

WRITING IN, ON, AND FOR ARCHITECTURE: INTERVIEW WITH CYNTHIA DAVIDSON

KHÖREIN: Let's start with the questions about editing magazines on architecture, and writing about this discipline. In a lecture about your editorial practice, titled "Image and Word: A Critical Context," held at SCI-Arc in 2013, you said that magazines recontextualize architecture through text. However, the lecture title contains both the *image* and the *word* with the conjunction "and" between them. What does this mean for architectural writing? What is the status of the image here? When we introduce the "and," do we speak about some kind of simultaneity between these two categories, image and word?

CYNTHIA DAVIDSON: I have since been teaching writing in architecture schools, and I have come to believe that architects, on average, think visually and produce images far more easily than they produce text. This is not the rule, it's just an observation.

I teach a required graduate course, called "Image and Text," at Pratt, where I try to help the students to understand that an image generally needs explanation in order to be understood in a certain way by the broad population that is involved in the project. So, you could say *and* implies a supplement. It is important to add words that don't simply describe what we can already see, which is the students' tendency to do. They need to write a text that explains the ambition of the project or the goal of the project, that explains what the average viewer would not be able to see or read in the image. We live in an image culture, but that culture also requires texts.

I would defend the word to the end, but in a certain sense, by saying "image and text," I'm admitting that text – note that I don't call it "text and image," I call it "image and text" – is, in that school, second in importance to image. Hence that pairing. I think of them, though, as a pair. Not as confronting one another, but needing each other to survive, and particularly to survive in a critical context.

KH: In the same lecture, you distinguish between activating and reactive magazines. You described your first editorial experience, at in *Inland Architect*, as a magazine that reacted to what was already happening, and you said you did not want *ANY* magazine to do that.

CD: It's important to situate *ANY* magazine not in relationship so much to *Inland Architect*, which I edited for eight years prior to starting *ANY*, but in relationship to the Anyone project. Anyone was a project in the 1990s, at the so-called end of the Millennium, to consider the undecidable condition of architecture at that point in time, as well as the many technological things that were going on, such as Y2K – fears that computers wouldn't recognize that the calendar was turning over from 1999 to 2000. There were lots of questions surrounding architecture and the digital, or virtual space.

At its outset, Anyone was a 10-year project in which architecture was the host of a multidisciplinary cross-cultural conversation about architecture. We staged one event a year with some 25 people, lasting two-and-a-half days, to consider aspects of architecture through a framework established by using one of the 10 “any-words”: anyone, anywhere, anyplace, anywise, anytime, anybody and so forth. *ANY* magazine was an offshoot of that. Since the conferences were a way of activating a theoretical discussion, the magazine was also activating. We conceived of *ANY* as a theoretical journal that I would run with guest editors who would propose thematic issues, or I would recruit people to address a particular concept in order to explore how different disciplines were thinking about architecture.

It was important that Arata Isozaki in Tokyo, Ignasi de Solà-Morales in Barcelona, and Peter Eisenman in New York initiated and were part of this cross-cultural project. They helped to sustain Anyone's international dialogue. Jacques Derrida was at the first two events Anyone in Los Angeles and Anyone in Japan. Other early participants included science fiction writer William Gibson, the Harvard Law School professor and Brazilian philosopher Roberto Mangabeira Unger, the postmodern theorist Fredric Jameson, from Duke University, and, of course, architects, such as Rem Koolhaas, Liz Diller, and Toyo Ito.

Some people criticized the conferences because they the project was quite closed, that we were a little club of elite thinkers in architecture that outsiders resented, in part because the word anyone means, or course any individual. We kept expanding the table of participants, but *ANY* magazine was another way to invite more voices into the Anyone project.

The conferences started in 1991, and *ANY* began in 1993. Many of those themes issues were staged events – actually, collaborations with the Guggenheim – in New York on Saturday mornings with a guest editor. For example, Mark Taylor, a philosopher of religion then at Williams College, did an event and issue called “Electroecture,” a term he coined in order to describe the architecture of future virtual spaces. He, Avital Ronell and others discussed different concepts of virtual space that architecture was facing. This was in 1994, when there were only chat rooms online, way before Facebook, Twitter, Zoom or Skype. Chat rooms were sites where you could participate in a conversation through typing. All words, no images. It was all text. Mark, in his foresight, saw a different future coming, and he was right. In this sense *ANY* was activating ideas in architecture in the 90s, in anticipation of the new century. But when *Log* came along, in 2003, the world was a different story.

