DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14809423
Interview Date: September 26, 2016

On the End of Authority: Interview with Peter Eisenman

Since writing his PhD thesis at Cambridge until today, Peter Eisenman has thematized "End" several times, which is why he was the logical choice to be the editor of this issue of Khōrein*. Initially, he agreed to this without hesitation, which would have made this his* de facto *'fourth stadium' of reflecting on "End" (although certainly not the last, as he feared). However, in conversation with the editorial team of* Khōrein*, his role and contribution to this issue changed. We can say that we attempted to imitate in one way or another his possible activity of editing an issue, evoking texts on 'End' from the eighties (*"*The End of the Classical") or his variations on "End" from 2016 (The End of Authority... Theory or End of Author). There is probably no position on "End" among architects and philosophers that has not been influenced by Eisenman's thinking on the matter.*

The interview before you sat ready on Eisenman's desk at Eisenman Architects Office (450 Seventh Ave); he provided us with a copy in the spring of 2017, and then he reworked and edited it for publication in Khōrein *late last year, removing some answers that we nevertheless found interesting. We do not know who conducted the interview, nor whether it is a transcript of questions and responses from one or more of the lectures Eisenman gave in 2016 across architecture departments (the most famous of which was at Princeton, entitled "The End of Authority," held on September 19, 2016). Finally, this interview has nothing to do with the interview entitled "The End of Authority: Peter Eisenman with Julian Rose," published in 2020.*

QUESTION: You distinguish between a project and a practice by arguing that while "project defines the world, practice is defined by the world." Yet, haven't powerful practices shaped the world?

PETER EISENMAN: I believe that there are two avenues to power in architecture. One is through design; the other is through the intellect—that

is, thinking. When I finished school in the United States in the fifties, I thought that power was gained through design, and so my models were Corby and Mies. I went to work with Gropius because I thought he was a designer—it turned out that Gropius was not a designer. After six months I left and met Jim Stirling, and showed him my work. He said to me: "Peter, you are a really good designer, but you don't know anything about architecture." Which was true—I was innocent. Jim advised me to go be with Colin Rowe in order to learn about architecture. Being with Colin Rowe for three years, I learned about the other power; the knowledge of the discipline. It was very important lesson that power comes from knowledge, just as much as design. I am convinced that all the students downstairs [at IIT] can design well, but can they think? If there is anything a school can give students, it should be the capacity to think. Practice can only become powerful if you can think and have knowledge of the discipline; which is gained in studio, not from history classes. Studio is also about teaching project, namely, the power of ideas. Some of that involves going to the library. That's how you teach project—by reading and thinking in the design studio; you can't just have a history-theory sequence. That is why it is great to have a library in this building [Crown Hall]; integrating theory and history into studio. This is the way to achieve a powerful practice.

Q: The question was not about how one can have a powerful practice, but how a powerful practice defines the world.

PE: At the present time, most practices in the world are power practices that don't have a project. I believe it is a minor form of power. There is not a single Mies or Loos among them. So in order to attain the kind of power you refer to, project and practice must be integrated in a studio, which isn't the norm in most schools. I remember when I was a student at Cornell, one of my teachers was Romaldo Giurgola. Perhaps he is not known anymore, but he was an important Italian architect. Every Friday morning, I was in his 9:00 a.m. class, having returned from party night on Thursdays. He hardly spoke any English, and I didn't really care either because the class wasn't studio. But I appreciated afterwards that he was teaching us project. Until we bring project into the studio as an attitude, we are not going to have power, because practice doesn't ever become powerful by itself. I don't know any architect who has power that does not have a project, and their practice becomes powerful through

that project. Rem Koolhaas, Greg Lynn, Rafael Moneo, Tadao Ando, and Oswald Mathias Ungers have all understood that, and they have a project. Gropius had a powerful practice but not a powerful project, he disappears when we discuss Mies, Corbu, Wright, and Loos. Gropius does not exist. Today, Bjarke Ingels is not powerful. He's just a designer. There is a big difference between Ingels and Koolhaas, and that difference is important.

Q: But people like Bjarke Ingels do have some kind of authority because of their practices?

