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Shifting to Historical Ends: Interview with Sylvia Lavin

This interview was conducted two months after the seminar dedicated to Khōrein*, held at The New School in New York on September 27, 2024. The seminar brought together architectural theorists, historians, critics, practicing architects and philosophers to discuss past and future thematic issues of the journal. As a participant, Sylvia Lavin reflected on the theme of "end" through the lens of her research. The following interview starts from Lavin's presentation, aiming to unpack some of its specific observations and discuss them through the lens of her broader work.*

KHŌREIN: You began your short presentation at The New School with an ironic take on the notion of "end," particularly motivated by the pervasive anxiety about "the end" today. How does this idea of end times shape the architectural present?

SYLVIA LAVIN: I was not being ironic. I think people are authentically afraid of the end today. And I think this shapes how architects think about their work in ways that seem to me novel and unprecedented. When I was a student, one understood architecture to be a problem of projection of the future or at least a problem of very long periods of time—monuments, preservation, archives, histories... Architecture understood itself to be something of the *longue durée*. At least its historiography was linked to these ideas of long, interminable periods of time. Over the course of the second half of the 20th century, as American capitalism and modernity overtook the historiography of the field, time shrank to the period of real estate mortgage. It went from "forever" to 30 years in a relatively short amount of time. And in the last ten years, the future has shrunk to two degrees in the change of the temperature of the oceans, which is now 1°. Therefore, the end (of something) is very present. I think that architecture is no more or less than any other field confronting a new way of thinking about time.

KH: In your talk, you centered your reflections on the "end" around what you termed the *radiation episteme*. Although you linked this historically to the aftermath of atomic bombings, you didn't adopt an eschatological tone. Your point seemed to be that radiation destabilizes the very concept of the material. It makes the material an unreliable means to an end. To what extent does this disrupt architecture's fiction of stasis?

SL: My answer here must relate to something that has already ended: the human-centered focus of most architectural fictions of the future. If we accept that human survival is not the point of narrating a future, then ending has no beginning against which to measure itself. Therefore, I don't take an eschatological tone. For me, the radiation episteme is one that thinks a lot about endless chains of mutation. I was thinking in architectural terms about how radiation didn't so much make material an unreliable means to an end because it produced more of an end than had ever been imagined before. It was very good at turning material into a reliable means to an end. But it had other byproducts. It is perhaps the material regime that produced the most unintended byproducts. Of course, all material regimes produce unintended byproducts, but the radiation episteme did so to the point that the difference between byproduct and intentional goal became unstable.

KH: Your research on trees seems to directly address this uncertainty of nature. How does the abstraction of trees into timber, as raw material, reflect a broader shift toward reducing nature's temporal and dynamic qualities into static systems of representation?

SL: I think abstraction is never fully realized. It's not that nature is uncertain. Nature doesn't have certainty. It has operations, and its abstraction is very difficult—I would say impossible—to realize. Maybe today it's interesting to think about architecture not in terms of representation, but rather as a continual effort to maintain the idea of abstraction in the face of concreteness of various forms. I think that's what my work on trees is trying to suggest. Trees are just a kind of stand-in for an obvious thing that architecture engages with on multiple levels at the same time—proportion, anthropomorphism, material, plays, geography, etc. In that sense, trees are a very handy and highly charged heuristic device. What I'm trying to do is explore the extraordinary amount of work that needs to be done, again and again, to keep them contained within the category

of timber in this case. In the United States, to own a piece of property entailed a long history of taking a tree and turning it into a point, and turning the point into a measurement, and having the measurement turn into a line, and having the line go on a property map—and then having the property. This is an incredible chain of what Cornelia Vismann calls substitutions via analogy. The minute you stop that operation, the tree somehow reappears and the whole operation needs to happen again. That's architecture's work, I would say, today.

KH: Architectural processes of "denaturing" are frequently discussed in your writings, often through the semantic duality of the Italian word *pianta*, which captures both the Latin *planta* and the meaning of the plan. Both meanings involve the idea of the *ground* as a plane where seeds are implanted and plans are traced. How do you see this duality in relation to the ideas of beginnings and ends, founding and projection?

