

DIPTYCH LOGIC:
INTERVIEW WITH PETER EISENMAN

KHÖREIN: In principle, how do you see the relationship between architecture and philosophy?

PETER EISENMAN: I'm only interested in architecture and philosophy in the sense that we need to change the priority from architecture *and* philosophy to architecture *slash* philosophy. In other words, there should not be second nor primary element in that relationship; it should be the same together: architecture / philosophy, philosophy / architecture. And the *and* needs to be erased.

For example, there's no priority in a painterly diptych between left and right, while in a literary diptych, in A + B, A always gets a priority. So in your example, architecture has the priority? What we're trying to do is overcome that priority. That's one of the things in my projects, to overcoming priority in duality.

KH: You would put a slash between these two disciplines. What's the difference between slash and conjunction here?

PE: There should be no temporal priority in studying precedents. If we talk about ideality and architecture, what we're trying to do is to say that ideality is not first, nor second. I don't think the *and* is useful. There is no duality... My work is trying to overcome ideality in architecture.

KH: "Architectural philosophy" is your phrase. You use it in a text published in *Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts* in 1990, when speaking about The Wexner Center for the Arts. You didn't say philosophy of architecture, nor philosophy for architects. The question is what does this syntagma mean for you?

PE: Maybe Alberti's book could answer that. Alberti dealt with the problem of relationship in architecture. This was a very famous part of his

theory, presented in his 10 books. Part to whole means that there is a priority or duality between them. Whole is both complete, more complete than part, but incomplete. It needs part. Part to whole is really important to all architects, whether today, or 500 years ago. This idea that still captivates them, whether they're for environment or function, etc. It is dominant.

Part to whole presupposes, again, an ideality. And what I'm writing about is showing that, in fact, Alberti may have written about part to whole, but in fact in his architecture he was far from that. Most theoreticians and critics say, well, you don't have to look at Alberti's buildings, because it's in the text, the theoretical text. I'm doing a book on the five buildings of Alberti, and I want to show that this is a fiction that he was interested in, but it was not in any of his buildings.

KH: How is Alberti using philosophy? Or theory?

PE: He uses theory, not philosophy. In Latin the title of his book is *De re aedificatoria*. It's hard for me to translate it; Manuel [Orazi] probably could translate it better. But Alberti was not interested in philosophy. He was interested in a theory of building. He was interested in space. He was the first architect to write the word *spatium* in an architectural text. Vitruvius never mentioned it.

So, what is space? Space became a really interesting idea, because it became a substance, not just empty. Seeing for an architect; to see space as solid is not what a philosopher does. Philosophers can't see solid space. Architecture has to deal with the idea of solid space.

KH: Alberti is a writer, as you are. He wrote several treatises.

PE: He was a brilliant man. He wrote a book on painting. He wrote a book on the family, too. He wrote many books. Alberti is an intellectual. People didn't like his buildings because they say he is too intellectual. He thought too much about what he was doing.

KH: There are two essays of yours, Peter, I'm very interested in, because of my studies about translation. In both, you mention Alberti. These essays are "Misreading Peter Eisenman" (1987), and "Architecture as a Second Language" (1988). For decades you were interested in architecture as a text. Maybe you changed your mind about that, going back to

form or space. I think this concept of architecture is fascinating, because it has to do with translation.

PE: Yes, Manuel. I'm working on language. Music is a first language, painting is a first language, but architecture isn't. You have to teach people to take the color and the shape and the form and the space, and do something with it. Therefore, it was not a first language. People don't understand that; they think architecture has to do with building. It may have to do with building, I don't know.

KH: You said more than once that Jacques Derrida was one of your mentors. Why did you spend time with philosophers?

PE: First of all, I spent time with painters who are philosophers. To me David Salle is a philosopher. Richard Serra, too. Michael Heizer is a philosopher. To me, dealing with people who are of philosophic bent, let's say, is important. Of three major architectural critics of the past half century, Banham, Tafuri and Rowe, I had interactions with two of them, Rowe and Tafuri, and it was important to me. In those interactions, I learned a lot about what I was doing. I didn't learn much from architects.