KH: In your preface to the first issue of *ANY*, you say that the journal uses the form of the letter, which refers to addressing someone who is not present, that there is a distance between the one who is writing and the one who is being addressed. How does this relate to the idea of connection present in those projects of creating space for discussion, conferences, etc.?

CD: In planning the editorial scope of *ANY*, the idea was that we would have two letters from specific places in every issue that did not relate to the thematic substance of the issue. They tended to report on current events or situations.

The letter is generally considered to be a form of personal correspondence. What do we say when we believe we’re saying it privately? In the 90s, when I was writing letters on stationery, whether by hand or by machine, I was writing just to you. When you received it, you could decide to share it with whomever, but that meant sharing a sheet of paper that had come through the mail, sealed in an envelope. It may have contained confidences or opinions that weren’t ready to be shared with a wider audience.

Why are we still interested in the letters of creative thinkers? Because we think we’re going to learn something about them that wasn’t public? Something that will add to how we see the work, or bring us a new understanding of the work? This is the case, for example, with Emily Dickinson, the poet, or Oscar Wilde, or any number of people who write letters.

The letter suggests a certain kind of intimacy, a sharing of thoughts. It's also a more informal way of writing. As an editor, I edit a letter differently than I edit a transcribed conversation, an essay, or reportage. They're different forms of text that use language differently.

KH: They are a different literary genre. It's not only a question of private or public. Letters are completely accepted as a form of expression, because they are a great chapter of literary, expression, of human communication. Just to give an example in architecture, among the books of Le Corbusier there is the book of his letters to Auguste Perret, his teacher.

KH: The *ANY* #0's theme is "Writing in Architecture." Almost like a manifesto, the issue brings important discussions on the role writing should have in architecture. In these discussions we encounter almost an endless multiplication of formulations – "writing in architecture," "writing architecture," "architectural writing," "writing on architecture," "writing of architecture," "writing about architecture," etc. All of them seem to be employed in the search for modes of writing that can produce architecture.

CD: This is something that has continued to interest me because the keyword here is not a conjunction, but a preposition. Prepositions, I believe, describe one's relationship to the subject or object of attention. So, writing *in*, writing *on*, writing *about*, writing *for*, writing *toward*... Those could be seen as function words, but they primarily signal a spatial condition, as to where the author is in relationship to what is being written about. Jane Rendell, who teaches at the Bartlett, has done a lot of work on this in a program she calls it "site writing." Some of her work stems from Michel Serres' theory of prepositions in his book *Angels*. I absolutely love this book. He says that prepositions are like angels that deliver messages and then help us understand where, in space, we are. When we talk about a discipline that produces space, that creates space – not just form, but space – our relationship to that space is defined in large part by prepositions when we try to describe it in writing, or through writing.

KH: Two years after this issue was published, you established the "Writing Architecture" series at the MIT Press. Was this an acknowledgment that academic writing can also become active, in spite of its slowness?

CD: First I'd like to point out that "Writing Architecture" uses no prepositions. When you remove the "in," "on," or "about," it's simply writing architecture. What does that mean? It doesn't mean we're writing *with* architecture. We conceived this series at about the same time as *ANY* magazine, but it's much faster to produce a magazine than it is a book. The magazine came out in '93, but the first book didn't come out till '95. This is partly because the first two books had to be translated from the Japanese and from the French. Translation takes time.

Academic writing moves slower than architecture itself. Let's say the average project is a three-year process from gestation to certificate of occupancy. And this is not scientific fact, just my observation. Three years minimum. Writing architecture books can take years longer than building. Most Writing Architecture Series books I have edited have been in the works for more than three years.