SL: I am absolutely fascinated by the process whereby the "ground plane," as we might say in English, lost track of the ground that gave it planarity in the sense that an architectural plan became a legal fiction. What it has been agreed to mean is some abstract horizontal plane, some number of feet off the ground plane. That's what makes it a plan. And if that plan hits the surface of the earth, it can no longer operate as an architectural plan. It stops being a plan. So, somehow the implanting that gave rise to the idea of making a plan lost sight of the ground that gave it its authority. This probably has a kind of long prehistory in forms of magical thinking. I'm not enough of an anthropologist or mythologist to know about that, but it's an extraordinary operation. It's deeply fascinating to think of the way architects have managed to overlook this magic that happens every time they draw a plan. You think of the most hardheaded secularists, for example, Muthesius or somebody like that, drawing a plan and somehow not realizing that he's pulling a white rabbit out of a hat. It's an total act of magical thinking.

KH: Speaking of exploitation and modes of production, we should mention an important subject in your work: *plastic*. The essence of this material lies in its artificiality—its capacity for endless transformation, unconstrained by moral imperatives of "truth to materials." On the other hand, to what extent can the lack of resistance of this material lead to the idea of imposing form onto matter?

SL: If I can answer your question in historical, rather than theoretical terms, I would say that plastic became artificial in the era of a specific chemistry regime. In other words, the idea of the plastic arts long predated the idea of plastic as an artificial material that required chemistry and technology of a certain kind. All it meant to say that plastic was an artificial material was that it escaped ideologies that had grown up around traditional materials. It is also interesting to think historically that materials didn't have truths until the very late 19th century. They had behaviors, origins, economies, and so forth. But, truth they did not have until certain kinds of systems of production intervened in them. Therefore, it was at the moment of the collapse of some material regimes that truth had to be invented. And let me add that truth to materials became an important issue to architects right around the time uranium was detected for the first time at the end of the 19th century. Suddenly, truth to materials had to be invented at the very moment when materials were beginning scientifically to be understood as behaving in ways that were novel, not explained by traditional forms of science. I would say it's important to think about these things in those historical terms.

One notable aspect of plastic—if by that we mean certain chemical polymers—is that it is a material that is the most sensitive to time of any material used by architects. When you extrude a piece of plastic, it remains plastic only for a short amount of time and then hardens to become something that behaves like a different material. So plastic has a shelf life, both in its shaping and in its persistence that might make it an interesting material to think about if one is concerned with the question of time. Moreover, one of the ways that plastic entered the architectural regime was as an agent of fixing together other materials. Plastic served as a kind of glue, and that triggered a retrospective redefinition of all kinds of other materials, such as mortar, certain types of concrete, etc. In this way, plastic became a medium, a kind of in between one thing and another. And then if we look at those median strips, part of what is interesting about them is that they often served historically as weak points, forms of porosity, maybe we could also call them welcoming doors, where various forms of life and elemental matter entered architecture. One of my pet interests now, for example, are these 19th century books on weeds growing in "ancient monuments." I am not talking about ruinology as such, but rather about 19th-century horticulturalists who were interested in plants that adapted their own organic lives to reside in forms of material that they had not

resided in before. For example, weeds moving from places in the ground into the plastic joints between stones in buildings, finding a new form of implantation. For me, plastic is interesting insofar as it unleashes such operations tied to forms of life and connection that do not relate to ideas of truth and falsehood but are rather outside normative models of material.

KH: Speaking of normativity, perhaps we should look back to your writing about "confounding mediums" in *Kissing Architecture*. It is very thought-provoking to trace how you discuss disciplinary boundaries here through the longstanding preoccupation with the "confusion of mediums" and medium specificity, particularly because you focus on thresholds that somehow mobilize these delimitations but still do not abolish them. As you say, "limits can make good politics," which you call "good entanglement." How do you see architecture engaging in this way with other disciplines or fields like media studies, for instance?

SL: Certainly, I was arguing against a kind of video fixation of the world in *Kissing Architecture* that everything was on its way to becoming video and video was becoming a kind of master field that absorbed everything into its intoxicating immateriality. In that sense, I thought entanglement was a way of trying to manage the movement forward and kind of super disciplinarity without collapsing into *meta*. I guess, *meta* didn't exist yet, but we were anticipating *meta*. So good entanglement is a kind of critique of the emergence of meta.

Media studies have, in part through the influence of German cultural technique work, importantly moved away from being itself dominated by questions of film, video and image making. Without media studies we don't have elemental philosophy, we don't have attention to certain forms of material practices in scholarly production and dissemination. I think that media studies is a key place to look for the operations involved by the deployment of matter in the world for ideological purpose. Architecture does that and media does that. Media has a lot to offer architecture, in that sense, precisely by the degree to which it has left behind a traditional definition of media. If you were to compare media studies, say, in the 80s, looking at a film, and the way a media studies person today might look at the cloud or an underwater cable, and how a media studies discourse links them together—that is an extraordinary expansion of thought and power. The question I would be asking is, has architecture

expanded its own self-understanding in ways that are equivalent in scale and power as that. I am not saying it has or it has not. I'm only saying it is a good question to ask.