From Jacques I learned the most important... The reason why deconstruction was important to me and remains to be important to me, is that there is no one to one relationship between the sign and the object. In other words, there is what he called a free play of signifiers.

KH: In the relationship between Peter and Jacques, what is the position of this *and*? How can you pose this \mathcal{E} between an architect and a philosopher?

PE: We did a book *Chora L Works* together with Jeff Kipnis. Jacques hated that we punched holes in the text. It was always my intention to mark the book with the absence. In other words, we paid a lot of money to cut the holes in the book. He really said, "Why are you doing this? I want a book without the holes. I want to be able to read it."

We were designing the Parc de la Villette, and Jacques said to me: "Where are the trees?," because it was a garden. I replied: "Where are the trees in your texts?." "Where are the benches?," he said. "People sit down." I said: "Where are the benches in your projects? There are no benches in them." In certain ways, I learned a lot, but it was very difficult.

KH: In the book *Peter Eisenman: in Dialogue with Architects and Philosophers* we read that you say: “I realized that one of the important issues in architecture was the ability and capacity to be able to *see* as an architect, and I realized that philosophers don’t *see*. Certainly, they do not see as architects. It is difficult for a philosopher to understand what is meant by *seeing* architecture.” Could you explain what you mean by that? Why is it difficult for philosopher to understand what is meant by seeing architecture as an architect?

PE: I can tell you what it means to see as an architect. You see what’s not present, what’s present in absence. That’s what made Palladio great. That everything he was talking about was not actually there. It was in the mind. Being able to see what isn’t physically necessarily present... that architecture is not only presence, but presence of absence. What is presence? In my book on Palladio, I explain clearly for hundreds of pages what the presence of absence is for architecture.

I teach students to see as an architect, as opposed to just seeing the physical. The objects they make have no conceptual being, no discipline.

KH: What is the relation between concept and discipline then?

PE: Discipline is the collected wisdom of concepts. It is a framework. Discipline is a framework for concepts.

KH: Is something entirely new possible in architecture?

PE: First of all, your question is problematic because if I knew, it wouldn’t be new. I’m not interested in the new, because it’s old, I guess. I’ve never been interested in the new.

KH: What about women in architecture?

PE: Architecture is a phallogocentric discipline.

KH: Can you say what is your best project?

PE: Obviously the Berlin project is the most significant, but I don’t think it’s the best. I think that the Wexner, Cincinnati and the Cultural Center in Galicia are also very good projects. One of the houses, probably House X is. I don’t know. What makes a good project for me is that it has a disciplinary

precedence and articulates that disciplinary precedence in a text. I think that some of my projects do that. I don't know which is the best. But some of them are better than others. I have to think about it again.

KH: Is it possible to talk about style in architecture? If it is possible, do you have your own style? How do you see relation between architectural object and aesthetics?

PE: I think that aesthetics as a philosophical category is really important, and I would like to think that we are always searching for ways of deploying an aesthetic frame. About style... I don't know what that is. I think my work has a core.

KH: Let me add something about style. Rudolf Wittkower wrote that Carlo Rainald designed Church Santa Maria in Campitelli in Rome, that you love so much. Rainaldi did the church in a certain style, he was forced to do it in a style he didn't like. He was forced to embrace it. It was the style of his father Girolamo. I want to ask you if you were ever forced to embrace a style you didn't like?

PE: Never, Manuel. I think Santa Maria in Campatelli is an amazing work, very different than any. Yes, it is not pure baroque. My view of Rainaldi is that he is a cross between Palladio and Borromini. There's Palladio, there's Borromini; that is very poignant in his work.

KH: What is a meta-project for you?

PE: What is a meta-project? I think precedence, for example, is a meta-project. I think that to understand the role of precedents in creation is a meta-project. I teach that as a primary thing, because my students need to know the nature of precedents. I'm interested in architects who deal with that kind of idea. Certainly, Alberti was one, Palladio was another. There are many architects who were dealing with precedents. I believe that education, that is, the discipline of architecture, depends upon the understanding of precedence. Without understanding you can't move forward. You have to understand what has been.

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