

COOP HIMMELB(L)AU BETWEEN  
DECONSTRUCTION AND PSYCHOANALYSIS:  
INTERVIEW WITH WOLF D. PRIX

KHÖREIN: Where does architecture as a profession stand today, in general, and where is it in relation to philosophy?

WOLF D. PRIX: Well, our profession has come to an end. Radical architecture is only radical when it's built. If it isn't, it's like the notes Beethoven, Mozart or Bach wrote on paper. Only a minority can understand them, only a few can read the notes and hear the music. So now, architecture only exists on paper and at an academic level. This doesn't match reality. As architects, we have to consider this, but not overthink it. With philosophy, one risks getting lost in things that are far away from reality.

KH: Why do you think this is so?

WP: There is something very important that Derrida told me in 1992, thirty-three years ago. I disagree with it, although maybe it's true, now that I think about it—that a little sketch is sometimes more important than lots of built projects. I agree, but only in a context that has nothing to do with social responsibility, and that's a problem. I can now see that the students who come to our office have no idea about architecture at all. They know how to use computer programs, but that's not architecture. They know how to delegate life to the machine. As Erich Fromm said, this makes me very worried about the future because a society that delegates life to machines has a death wish. When I look at Elon Musk, I think this comment is right.

KH: In 1992, Coop Himmelb(l)au had an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou. Did you know Derrida before this exhibition?

WP: Yes, because the Deconstructivist exhibition at the MoMA took place in 1988. The term “Decon” architecture was already in common use by then. I have a completely different view of the deconstructivist philosophy.

KH: You have said that you were against deconstruction?

WP: My view of so-called deconstructivist philosophy in connection to architecture is very different. These architects claim that we can tear a building down and put it back in a different way. However, the way Derrida explained it to me—since I am not a philosopher and haven’t read much of his work—was that he was influenced by Freud. He was interested in how the subconscious operates. So, long before Derrida and 1988, as early as the sixties and seventies, at the start of my career—but I should mention that my father was an architect, and I knew from the moment I saw [Le Corbusier’s] La Tourette that I wanted to be an architect. There is a little chapel there that catches the light not through windows, but through these tubes in the ceiling. When we started, we wanted to change architecture radically. We needed to find a way to do that. We said that the first sketch of whatever one is designing is the most important thing. We must liberate that sketch and that moment from all external pressures, such as codes, rules, aesthetics, and philosophy. We thought that if we could liberate space from these rules, architecture would become free. Even our name, Coop Himmelb(l)au, has nothing to do with architecture, but it shows where this idea comes from.

KH: What do you mean when you say architecture must be free? You mean some kind of autonomy?

WP: In order to create open, pressure-free architecture that influences the context and social situation, the architect must be free. We thought that we had to redesign or rethink the moment of the conception process. To do so, we—myself along with my friends, collaborators, and partners used the subconscious to rethink this moment of conception. You have to be free of all circumstantial pressure.

KH: Does this mean opening something before the concept is created, before conception itself?

WP: I use a pen, not a computer. At the beginning is the sketch. I just draw without thinking, “Oh, I can’t do that because the client won’t like it,” or “It doesn’t meet fire codes,” or anything like that. It is just free sketching. All the while, we talk about the project. The iconic project we did was the Open House. We had an exhibition in New York where we showed a lot of sketches and explained that we build models because architecture is a three-dimensional language that can only be understood by being grasped or conceptualized (*begreifen*) this way.

Then, we received a call from a Viennese psychologist who wanted us to design a house for him in Los Angeles. When we asked where the house was, we were told, “You should come and see the site.” Although we didn’t go, we talked a lot about the house. We were free to design it however we wanted, but we had to follow the sketch and model. We discussed the project for at least a month. I remember it clearly. To escape all the drawings, I closed my eyes and could see the house in my mind, as if it were a psychogram of the upcoming house. I used my pen as a seismograph, and we immediately built a small model. Then, we started thinking about the practical aspects, such as the plans and structure—but always following the sketch!

