, on your movement, and/or on your being. They also have an impact on how we think about architecture. So, engagement can either be engagement physically with the building – being struck by the building, being affected by it, being thrown into different relationships. Even through publications, a building can make you think differently, you can engage with it as a project. I think projects engage their audiences and actually create audiences.

KH: You worked in Peter Eisenman’s studio. Peter frequently used the word concept, and “project” only later. What can you tell us about how you understand their relation?

SW: I would say that already when I was working for Peter, he had already shifted to using the term project, and that at that point, he used the concept when he was writing about other figures. He shifted to the project maybe when he started doing projects that were beyond the houses. Here I’m speculating, so I may be entirely wrong, but the distinction makes sense to me. His houses were part of his understanding architecture conceptually. I think a house remains something that is more singular and more theoretical for Peter. In his work the project is also an exercise of the concept. I think there are fewer and fewer architects who are engaging just in the concept, but that might also be my bias, my interest in the project, the future, and the projective.

KH: Without the project, there is no future and there is no collectivity.

SW: That's my sense. Yes, exactly. I don't know if everyone would agree with me, but that would be part of my argument – that the term project is absolutely tied to the construction of a future, even if it is an envisioned future.

KH: But is there a project without the concept?

SW: I would say no. I think that's a very important point. A project is not just a fulfilling of architecture, it's not just "oh, 'a very beautiful building," and "look how that cantilever hovers so powerfully or so elegantly." To me, you can have great or beautiful architecture, perhaps, that is not the architecture of a project. Beautiful architecture does not always map out a future. A project for me is architecture that has a concept.

KH: Your dissertation thematizes the words "public," and "critique." Almost certainly, your insistence on "collective subject" or "collective subjectivity" can be read as a kind of architectural social ontology or architecture as social ontology. Critique certainly indicates a critical theory of society. Who were you reading when you were thematizing these concepts?

SW: There is a little bit of Habermas's influence, but more through people like Nancy Fraser and Craig Calhoun. Remember that Habermas was translated into English very late. His translation into English was very convenient for people like me because it coincided with a critical reading of his work. I took a class with Seyla Benhabib at Harvard while I was working on my dissertation. She was, you know, very beholden to Habermas, but pushed him in new directions. Nancy Fraser is an even greater touchstone for me. Fraser sees the public sphere as a series of umbrellas, a series of groupings – we are all members of multiple public spheres, rather than belonging to some mythical, singular public sphere. Her more recent work has been phenomenal in terms of offering transnational readings of the public realm. She's just a fantastic scholar for opening new directions that impact all of us interested in the public. Someone like Fraser helps to turn some of the thinking that is more philosophical to the social. Finally, Simone de Beauvoir was in the background, but not foregrounded. I'm interested in de Beauvoir's fiction. I think her politics comes through her fiction slightly better than through her non-fiction. There's a lot of fiction that actually influences how I understand social relations and how we design for different publics.

KH: We spoke about your introduction to the book *Differences: Topographies of Contemporary Architecture*. It was published in 1996. Nearly three decades have passed since. How do you see the “change” in topography of contemporary architecture in the intervening period?

SW: What fascinated me with Ignasi was he was really trying to struggle to articulate and capture a very specific moment. What would he think of the moment today? I think there are very few architects today who are reading a lot. I’m going to digress, but let me, please, as I think it’s relevant to this conversation we are having: There’s a very interesting and important article on the current decline of the humanities that came out in the *Atlantic*, maybe last month or the month before. Obviously, the rise of media has led to the decline of reading. And so, people receive their information in different ways today, and that change has had a huge effect on our field of architectural thinking. Even if you get beyond architectural philosophy or architectural theory, let’s just say *architectural thinking*. What common thinking do we have that unites us in a school talking about architecture? It’s harder to find those common texts today. For me that’s the biggest change in the topography of contemporary architecture; you no longer have that landscape of common references. Or if you do, they’re abbreviated, and they tend to be mediated references. We now live in a culture of speed that doesn’t give us time for extensive thinking. You don’t have people taking the time to read things that are important and interesting. The acceleration of our moment has weakened theory specifically, and thinking more broadly.

KH: You often insist on the future. The site of WW Architecture features the following sentence: “We use ideas to hold architecture together, and to assure that tomorrow is always at least a little better than today.” What is the new that we can expect or seek in architecture?

SW: I’m more interested in the future than I am in the new, and I think there’s an important distinction between the two. The new is a necessary component of capitalism, of the need to constantly provide a market for new things that replace old things. Therefore, we all find ourselves constantly striving for the new. I would oppose this economic way of thinking and I think universities *have* to oppose it. The new seems very individualized, whereas for me the future is something that we *share*.

