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Conversations on type, architecture and urbanism

(from the 'Architectural Type and the Discourse of Urbanism' Symposium, Royal College of Art, London, 14th December, 2015)

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Conversation 1

Facilitator: Renee Tobe (RT); Participants: Katharina Borsi (KB), Maria Shéhérazade Giudici (MSG), Sam Jacoby (SJ), Adrian Lahoud (AL).

Domesticity, scale and experimentation

RT: This Session's three presentations had some intriguing moments. Both in terms of convergence and divergence—as to the way we live, the spaces we create for one another, but also in terms of bringing out points that are relevant to how we will continue to do so. What I'd like to do first is ask the speakers if they would like to respond to one another's papers.

KB: Maria, I like your reference to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, and the notion of the happy *family* and the happy life of *domesticity*, but from a Foucauldian perspective that is somewhat questionable. Because the way their dynamism has been set up is always already one of both centripetal and centrifugal forces. To a certain extent, this is where our work complements each other—but it's also on very different terrains. What I have been trying to show through my discussion of Hans Scharoun's works is that formal variation often doesn't really do all that much. While formal variation can be intriguing from a design perspective, it becomes architecturally interesting once it addresses an urban problem differently; as Larry once said, a graphic complication in an architectural plan can simply denote the bathroom, rather than anything else.

Being radical about domesticity in the city is very, very difficult given the strengths and the power with which it has inserted itself into our society, in our planning practices and in ourselves. Being revolutionary about housing, to me, would involve having to try to think very differently, to step out of the scale of the neighbourhood. We would need to begin to think about what your diagram across the city showed, how we occupy the city rather than having this widespread obsession with how we house ourselves better, more individually, and more self-actualised in our homes.

MSG: I completely agree on the question of formal experimentation, which I hope was clear also in my presentation. That's exactly what pushed me to re-read these feminists from the 1970s, due to the fact that there's a lot of formal experimentation, but the diagram of the way you actually move from one space to the other is identical. At the end of the day, the kitchen remains exactly the same. You cook with your shoulders facing the rest of the rooms; nobody sees you when you do what you're meant to do, but not be paid to do.

At the same time, as a practising architect but also a teacher, the question is, always, how can we push the boundary a little bit? How can we shift the boundary in a way which actually enables us to imagine things done differently?

Scale, drawing and type *vis-à-vis* the design process

AL: One of the things we can pick up later is the idea of the drawing, and how the drawing starts to mobilise those types of conversations, because I think that's a really interesting aspect of the work—as Katharina has demonstrated during her talk. We might think of the drawing as a kind of surface of invitation or engagement.

I'm going to try to continue this conversation with the following observation. It was fascinating to note that in Sam's presentation we have started off with Ungers's notion of the house in a house, followed by the city in the city, and then there was a really intriguing moment of inversion when Maria presented, whereby suddenly we got a house that was a city, and then at the end it concluded with the idea of the city as a kind of extended domestic space, as a

kind of house. Hence, I wonder if what that suggests, as a conclusion, is that not all of those scales, or not all of those problematisations, are equally amenable to transformation at the same time. ⁣35

And so, one further question would be, what are those moments of sensitivity now, if the domestic is extremely rigid? And maybe one concluding thought about Maria's presentation, was the way that there was almost a kind of contraction of the scale of 40 the domestic to the appliance. It wasn't even targeted at the level of the room anymore, because the room became almost unscripted. That might be a way of opening up a kind of interrogation about the shifts of where the problem gets consti- 45 tuted across that territory.

KB: I think it's really important that we keep clarifying at which point we are speaking about the urban notion of scale as opposed to other notions—for instance, scale as a domain of negotiation. 50 Because the scale of the city is certainly not co-eval to the scale of the domestic, nor is it co-eval to that of the neighbourhood; indeed, in my work I strive to reason across these scales, since each of these scales discursively works very differently and 55 it has distinct qualities, patterns and regularities. It's important to define at which point a certain spatiality corresponds to a relatively defined domain of negotiation between expertise, and how this scale becomes linked to other scales. 60

MSG: Again, I agree; this is the reason my previous work was all in the large scale, namely, the city's spaces of representation. However, we seem to be getting increasingly disheartened by the fact that

we really have very little agency over that scale. I just wanted to say one thing about the so-called reduction of the agency to the appliance that has been mentioned before. Because I'm an architect's architect, I do not agree with what others see as almost the reduction of the domestic to something like a mobile app. This is a rather cynical idea, which might make sense in the realm of contemporary art; but, I refuse to follow this because I remain an architect.