Derrida says—and you can correct me if I’m wrong—that every artwork, whether a text, painting, or piece of music, contains a trace of the artist’s unconscious. This means that the artist’s unconscious rules the entire work. This was long before the MoMA exhibition. We found a site for the house and started building it—not on site because the steelwork had to be done here; it couldn’t be done in the US. It was rather complicated. However, the client passed away, and his children no longer wanted the house. It was never finished.

KH: So, at the beginning, was Derrida on your mind?

WP: No! Derrida wasn’t on our board at that time. We were invited to work on many projects like that house. People were looking to Philip Johnson or Mark Wigley for inspiration, as they were interested in the geometry of buildings. But that was not our approach.

KH: Why did you think back then that you didn’t belong to this group?

WP: They—especially Eisenman—were always quoting Derrida. “Derrida told me to do it this way.” We thought, okay, he’s going in this direction, but we could go deeper by using the unconscious. It wasn’t about taking some forms and putting them together; it was about the method of liberating space by getting rid of conventions, rules, regulations, and aesthetics. We didn’t care.

KH: This means you had never met Derrida before that interview?

WP: No, never. Then, in 1992, we had an exhibition organized by Regine Haslinger at a time when everyone was talking about deconstruction.

KH: Do you remember whether Derrida saw your exhibition at the Centre Pompidou?

WP: I don’t know. He was giving a lecture. I can’t remember exactly what he said, but I don’t recall him mentioning Freud at all. I didn’t want to talk to him about this aspect of working through the subconscious. I read his work later on.

KH: In that interview, Derrida talks about “the new,” and you mentioned that “the new,” or innovation is important to you. He mentions this question several times, without prompting. And at the end, he also talks about “impossibility”...

WP: Che Guevara made the following remark: “Be realistic; demand the impossible.” I like to quote that, even to my students.

KH: How can we see impossibility in your built projects?

WP: Well, I’ve learnt a lot about strategies for overcoming the argument that something cannot be built. For example, we were once asked to design a private school in Germany. They said: “It’s a very nice project, but it’s too ambitious; it cannot be built.” We returned home and brought in a consultant to help us prove that it could indeed be built. Then they said: “It can be built, but it will be too expensive.” So, we went back again and found a way to keep it within budget. Then they said: “It can be built within budget, but you know, *es gefällt mir nicht*, I don’t like it.”

KH: What is your response to that? In this case, architecture becomes the destruction of impossibility. You are proving that it is possible to do it, to build it.

WP: Yes, this is the same argument we used to prove by referring to space exploration. Before 1969, nobody thought it would be possible to see the Earth from space. Remember the *Life* magazine cover that said: “The Blue Planet.” That image pushed us to consider the impossible as possible. We learned that the constraints we have to overcome can have many answers. For example, to go to the moon, there were many constraints, but also many ways to overcome them. Consider the Soviet and U.S. designs of helmets, or the different patterns of red dots and black spots on the wings of butterflies. Why? Trial and error. Development requires trial and error. Otherwise, you always build the same things, like the Ancient Greeks did.

I always say: We have Ferraris and Porsches today, so why should I ride a horse? This applies not only to the car industry, but also to the weapons and military industries. They are more intelligent than architects. And clients. Architects aren’t always the least intelligent people in the room; sometimes it’s the clients.

KH: It seems to us that the way you work involves interrupting the connection between architecture and philosophy. Is this correct?

WP: It’s not exactly interrupting. Philosophy is very important. It certainly influences the way we think. However, philosophy itself is not important to me as an architect for developing myself and my way of thinking. Otherwise, I’d end up doing the same as Eisenman or Tschumi.

KH: You were close with them, is that correct?

WP: Yes, we were friends. Especially with Zaha Hadid. She told me that she wasn’t a deconstructivist.

KH: This exhibition on deconstructivism is interesting because all of you participated, and yet you all say in the end, “we are not deconstructivists.”

WP: Yes, no one wants to be a deconstructivist. In common discourse, deconstructivism is associated with *zerstören*, which means to destroy. But we weren't destroying anything. We just had a different way of designing.