KH: The metaphor of kissing becomes particularly compelling when thought of not so much as a non-discursive touch, but as an act that implies a political relation between the two. How did this simple idea of "corruption" by another provoke your reflections about the state of the discipline in its tension between autonomy and engagement?

SL: I do not necessarily describe kissing as non-discursive act. I know that there is a lot of literature that does that kind of work on it. I just took it to be an extraordinary statement made by a person in relation to a project she was commissioned to do, and I simply thought: what is that? I clearly fail, but I try to resist ontological, historical, essential arguments about what a kiss is. Rather under those circumstances—the reopening of the Museum of Modern Art, an institution in the throes of the most megalomaniacal expansion and confidence in its first world, first city, first borough status—what did it mean to not be able to resist saying yes to MoMA? And yet, wanting also to produce a kind of disdain. I think that when Pipilotti Rist said she wanted to kiss it, it was—though I don't know this, but I read it—meant to be an almost castrating act. I thought this was a critical strategy she was trying to deploy and develop at a moment in which the advertising universe was taking over cities and museums as such were coming to an end. Their cultural status as autonomous objects were coming to an end. I think of it as a historical reflection on thinking about architecture and its accoutrement in that period of time.

KH: Another installation you mention in the same book is Diller + Scofidio's *withDrawing Room*. You seem to introduce it almost as a counterexample of radical avant-gardism, talking about its dismemberment as a way of intentionally precluding intimacy. Were you employing such a mode of detachment as a form of criticality?

SL: I certainly think that the *withDrawing Room* succeeded in producing a critical response to the idea that there could be something like public intimacy, in its refutation of the spectacle of intimacy. Maybe there is a word missing here, which is *privacy*. In the period the *withDrawing Room* was made, there was a lot of interest in the problem of privacy

and where privacy and the public realm intersected. I think that was part of the strategy. Certainly, I think they were equally interested in private forms of design. Without Walter Benjamin's writings on the interior there wouldn't be the *withDrawing Room*. It is an intimate meditation on Walter Benjamin's reading of the Parisian interior and the forms of drawing that it inadvertently produced. There are these fabulous passages in Benjamin about how when you sat down on a Victorian sofa your ass made an imprint on the voluptuous velvet upholstery, and when you stood up a kind of ass drawing was left behind you. I suppose in the era of the Victorian prude there could be nothing more weirdly intimate than asses all over the place in a proper parlor. But I think that was the kind of soft, ironic inversion that Diller + Scofidio then explored.

KH: Your reflections on the context of this project are accompanied by expressions like "tragedy of isolation" and "tough love." What do you see as the "tough loves" that shaped architectural discourse back then (or continue to shape it today)?

SL: I suppose I would say that in the now decades that I've been thinking about architecture, I have become increasingly uncomfortable with the ahistoricity of the philosophical position. Not that I don't wish philosophers to continue to occupy it, but I am not comfortable there. It is very tough for me not to assume that what one person thinks of as philosophy, another person experiences as hegemonic in position. I don't know how to navigate that except by shifting to, let's call it ends, historical ends, because it means that whatever mistakes I make, which will be inevitable and profound, I do not spread them into the world with universal ambition. It is a kind of shrinking of the amount of fuck-up that I can produce. So, in the period in which I was thinking about this problem, architecture as a field was really going through the renunciation of its identification with drawing and representation. That was the problem in the field of western modern, Euro, American architecture—insofar as there was a field we're talking about. For 25, 30, or even 50 years—whatever the exact span—this was, in the context of human history, just a blip. Yet during that period, we came to believe it represented "architecture itself." It was a time when architecture identified the purity of its own purpose, its morality, and all the ideas we've been discussing in relation to drawing. The drawing served as a kind of filtering device through which architecture filtered out the toxins it was otherwise deploying around the

world, while simultaneously defining what it believed itself to be. In that particular moment, I felt that fantasy world was coming undone. And writing then as a critic, as opposed to an historian, I was thinking: how do you make sure this crazy false world does come undone? It must collapse, but perhaps if you accompany it on this journey of collapse, it will have a softer landing and be able to find other ways of moving forward. I think that's really what I was saying. I felt that the field had to go through a kind of mourning because it really believed in this myth that it had produced for itself. And I felt sympathy with its loss.

Interview conducted by Sara Dragišić and Marko Ristić.