The reason why this is not superficial is very simple, and it goes back to the discussion of type, as the latter has been pursued in the recent literature—such as that of Chris Lee. Reading his work, one wonders why does interest on type only pop up in certain moments in history? Why do we have Abbé Laugier with the first typology; why do we have the modernists with the second typology? A possible, provisional, answer is that it really comes to the foreground when the question of architecture's agency is thoroughly explored. Specifically, Laugier attempted to conceptualise architecture in a moment in which it seemed to oscillate uncomfortably between engineering and fine arts. Subsequently, we have the modernists being confronted by the incredible growth of industry and technology. By extension and contrast, our agencies today seem very reduced, because we have to catch up, as it were, to many other domains that are running ahead of us.

Thus, this discussion of the role of the architect is a recurring predicament. While some of us would never consider it seriously from an academic point of view, there are thoughtful colleagues—including scholars with authority, such as Mario Carpo—with

forecasts that our role might be superfluous in the future. So, for me, this is where the idea of type comes in: to give us a way out, by clarifying what meaningful input we can have in the construction and governance of cities.

KB: That's something we could pursue further in the next session, because my notion of type is probably more banal than yours. It seems to me that type is ceaselessly active in architectural thinking—independent of theorists speaking about it or not, or if there is a crisis of agency. In my version, the moment an architect sets out to work, even in the format of casual sketching, typological reasoning is ineluctably operative. Put differently, it's embedded in the design process, and it is within this context that we brought together this Symposium.

Conversation 2
Facilitator: Adrian Lahoud (AL); Participants: Tarsha Finney (TF), Chris Schulte (CS), Pavlos Philippou (PP), Lawrence Barth (LB) as well as all participants from the previous conversation.

Architecture and subjectivity Part A
AL: I would like return to the point that Larry made, which is the idea of *the building as a sphere for action*, and to use it to open up a conversation around the relationship between buildings and people—thus trying to connect together some of the other talks. In Katharina's presentation, there was a clear sense that there were two different registers of formal transformation. One was somehow compositional, often dealing with proportion and design, resulting in a series of, let's say, superficial

effects. The other pertains to a series of organisational qualities guiding architectural formation that were instrumental, which ultimately yielded some kind of significant change.

So, a distinction could be drawn between those aspects of the building that touch or affect the person in a way, which then induce some kind of shift or transformation, from the irrelevant ones. Yet, one has to learn how to perceive and distinguish between these two. Thus, we return to this conversation around the precise way that buildings influence life, or become spheres of action, or effect subjectivity. A candidate for this can be found in Pavlos's talk, where he's drawing on the tradition of close reading in architecture, in which there's a pursuit of revealing displacements of concepts. We can think about it as typologically-driven, or we could also think about it as a series of tropes, if we use a literary term.

In Porto's Casa da Música, for example, the way the ground exists in tension with the mass of the building, and their relations to the main entrance, collectively act as a kind of deviation from an existing trope. But it's a trope that we have to recognise. So, you need a learned architect for the trope to be intelligible in some way. That is, there is a need for someone to somehow decipher the trope for you, in order to enact that transformation. Thus, I'm wondering whether there are issues with this idea of displacement of concepts. And whether there are problems with the idea of close reading, if that's really the kind of mechanism that was presented today for making that connection between buildings and the kinds of life they allow to emerge.

PP: One of my favourite critical pieces is a review by Colin Rowe of Robert Venturi's work—both in practice and in research—in the aftermath of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.[1] There is a moment in the review where Rowe suggests that, notwithstanding Venturi's professed 'feeling for the commonplace', the latter's work is undeniably premised upon a 'game of the learned reference and the calculated footnote'. Formulated differently, one of the things that we should be doing more in architecture at present, is to seek to understand these moments of innovation, or productive displacement of the field's established wisdom—irrespective of the public appraisal, the functional efficiency, the programmatic adaptability, the credentials of sustainability, or the technical efficacy of a work. This is not to suggest that all of these do not matter; of course they do. Instead, this is an argument that insists in seeing typology as the native intelligence of architecture. The Athenian Parthenon is articulated analogously to many other Ancient Greek Temples, while Rome's Pantheon is meant to leak; yet these two buildings, for example, have exerted a profound influence in the history of architecture precisely because they each accomplished a meaningful typological transformation at the time they were constructed.