KH: Or constructing?

WP: Well, yes, but that came later. For example, I was always against columns. After all, I'm from the generation of 1968. Anti-authoritarian thinking, like that of the Frankfurt School, was very important to us. Popper's book *Open Society and Its Enemies* was also important.

I remember Derrida telling us to think socially. We were rather angry because we thought that thinking about open architecture wasn't the opposite of being social. I'm thinking about the self-determination of people, if I can put it that way.

KH: But you think that you might be closer to his ideas than the others?

WP: Yes, perhaps ironically. We were never explicit about this. Everyone kept saying, "We are not deconstructivists," so I held back my idea about using the subconscious. In our school we had to learn about Freud, that was part of our education.

KH: After that interview, you never met or spoke with Derrida again? Nor did you write anything about deconstruction?

WP: Correct, only a lot of talking.

KH: Did you write anything about the unconscious, though?

WP: I think so, but it didn't come up with Derrida. I wrote more about open architecture, referring to the idea of the open society.

KH: In the interview with Derrida, you resist his positions the whole time. Sometimes, he even sounds a little angry. As you remember, he could be quite irascible...

WP: I don't think he was angry, but he was lecturing us. I had a lot of respect for people who knew more than I did. I was young then, I wanted to learn, so I listened to Corbusier, Louis Kahn, and Frank Gehry. It's

good to learn from others in different fields. I read a lot about the Rolling Stones, about the Beatles, but not about architects.

KH: How do you see your work today compared with what you were doing in 1988?

WP: That has nothing to do with this time. Those were projects that were never built. By choosing the name *Himmelb(l)au*, we made it clear that we were far from conventional architectural thinking. As an architect, it's hard to say, "I hate columns," because everyone wants them, especially postmodern architects. I hate them because the column is a synonym for pressure. It's important to me to use reinforced structures because they're under tension; they're dynamic.

The development of architecture can best be illustrated by comparing the Doric temple in Paestum to the BMW Welt in Munich. The temple's 1,300-square-meter roof required 36 supports to hold it up. By contrast, the BMW Welt's roof is ten times larger and is supported by only eleven pillars.

KH: At one conference on Jeffrey Kipnis and the new<sup>1</sup>, Eisenman said that deconstruction is just a method. Do you think of it that way? Is it a design tool for architects?

WP: To make it more understandable, we said that it is a design method, but essentially it is a way of thinking. At the time, we were much more interested in development. We examined how evolution works—trial and error, Popper, and so on—and used all of that to develop a project. It is very difficult to do so in a big office. Very tough.

KH: What is the architectural concept for you?

WP: I cannot answer this [laughter]. I have no architectural concept, so it would be difficult to explain. We receive a program and try to organize it. All of our buildings are highly functional and climate-appropriate. To me, this is craftsmanship. I learned that from my father and at school.

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<sup>1</sup> Symposium Jeffrey Kipnis & The Quest for the New — 19 May 2022; <https://coop-himmelblau.at/news/2022-05-19-symposium-jeffrey-kipnis-the-quest-for-the-new-19-may-2022/>

It's not necessarily architecture, but creating great new spaces really depends on the program the building has, although this may sound banal. I don't design military buildings, I don't do nuclear silos. I want to design schools, museums, cultural buildings, conference centres, etc.

KH: What do you think about design and AI, new software, new technologies? For example, you talk about dynamic structures, and now we have 4D printing, with the memory of materials, amongst many other new tools.

WP: This is very interesting. All the new programs are interesting, but they are only tools. First, architecture is a three-dimensional language. We build models to see if everything fits together. Renderings are the fake news of architecture because you can manipulate them to suit the client's preferences. That's stupid. But the computer is a very helpful tool.

Young architects say that AI is helping them. I respond that there is no such thing as artificial intelligence, only *architectural intelligence*. AI is a fantastic tool for bringing inspiration to the design process and reducing work time. We have all our projects in our library, and we can put them together—for example, if a new opera building is being designed, we can bring together previous similar projects. We are far from achieving AI that can organize a building the way we want.

