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Space of Questions: Interview with Bernard Tschumi

KHŌREIN: Given that you are not an advocate of the autonomy of architecture, in what way do you think references from other disciplines and fields of knowledge influence architecture? Do they change architecture as a discipline? Do they subvert it?

BERNARD TSCHUMI: We should be careful about using the word "discipline," which is reminiscent of the kind of disciplinary regime used in religion, slavery, and boarding schools. But as a "field of knowledge," sure—other disciplines inevitably influence architecture. Winds pollinize fields. Fields pollinize one another. Think of the architectural terms "structure," "column," "window," "bridge," "keystone," and so forth, pollinizing philosophy. The discipline of philosophy would not exist without architecture. Think of Ancient Greece: How much did architecture contaminate philosophy 2,500 years ago?

KH: You often say that architecture is a "form of knowledge" rather than a "knowledge of form." What does that mean in terms of architecture's relation to other disciplines or "forms of knowledge?"

BT: Bringing together thought, space, material, and shelter is unique to architecture.

KH: Your definition of architecture as "the materialization of concepts" seems particularly relevant for the relationship between architecture and philosophy. As you emphasize at some point, a "theoretical concept" can become "operational" through an architectural project. How do you see the role or relevance of philosophical concepts in this process of architecture stepping into the practical?

BT: The "import-export" of concepts and ideas goes in both directions, from architecture to philosophy and back again.

KH: Your theoretical vocabulary includes the term "context." In your words, context is what situates, or places architecture. Does this idea of situation oppose change?

BT: A concept is an abstraction, a "*cosa mentale*." At one moment, if you want to make a concept in material, or "materialize the concept," you inevitably interact with context. The concept will be made from stone, wood, concrete, or glass, but it will also interact with issues of climate, labor, or cost, which will have their own influence. In architecture, concepts inevitably get contextualized.

KH: You say there is no architecture without context, except in the case of a "place that is not:" *utopia*. However, doesn't this "place" of absolute ideality, too, exclude change?

BT: Utopia may be outside of place, but it is not outside of social constructs and material-making hypotheses. Now, "change" introduces the idea of time: the time of imagining, of constructing, of inhabiting, of transforming, of destroying. Some concepts are rigid and absolute, while others allow for evolution.

KH: The previous question, perhaps improperly, suggests an analogy between the place/"non-place" distinction and your distinction between context and concept. Do you find the notion of place relevant for the concept?

BT: Concepts are abstractions. However, a concept can be generated by a context. Just as concepts can be contextualized, contexts can be conceptualized. My design for the Acropolis Museum in Athens conceptualized an intricate context of different layers of histories, proximities, and materialities.

KH: One of your *Questions of Space* seems to refer to the difference between place and space: "Is topology a mental construction toward a theory of space?" What would be your answer?

BT: None of my *Questions of Space* demand a single or specific answer.

KH: You often repeat that you are a "person of the city," once even explaining that your work "thrives on conflict." As you explain, "[t]he

conflict is no mere dialectic but a real conflict corresponding, on a theoretical level, to practical battles that occur in everyday life." In what way is the conflictual space of the city relevant for your work?

BT: I find it interesting how your questions indirectly reflect the days of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Phidias, Ictinus, and Pythagoras... The early definition of "city" and of urban spaces (*agora*, *stoa*, etc.) is about identity, interaction, and dialogue, but also about conflict and invention.

KH: After your post-1968 interest in Henri Lefebvre and the Situationists, the theme of the city and urban space gave way to abstract space in your writings. You explain this by saying that you could replace the term "architecture" with the abstract concept of space, without losing any of its two constitutive elements: one that belongs to the mind and the other belonging to the senses. In your words, space "was about opposition between concept and experience." Did this introduction of space as the third element within a system of the opposed two inspire your triadic conceptual systems, which made it possible to thematize the dynamic principles in architecture?

BT: At the time I was writing my early texts, the word "architecture" seemed loaded with too much history, too many connotations, too many "isms" (modernism, postmodernism, regionalism, etc.). It seemed necessary to take a distance. Words such as "space" and "city" were a means to free oneself from the competing and predictable ideologies of the time, their clich*é*s, their dictionary of received ideas.