PE: Bjarke Ingels is so successful because his clients do not want an authority, which speaks to the times we are in. That's the trouble with our society—we no longer have the need for authority. We want crowdsourcing and bottom-up thinking instead. What kind of surgeon would ask his client about how he should operate? What kind of lawyer would ask a client which way to argue a case? What writer would ask the readers to tell him how to write? So why should an architect listen to bottom-up opinions? When authority is no longer looked upon with respect, we end up with someone like Donald Trump in public life. He builds bad buildings and hires uninteresting architects who don't care about the project. He just wants to make money! Not only is he a person without morals, he is a person without scruples. I know, because he hired my firm once to do a schematic design for a high-rise in New York City. We signed a contract and agreed on a hundred thousand dollars fee, yet when we took the schematic to him, he said, "This is shit. I am not going to pay you," and walked away. This is emblematic of our time, which is why I don't want practice to be powerful. Radical Italian thinkers like Bramante, Brunelleschi, and Borromini were powerful because of their ideas. Do you think that anybody would care about Venturi's practice if he hadn't written *Complexity and Contradiction*? Or, that anybody would care about Palladio's villas if he hadn't written the *Quattro Libri*? I have always said that books last longer than buildings.

Q: How relevant do you think a project can be without being practiced?

PE: Manfredo Tafuri once told me that nobody will care what you think, if you don't build. Conversely, he also told me that if you don't think, nobody will care what you build. That is so important to understand.

We are currently doing the construction documentation for a 450,000 square-foot museum in Istanbul [the Yenikapi Museum]. I have realized how lucky I am: at the age of eighty-five, I am doing a big museum, I have just finished two books, and I am teaching. I am doing exactly what I think an architect should do, which is to do both. In other words, it would be a mistake to step practicing and concentrate solely on a project. Since most people in this world are just practicing without a project, however, my recommendation would be to worry about project more than practice, as it is easier to go into practice than it is to have a project.

Q: Do your clients defer to your authority, and what compromises, if any, do they make when they choose to work with you?

PE: My clients know the difference between Peter Eisenman and Frank Gehry: Frank has lots of buildings and I do not. I believe that clients generally don't want architects with projects. I think that project is a contradiction to practice, which is why it's so difficult to do both; they stand opposed or oxymoronic. Frank has a great practice, which sustains his project. I believe that I have a good project, but not the practice that sustains this. This is why I am excited to do a large museum like Yenikapi. I don't get my projects from clients; I get them from competitions. One of the marks of an architect with a project is an architect shunned by clients. I can't tell a client why they should build a project, because they would not understand. A client often doesn't understand why we do what we do—but that is not important, as long as the architects understand. Any client who chooses to work with me compromises. Doing something that the client wants is compromising, too! Last week we changed something on the east facade of the Yenikapi museum, and the client said to me, "Peter, you have six hundred drawings and the changes you wish to make will change a hundred drawings! We are hoping to go out to bid tomorrow, do you still want to do drawings or do you want to go out to bid?" That is my compromise: the east facade is not going to be how I want it to be. I still want to tweak things and the clients want to build! What's interesting about this client is that they have never set us a budget, allowing us to draw for them what we wanted. So the compromises are coming. At my stage of life, I want to see the building built, I am less interested in the six hundred drawings that are going into the archive.

Q: Can you define your project?

PE: No, that's for you to do. I don't need to define it, because I do it. I am not a historian. I can define Koolhaas's project, or Moneo's project, but I can't define mine.

Q: In projects such as the City of Culture at Santiago de Compostela or the Yenikapi Museum in Istanbul, you interpret ideas from the site that you arbitrarily use to generate the figure. Can you talk about the notion of the arbitrary in your work?

PE: When ideas come from a site they are no longer arbitrary. So I object to the term arbitrary. Unless you are arguing that the site has no relation to the building, I would say that we are on a different page. Moneo always argues that my work is arbitrary—my response has always been that I do not think so. The module for the Yenikapi project comes from the modulation of the Hagia Sophia that we discovered in our studies. No one from the city administration knows that, but it is clearly identified in the grid, and so it is not arbitrary at all. The former harbor walls of the site were used to define the figure, so the building takes the form of the old harbor whose archaeological ships it houses. You might think that's arbitrary, but I cannot think of a better way to do it. So, I stand categorically opposed to the arbitrary.

Q: In a panel discussion with Preston Scott Cohen where you spoke about the superimposed grids in Santiago, you said yourself at one point that it is arbitrary to some degree.

PE: Let's take the example of this table. Why is this table this shape in this room? Is it arbitrary? No. Would it be an equally effective table in this space if it were square? I don't know. So I think a degree of arbitrariness plays a role in everything we do, where there is no extreme logic being applied. Our Berlin Tower was against phallocentric architecture. Phallogocentrism, which was a strong feminist idea from the eighties and nineties. It made us decide that we shouldn't be building phallic symbols anymore. We had female architects working with us, and we thought that there should be other kinds of tall buildings. So we made a Mobius strip, which can never be interpreted as a phallus as it is always twisting in on itself. Unfortunately, my client died, so the building didn't go ahead:

Yet I am still wondering about the shape of the tower. It is an important question. But none of my projects, whether in Istanbul or Berlin, are arbitrary—they are absolutely thought out and related to the site.