KH: The discussion about the relationship between the word and the image is also found in your interview with Bernard Tschumi in #0 of *ANY*. When you asked him why writing had been important to him, he replied: "The logic of words allows you to apprehend certain concepts better than, let's say, the logic of materials. There is an abstraction, there is a conceptual dimension to architecture that is inevitably part of architecture and that, not surprisingly, can be mastered more precisely through the conceptual means of words." Does this "conceptual dimension" of architecture need a non-architectural writing? In other words, does architectural writing need to be supplemented with, for example, philosophical writing?

CD: I think your question "does this conceptual dimension of architecture need a non-architectural writing," is a question for Bernard. I think it's embedded in how he thinks and how he works, and not necessarily how I think or work. Does architectural writing need to be supplemented with philosophical writing? Not in every case, no. We already have the problem of a distracted audience, or an audience that doesn't really care about architecture in the United States... There are very few people writing about architecture in mass media in this country – once in a while you see something in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, or the *LA Times* – because there's no real audience for it, people don't necessarily want to read about it. And there is no room for philosophical writing, so to speak, in mass media because there is no audience for it. Its platform is in specific journals, such as *Khōrein*.

I think it's quite interesting that in thinking about the climate crisis we are now trying to come to terms with that people like Sanford Kwinter have returned to philosophy, to Spinoza, Whitehead, and others, to try to rethink our relationship to the cosmos. This is clearly a philosophical position, but most of the architects working on the climate crisis are doing research on material.

KH: Could you tell us what is for you the difference between an architectural concept and a philosophical concept?

CD: I'm not convinced that architectural concepts stem from the meanings of words, and I associate philosophical concepts as stemming from words. For example, the idea of "house" could have very different meanings for architects and philosophers. But I don't know what those differences might be. When I interviewed Rem Koolhaas, back in 1993, about why he wrote *Delirious New York* – it's in *ANY* #0 – he said two things that have stayed with me: first, that he wrote it in order to create a condition or territory – I forget his exact words – in which he could practice the kind of architecture he wanted to practice, because that condition didn't yet exist. He thought that through writing he could create it. However, *Delirious New York* is a retroactive manifesto for Manhattan. Rem used the history of New York to create a condition in the 1970s that he felt he could operate in as an architect. Second, Rem said that before he designs any project – and this would be the antithesis of Frank Gehry – he first writes down the concept. But he's thinking about a design concept, I believe, not philosophy. Anyway, I don't want this conversation to turn into an analysis of Rem Koolhaas. I only use his work as an example.

KH: In 2003, ten years after *ANY* was established, you published the inaugural issue of *Log*. What was the motive behind the transition from *ANY* to *Log*?

CD: I guess you can call it a transition. By the year 2001, the Anyone project had concluded, *ANY* magazine had stopped, and the last conference book, *Anything*, was had been published. There was the question as to what should happen to the nonprofit Anyone Corporation, because its initial project of 10 conferences leading the millennium had been completed. I was taking a kind of gap year when the World Trade Center towers went down; after the design competition for rebuilding

the site, I felt we needed a new kind of journal, one that focused on texts, not images.

Log is definitely a reactive journal. I don't believe that *ANY* was a reaction to *Inland Architect* but *Log* was clearly a reaction to *ANY*, in part because times and events had changed. So where *ANY* was thematic and theoretical, *Log* is open, without a theme, but also critical. We set out to record the movement of architecture in the new millennium. I thought architecture seemed a bit adrift after the digital revolution of the late 90s, with its fixation on design software. Architecture was changing. The question was, where was it going to end up? Would it cohere in a uniformity of thought, like in prewar modernism? Or would it become something much more fragmented? Essentially, something much more undecidable.

The ideas introduced by deconstruction, and by Deleuze and Guattari, are still with us, even though no one talks about them. I think they're deeply embedded in how architecture operates because architecture is so fragmented. The recent issues of social justice, economic inequality and climate change themselves are so big that you can't possibly address all three at once. It's literally impossible for an architect to do that and it's not necessarily an architect's primary responsibility to do that. These are the changing conditions and concerns that *Log* records. Initially I was hoping for more criticism of architecture itself, of buildings and projects, but today it's more about process, material and research than criticism.