KH: At that conference *ISSUES? Concerning The Projects Of Peter Eisenman*, held in Belgrade in 2013, you spoke about the crisis of the object in the contemporary discourse of architecture. Varying one of Manfredo Tafuri's theses, you noted: "I would say today that the end of the object, or this discourse of the object, of its end, is tied to the eclipse of theory." What is the current status of the architectural object as such?

SW: I don't know if that's a particularly American question, or situation. It's even more acute right now, especially when talking about the urban. There are urban thinkers in this country – and here, I'm going to speak in grossly generalized terms – that tend to think "we *either* talk about the social, *or* we talk about built form as form and space." It's as if there are two different camps. That distinction between form and objecthood on the one hand, and the social on the other hand has been in place for a long time now in urban theory. In architectural theory we were interested in the relationship of the subject and the object, in the object as a whole, as a totality. That approach was thrown into question, maybe 15 years ago, by saying "rather than talk about the object, we really need to talk about how much energy a given object uses up," where the materials are coming from, etc. We moved from thoughts to facts.

It's getting harder and harder to talk about the architectural object without being called irresponsible because theoretical talk doesn't have facts or data, but only ideas. This crisis of architectural theory is even more serious today than it was when we were together in Belgrade, at that conference, partly because the social and climatic issues are so pressing here, right now. And don't get me wrong: these issues are terribly critical right now, but I strongly believe that you need to talk about climate and architecture, while also acknowledging the role that the object plays in constructing our given world and our potential futures.

KH: "Projective architecture" – did you coin this phrase? Is this your phrase?

SW: I *think* it is; I think that Bob Somol and I coined it. I don't know if other people have used it before us, but it's definitely tied to us. So I'm not going to say that we are the only ones who've ever used it, but I think that it's associated with us. The key for me here is that architecture is projective, and that we've never used the term post-critical. There's a big and very important difference between the projective and the post-critical.

The projective includes the critical and extends it to the future. We understand the critique, but now what do we do about it? Some people are saying you don't need to spend that time with the critique or the conceptual, you can just produce, which is where the post-critical headed.

KH: How do you see the difference between men and women in architecture and in particular in architectural design? If you had to put a conjunction between the two W's, how would you define the "and"?

SW: The beauty of WW is that no one knows which one is first, whether it's Witte, or whether it's Whiting. The funny thing is the two names derive from the color white. So they're already almost the same name – different versions of the same name. I do not see architecture as gendered. I see the profession is gendered, because it's still dominated by men in boardrooms, in senior positions, and among powerful clients. But I see that more of an issue with the economic and social fabric of our context. Without more social support, we're still going to have a problem with all professions being dominated by men. Professions are gendered, and that's an economic argument.

KH: What does it mean to be to be a Dean, and to be a leader as a woman, today? You act institutionally. Does a leader have gender?

SW: I don't think a leader has a gender. A leader has to be decisive, and I find it remarkably superficial (and insulting) when people say that a woman who is decisive, or who speaks strongly has "male attributes." I disagree. They're simply leadership attributes; someone has to make a decision. Maybe women consult more with others as they make decisions, but that tendency is also something that's been socialized and has an economic basis. A lot of our society is stuck in the model that capitalism has put in place, and it's very hard to disentangle ourselves from that model.

I don't like being identified by my gender. Everyone who says to me, "you're the first woman Dean at Harvard." To me that seems incredibly boring, and also actually quite insulting. For me, the exciting part of being a Dean is that a school is a project. A school can't just be a place to fulfill requirements; it is a place for incubating how to think about architecture culturally.

KH: How would you describe your method of working with students?

SW: One has to be very clear and know the consequences of the direction that you're taking, the references that you bring along with it. So, my method tends to be very thorough in working with students. My style of working with them is to combine being very direct and very rigorous, with empathy and humor. One has to always remember what it's like to be a student. And one has to remember that they can be incredibly naïve, which is also very refreshing. But it's our job to get them to try and be more methodical and channel their naïveté into directions that really try things out, testing whether they work or not, for them or for their result.

I'm not teaching right now, and that's simply because this is the first normal year I've had here as Dean, because of COVID. It's only now that I feel like I'm starting as Dean, and there's an enormous amount of work for that. I do hope to return to teaching because I love it.

KH: With regard to your academic professional experience, and the fact that you are Dean, do you think that the position of philosophy as a discipline in the academic education of architects should be improved? From an institutional point of view, what needs to be done in order to affirm the value of philosophy at the schools or faculties of architecture?

SW: Here, I would return to my first point, which is that I see it less a question of philosophy per se and more a question of ensuring that a school of architecture values culture broadly and for me, culture means thinkers and writers who get us to think differently about the world, who get us to open our minds – and therefore our designs – to new futures. That means philosophers, yes, but also novelists, historians, critics – *thinkers*.

Interview conducted by Petar Bojanić, Snežana Vesnić, and Manuel Orazi.