Q: You talk about the idea of lateness, both as a critical moment in time and a late moment in your practice. Are you trying to evaluate your project in relation to the conditions of the present zeitgeist?

PE: Beethoven wrote the Missa Solemnis a few years before his death. If you look at the Missa Solemnis, it is a completely different take on music. I would argue that the Missa Solemnis was Beethoven's late moment—that is to say, it is a piece that breaks away from the work that had led him towards the nine symphonies, and is completely separate. Had he lived beyond the Missa Solemnis, I believe he would have done something different. I am eighty-five. I am already playing against time. So what can I do? I read Edward Said's book *On Late Style*—"late style" was the phrase Theodor Adorno used to describe Beethoven's third hit period in his own book—because I am trying to find out what is my being. I am in "late style" whether I like it or not. You cannot do things until you die, because we have to put a capstone on our existence. I don't think I am eighty-five, but I am! I have to keep up with young people with the energy and ideas. It could be said that I am out of touch with the present *zeitgeist*: the millennial project, crowd sourcing, and object-oriented ontology are not my game. I am not interested in many things that are being worked out in the present, since there is nothing that I can teach of the present. I have recently completed a Palladio book, and I am working on an Alberti book, for which I learn something new every time I give a lecture. I just assigned an article by Rudolf Wittkower about Alberti written in 1938. It's a fantastic article with a different view on Alberti. But I can't teach Jeanne Gang or Zaha and parametric software because I wouldn't know I how to; nor would I want to. So I teach Alberti and Bramante, and I take my students to Vigevano by Bramante. Now I would propose that only five students out of the six hundred here at IIT have been there, but to me it is the best square in all the world. There is a church there by the Polish cardinal, Juan Caramuel y Lobkowitz, it has a facade with four openings. The fourth opening is where the cars and secular people enter from, while the other three are standard entrances into the church. Massimo Scolari wrote a book on Lobkowitz, *Oblique Drawing*, as he

was both a Polish cardinal and a practicing architect. I cannot talk about today because I am still learning about yesterday!

Q: You have predicted an epistemic paradigm shift in the next twenty years, which will create space for the development of a new meta-project. What do you believe will drive that shift?

PE: I can't answer futurist questions. I believe that there will be a paradigm shift, but I don't know what it will be or what will drive the shift. I am not sure, but it is not global warming. That will happen and we will deal with it, but that is not going to be the main driver of the architectural shift. To be honest, I don't think democratic capitalism as a project works anymore. It cannot afford security, healthcare, or sustain infrastructure. Capital, as a system for politics and economics, is on its way out. Towns like Flint, MI, don't even have money to purify their water. People are being poisoned by infrastructural systems. What worries me is that we could see authoritarian politics and economics, which will be a real problem. Don't forget, the major built accomplishments of the Modern movement occurred during periods of fascism, communism and Nazism. In other words, under repressive authoritarian governments. So it could happen again. I can't tell you any more than that, but we will probably see a shift in the socio-political economic structure that will affect architecture in a big way.

Q: In your opinion, what will be the three buildings that Peter Eisenman will be known for?

PE: I would argue that the most known project would be the Berlin Holocaust Memorial. It is a complete outlier that has more to do with my practice and less to do with my project, yet it will exist for five hundred years and I can't do anything about it. The same could be said for the University of Phoenix Stadium. It is in the public eye and everybody knows of it. For me, the most important projects are Santiago de Compostela, Cincinnati [Aronoff Center], and Wexner Center, or any one of the house series—probably House II, as it has more theoretical development than any of the others. The CCA in Montreal has over three hundred of my development drawings for this house. House II dealt with the dialogue between column and wall, which is an Albertian project. Alberti said that the column is not structural but a residue of the wall. The project followed the idea that the columns are not structural, rather the walls

are. The columns were ornamental. This was not the case for any of my other projects; the theoretical message is very much tied to the Albertian theory. For me, the didactic nature of that house is very important. Jeff Kipnis has just written a great book, *By Other Means*, where he talks about the conflict within myself: I'm the typical American bourgeois kid, who runs into philosophical discourse and fights against himself, for which there is a struggle and an eventual return to the values within me. It is a beautiful essay which is absolutely true. It was just published in the Palazzo Bembo at the 2016 Venice Biennale.