KH: As you once pointed out, your *Questions of Space* were based on various reflections on space throughout history, from Kant to contemporary theorists. Does this set of references include Plato's descriptions of *khōra* or some contemporary readings of the concept?

BT: I wrote *Questions of Space* both as an ongoing investigation and as a "performance." (See accompanying illustration.) By no means are the questions intended to be a comprehensive catalogue of all the questions about space.

KH: It is worth noting that the word *khōra* in Ancient Greek primarily denotes space outside the city, which as such is linked to the limits of the city. You have written about limits, but, perhaps more importantly,

about their transgression. This provocative notion implies the idea of the limitless, but at the same time it is based on limits and would be unthinkable without them. Does that make the act of transgression necessarily belong to the city?

BT: I would have said yes when I wrote my early texts. Now I tend to think the definition(s) of limits extend(s) beyond the concept of the city.

KH: Could we describe transgression as an act of change? How do you see the relationship between the two terms?

BT: Let me think about it. I need time here, literally and figuratively.

KH: Speaking of change, we also need to mention the term *event*, which forms part of your space-event-movement triad. Unlike the common phrase that events "take place," you address the relationship between space and event, talking about "spatialization that goes with the event." You say: "Events are everywhere and nowhere. How does one locate an event in architecture?" And then you continue: "In architecture, an event is an in-between: somewhere between an exception and the mold of things to come." Do you find the idea of the in-between relevant for change?

BT: Yes. But let me recall a 1996 exchange between Derrida and myself that I have written about frequently. On the occasion of a public debate to an audience of over 1,000 people, Derrida corrected my undifferentiated use of the words "event" and "program," stating that the first term was unpredictable, as opposed to the second.

KH: We encounter the expression "magic of space" in your 1975 essay titled "A Space Is Worth a Thousand Words." You seem to use this expression to address the irreducibility of space to its theoretical discourse. Will this asymmetry between space and words always create events in architecture?

BT: Yes. This asymmetry is prevalent in architecture, for better or for worse. This includes the practice of architecture vs. its history. It also includes architectural theory vs. architectural history.

KH: You say that "[a]n architectural concept critically engages the circumstances, brief, and situation and formulates them in an original way."

Elsewhere, you even say that you don't believe in post-critical thinking, claiming that the task of architecture is to raise questions. Can these questions become "events of spacing"?

BT: Yes. Let me try to sum up with an allusion to a forthcoming text, namely my introduction to the final volume of my Event-Cities series (*Event-Cities 5: Poetics*, The MIT Press, Fall 2024). I have become increasingly interested in what Derrida calls the "poematic," which I'll transpose in the following way: when concept and context are entangled in such a way that their outcome cannot be explained in absolute or rational terms.

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

Figure [see next page]. Bernard Tschumi, "Manifesto 2: Questions of Space, or The Box, 1975," in *Architectural Manifestoes: Artists Space*, Committee for the Visual Arts, New York, 1978, unpaginated. Courtesy of Bernard Tschumi.

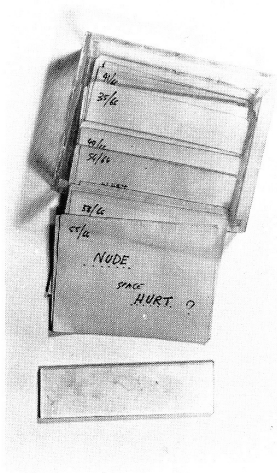
MANIFESTO 2

QUESTIONS OF SPACE, or THE BOX, 1975

Architectural space will be defined by ideas as much as by real walls. Architecture will be the tension between concepts of space and experience of space.