I began working on *Log* in December 2002, after the World Trade Center design competition. At the time, the image that the proposed buildings projected to the world seemed to be the major concern, though the developer was concerned with leasable space. *Log* was conceived in the tradition of a literary journal, a form it still has, as a way to suppress the dominance of the image. It was a deliberate attempt to place text ahead of image. Images were only black and white, and they were basically the size of postage stamps. This has changed overtime. The most recent issue, *Log* 56, was our first full color issue. It served as the catalog for an exhibition I curated, called "Model Behavior." There were several essays, but most pages featured large images of the objects with short explanatory texts. Several people wrote to say "this is what *Log* should be now, enough of this repression of the image, we don't need to do that anymore. The image is everywhere. We need to deal with the image." That had gradually been happening over the course of *Log* itself, which will celebrate its 20th anniversary in September this year.

KH: At the end of your essay “What’s in a Log?,” you say something about the journal’s position: “A log, by definition, is a way of recording observations of the present through writing in time. Seen against the backdrop of a culture of images and rhetoric, and in its distance from both the academy and mass media, this *Log* offers the possibility of a critical context for writing about architecture today - for observing its movement or lack thereof, its images, its texts, and its subtexts.” We could notice the emphasis on the issue of time here. How did this change the idea of “writing architecture?”

KH: I would like to answer this. I think it has something to do with the transition from the printed newspaper to the Internet. This means that newspapers can survive only through opinions and judgment. No more with information. This is all about the crisis of magazines and architecture worldwide. The age of *magazines as tools of information* is over, they’re gone. It’s another time. We need more critical opinions. I think this is the transition. It’s the same with newspapers. All the newspapers had to face this because of the Internet. Every second you have information. So, of course, what you don’t have are opinions, judgment, critical thinking about the events.

CD: I think you’re absolutely right, Manuel. We’re also at a very strange moment in the United States; if you make the “wrong” judgment, you are canceled. It’s out of control. The “cancellation” comes through social media. Yes, people want judgment, but I don’t know how many writers are willing to take a strong stand on something because we’re in a strange judgmental moment.

KH: Walter Benjamin said that when you look at *Die Fackel* directed by Karl Krauss, you are looking for judgements on the world. Cancel culture is also about judgment. In Italy, we were contesting everything in the 60s and 70s. That’s why there were thousands of magazines, because they were erasing all the traditional values. I think that the cancel culture is stimulating.

CD: Specifically, I think *Log* is at a critical turning point. I didn’t expect it to go on for 20 years. *Log* is not affiliated with any institution, therefore it’s free of their ideology, if such a thing exists. Its independence, I believe, is critically important. The United States has never had the culture of architecture that exists in Europe, especially in Italy.

KH: In the same text, “What’s in a Log?,” you ask: “In a culture dominated by the image – filmic or still – is it nostalgic to yearn for a text? For writing?” What is your answer to this question today, after twenty years? Later on, at the conference “Issues?,” held in Belgrade, you said that you stand for resistance to “the seductive power of images.” What can be the role of architectural theory in resisting the dominance of images in contemporary society?

CD: Your question makes me think of the 2016 Architecture Biennale in Venice, when Mónica Ponce de León and I created the show called “The Architectural Imagination” for the US pavilion. We wanted to exhibit models and drawings and renderings of speculative proposals for Detroit, thinking that this would be a way to represent thinking in 2016 about how we make architecture for four different sites in a city that was badly in need of investment. The 12 projects we commissioned for this exhibition presented new ideas not only about design but also about habitation, education, reclamation, and so forth.

To explain this, Mónica and I felt we needed a lot of text. I have always been critical of exhibitions that have too much explanatory text on the wall. I once wrote a piece criticizing a show by the Museum of Modern Art curator Terence Riley, saying that he basically exhibited a magazine of photos and texts on the wall. We at least had models, drawings and text.

Architecture doesn’t always speak for itself. It may speak for itself within the discipline, but not to the broader public. So again, who is the audience? We can’t just talk to ourselves, especially at this critical moment in time. There are so many architectural – and philosophical – questions to be raised and discussed.

Obviously, writing is important as a supplement to the image, or I wouldn’t be teaching it. I don’t think it’s nostalgic at all to advocate for writing, and good writing, because it’s another mode of expression – of thought – that is critically important. There’s no scientific proof, but perhaps writing causes us to dream, even to visualize, in ways that images do not.

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