Q: A few years ago at the Berlage, you presented on a conversation you had with Jacques Derrida, and why you saw him as an idealist. You went on to mention that architecture cannot exist without idealism. Could you elaborate?

PE: Rosalind Krauss wrote an essay called "Death of the Hermeneutic Phantom," in which she said that modernist sculpture and painting really are more radical than modernist architecture. In her opinion, modernist architecture wanted to idealize technology, structure, new materials, and new ideas of the social—it was the continuation of a Kantian project of the late eighteenth century. Ali of the early nineteenth and twentieth century architects whom we admire had this idealist streak that remains unacknowledged. This situation is the hermeneutic phantom of modern architecture according to Rosalind Krauss, and she talked about the unspoken idealism of modern architecture as a project of the modern. This project of idealizing new techniques and materials did not have the radicality of modern painters and sculptors, because it did not aim to estrange or defamiliarize as they did. So I would argue, as Jacques Derrida did, for the moral idealization of philosophy, namely, the deconstruction of ideas. I would say that Derrida was a moralist and idealist; Jeff was ultimately saying that I was too. Students should understand what that means, or at least make sense of it as an open problematic, as it is the latent idealism—in terms of modern architecture—which we all teach in schools.

Q: I wonder if you could expand on your intrigulng analysis of Giuseppe Terragni in your dissertation, The Formal Basis of Modern Architecture?

PE: I was travelling with Colin Rowe in 1961, and had been given a book six months earlier by Sir Colin St John Wilson. In the book was

the Terragni building. I said to Colin, "We've got to go see this." So we left Bernhard Hoesli, who was then dean of ETH, and drove down from Zurich to Como. Colin used to tell the story that when we came upon this certain square in Como, I had an apocalyptic revelation. I had never seen a building like that, and even now I still see it as an amazing thing. When you come upon this white half-cube in the sunlight it is incredible. So, I decided I wanted to write my thesis partly on this building. It was really important to me, even though I had never wanted to be a teacher; I had always wanted to be architect. Eventually I wrote the dissertation at Cambridge. I could never do another book quite like that one. It was a little over the top; there were hundreds of drawings. Rem used to say to me, "You and Terragni are both B-movie architects." I would say to him, "Well, I love being a B-movie architect, because I love B-movies." But I don't think about Terragni today, and I have never taught Terragni. *Ten Canonical Buildings* did come out of a class that I taught, but it was Koolhaas, Libeskind, Moneo, and so on. Terragni was a moment in my life in which I am not in anymore. I am not sure I know how you would teach Terragni in today's climate anyway.

Q: What was Judith Turner's importance to the New York Five?

PE: Let's not talk about Judith Turner. She did not do the original book, *The Five Architects*. The problem with The Five Architects was my inability to be me. I was always inventing institutions and projects that I could appear in, such as the Institute of Architectural and Urban Studies (IAUS), the Conference of Architects for the Study of the Environment (CASE) group, and P3. With *The Five Architects*, I didn't know what I was doing it for. It began when I went over to see George Wittenborn, who published the first edition, and told him that I had the tapes from a meeting we had had at MOMA, CASE 7 and 8, which was the basis for The Five Architects. I had been ready to announce the book with the title *Cardboard Architecture*, which was the title of my essays, but the group said, "No! That was not our idea, we can't call the book that." When I asked them what they would like the book to be called, they said, "We don't want it to be called anything! We don't like each other's work, we just happen to be doing this book together." After that, we just named it, "Eisenman, Graves, Gwathmey, Hejduk, Meier." The final title came from Paul Goldberger, who published a story about the book calling it The New York Five. We were all different. We published five hundred

copies of the original book, as we were not interested in publicity. All we wanted was to make a nice book, and it turned into an ideology. Getting out from under the association with The Five was difficult for me. That's another period of time, like the Terragni period, that I am always trying to get away from.

Q: What is the book you want to be remembered for?

PE: I haven't written that book yet. Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction* was the first book of American theoretical practice. Rem's *Delirious New York* is a very important book and will be remembered long after any of his buildings. I believe that I haven't written the book I want to be remembered for yet. I don't know what it will be about, but that is my late project. It's not Palladio, Alberti, *Ten Canonical Buildings*, Terragni, or *The Formal Basis*.

Q: When will this book come out?

PE: I am still trying to understand what it will be about. It could be about anything, even soccer! I once did a book, *Contropiede*, which is Italian for counterattack. They bring the enemy very close and then they attack with their libero, or defensive players. I took the term and I published a book. I think I will do something really unique. When I work with students or when I work in the office, I want to do something that no one else does. I don't know how to theorize what that is, but nobody that I know understands what it is.