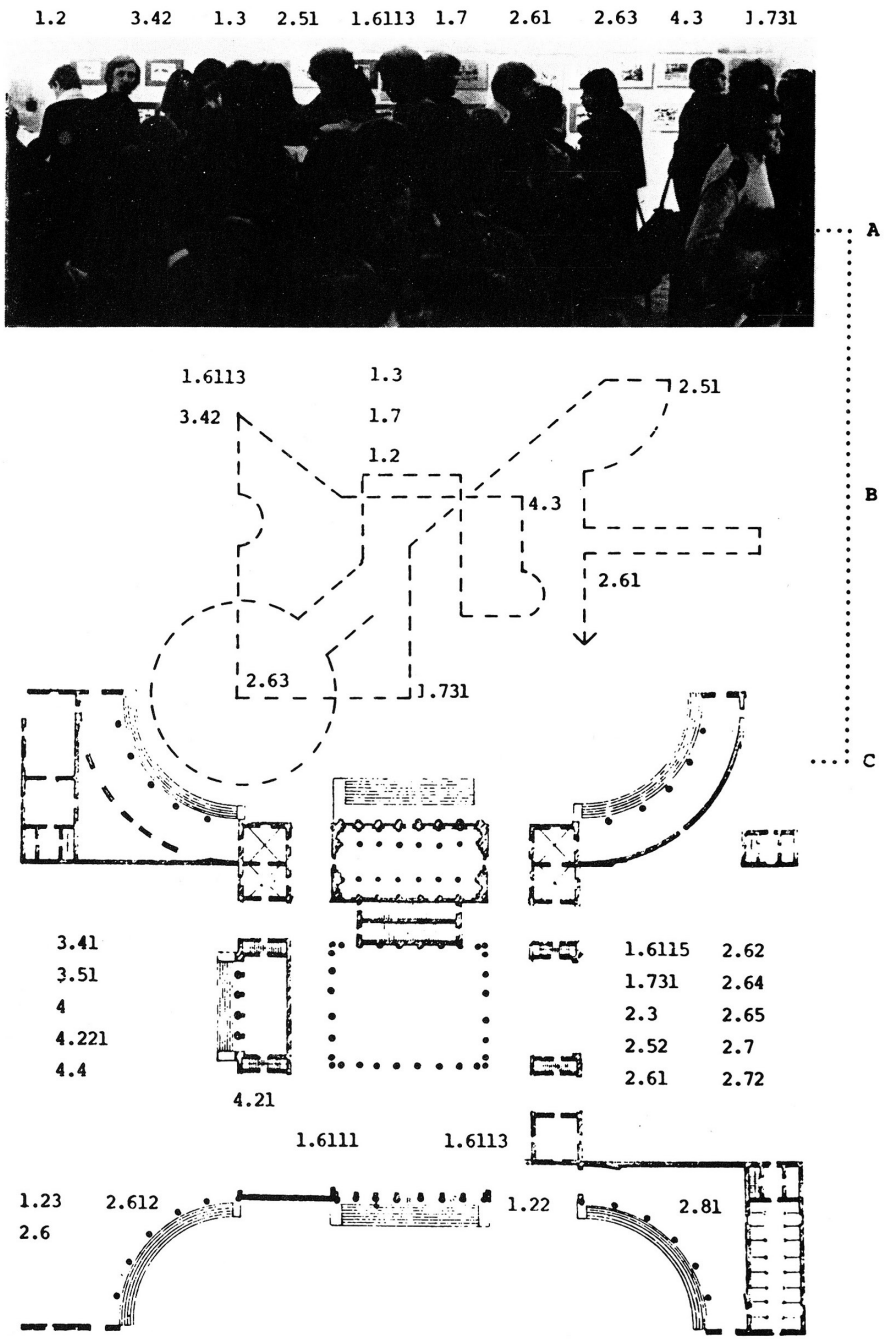
On April 21, 1975, visiting an architectural exhibition in Central London, 66 viewers were asked to write 66 questions relating to space. It was an attempt to define an architectural space without physical boundaries—a space similar to a sentence with a question mark. The path of the questioning was mapped on a plan of the exhibition space. This path defined an invisible (but real) "question space", a space materialized by the traces of my movements during that short period, or alternatively, by the stages of this particular architectural ritual: asking questions about space . . . The viewers' questions were placed in The Box, *which then contained both questions about concepts of space as well as the memory of a spatial experience. In this work, architecture is the* tension *between spatial concepts and the memory of the crowded space of a distant London evening. The box is a fetish.*

Another form of presentation was also devised. It literally juxtaposed (1) the photographic memory of the event (2) the 'performance path' of the questioner, and (3) a plan of one of Palladio's unrealized villas (referred to by one of the 66 questions). Here architectural paradoxes verged toward conceptual madness as the 66 questions began to replace the walls of the plan of the ideal villa.



Questions of Space *(1975), China Ink and Photograph 19" x 27"*

The Box *(1975), 8" x 6" x 2"*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