If you ask how AI could help, imagine a client who wants an opera house. In ten or fifteen years, you can give the program to my AI assistant, and the rest of the office can go on vacation to the Maldives. After two weeks, we come back and say, "This is wrong. Change a few things and give it to the model maker." Then, we go on vacation to Bermuda. When we return, we send the project to the client along with the bill, and then we go on vacation again. It will never happen like that. It's naive to think so. AI will certainly help us, but only if we control it.

This reminds me a little of Elon Musk's theory to delegate everything to the machine. My friend Wolf Singer, a neurologist who studies the brain, says that flies have to make decisions in milliseconds to survive. Even the most advanced computer can't make this decision in under two weeks. The brain is still the best.

KH: You think that the mind has the capacity to decide?

WP: Yes, and hopefully it will stay with us so that we can continue to think in complex ways as we always have.

KH: Then what is the position of design? Where does design happen? In the brain, in the mind, or artificially, via the computer? How do thinking, designing, and the computer fit together?

WP: In German, designing is *entwerfen*, where *ent-* refers to the subconscious—*entäußern, entflammen, und entwickeln*—and *werfen* means to throw, to project. This is how we describe our design process. “Design” is not a good word. We design glasses, vases, and ashtrays. “Entwerfen” is much more than following a method. Do you know what Bob Dylan says, “you don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows?”

KH: Then the question is: what are you doing when you’re deciding? When you are in the position to *werfen*, to project, what are you doing? Do you work intuitively?

WP: Mostly. I usually work on the model rather than the drawing. I can read the organization of the project from a ground plan or cross-section blueprint. However, to understand how it will define a new context, I need to see it as a model. This is intuitive.

KH: What inspires your first sketches?

WP: I try to imagine how people might use the space. And I leave it as open as possible.

KH: For transformation?

WP: Yes, for transformation, too. I don’t care if they remodel the entire project.

KH: Comparing the design or methodology of a project with the built object, can you see a dynamism in the finished, completed work? Of course, you always somehow follow this dynamic structure, but how do we find that fragile thing, that instability in the built project? We started this conversation saying that the most important thing for an architect is to build...

WP: Yes, but I was referring to “radical” architecture, which only exists in radical buildings. Whether or not an architect wants to build is a personal decision; it’s not a universal rule. I would never create a universal rule or recipe for everyone. The only advice I give students is: develop your self-confidence and find a strategy to realize your ideas. I can’t give you codes, rules, or regulations. The golden ratio isn’t even really found in nature. Look behind the scenes and ask yourself: why does the client want this? Why does the city need this project in this location? Is it political or personal (which is the best kind of client).

Or, is it just following rules and regulations because a street must go through there? You can criticize that, but not too much, or you might lose the project. If you ask uncomfortable questions, you’re out.

When I visited the Pyramid of Pharaoh Djoser, I was impressed by its presence. Now, they are trying to figure out how they built it and how they used math. I imagine Imhotep, the architect, standing next to the pharaoh on the palace balcony and saying: “Mr. Pharaoh, what do you think about building something like this for you after you die?” Today, you can’t do that; everything has to follow rules and regulations. You have to prove things; certain things seem obligatory, but they aren’t. That’s what is fascinating about this “deconstruction philosophy.” We never know what is right or wrong; or, everyone is right, but nothing is correct.

KH: What about the autonomy of architecture?

WP: Oh, it’s all in schools. You could play around and define your own thing, but now there are codes, rules, and regulations. Can you imagine two presidents (Trump and Zelensky) arguing in the Oval Office of the White House? We lost. My generation lost. All the ideas we had about new societies and development are gone. Schools haven’t changed. The education system is the same. My kids bring home the same notes I did. Kids are on their phones, which makes me skeptical and worried about how things will turn out. Architects are trying so hard to be cool, but they’re sweating. Our situation is hopeless but not serious.

*Interview conducted by Petar Bojanić, Snežana Vesnić, Edward Djordjević, Andrea Perunović, and Sara Dragišić.*