This disposition towards the histories and theories of the field is very much dependent on a solid conception of the intimate and reciprocal relation between architecture and politics—or, if you prefer, between spatial formation and patterns of inhabitation—in a way that these are not caught up in simple (binary) or essentialist relations of one-to-one correspondence. So, architecture can

produce something significant for the city, as well as for the life of the inhabitants—but this is not at the full and utter control of the architect. Indeed, it seems to me that one of the common threads in today's presentations is that *spatial formation cannot be conceived, on the one hand, as a static, unintelligent and reactive receiver of sociological understandings of reality; it is much more than that. And, on the other hand, that a careful conceptualisation of what architecture can do is not reducible to the people—their needs, their opinions, their priorities and their participation*.

Hence, my response is that architecture, *to a certain extent*, is indeed a game of the learned quote and the careful footnote in order to yield meaningful differences, which inevitably have a typological dimension. For their part, these differences allow us – in turn and in their own right – to experiment with different urban potentials and possibilities. This is evidenced in the field's history of close reading, which has gradually built up into a domain of enormous sophistication in how we understand buildings – both as autonomous objects, but also as constituent parts of the city.

AL: I think we'd all agree that there's no kind of mechanical transmission of a concept from the building to the person, such that the person suddenly changes their behaviour. But I want to push this a little bit further: there are claims being made here for the production of a spirit of collaboration—that is, trust and civic decency. And I'm trying to work out, actually, what are the grounds on which we are making those claims when we get down to speaking about the specifics of architecture? This seems to me still not clear.

LB: I think that Pavlos might have calculatedly emphasised the inherent potential of close reading; yet, we agree that the value of architecture is not reducible to absolute architectural values. As I have mentioned in my presentation, while I really like Jeffrey Kipnis's work, one of the things that fails to convince me is his appreciation of architecture as freedom, or as promoting freedom, or, at least, as a kind of liberatory act.

Katharina mentioned earlier that we spent a lot of time with the work of Michel Foucault,[2] and a big part of the reason we invested this time and effort is that we don't think in terms of sweeping histories and total histories first of all, and we don't think in terms of unified subjects or unified citizens. Instead, we prefer to pursue a series of different domains of institutional change. For instance, what I like about the things that Pavlos is researching is not so much that the architecture will, in some absolute sense, become better if Pavlos guides it. It's more that *he's revealing the possibility of changing attitudes about culture as a resource within the city, and as having an effect; cultural buildings have consequences on the life of urban areas, and these can be discussed with a certain amount of intelligence, as opposed to something that yields a banal reaction, such as: I like it, or I don't like it*. Now that means then that there could be a completely different argument about architecture in relation to clinics and hospitals, and another one in relation to mixed-function environments, and so on. Hence, we could have a lot of different

conversations. *There's no absolute citizen, and no absolute architecture*.

TF: I think the question also has to do with the claims that are being made for the agency of architecture in terms of the constitution of subjectivity. If I put it in terms of my work, I spend less time pursuing this in the context of the relation between contemporary city-building and innovation environments. Where I have always found it most instructive to look is to the early housing reform projects, in the second half of the nineteenth century. For example, there's this great story about Arnold Circus in London, where, for it to be built, a slum was demolished. [It was a situation of] taking out the 'worthy' poor and rehousing them in, essentially, the 1851 model apartment.[3] But, of course, there were many inhabitants that moved into a single room, sleeping in the same bed, thus enabling the subletting of the other bedrooms. And so the housing philanthropists then had to produce a user manual of how to live correctly in a three-bedroom apartment. The relationship between social norms, behaviour and habitation, subjectivity and spatial reasoning is more complex than the surface of the drawing, and yet it's the surface of the drawing that allows us to get into these positions of dispute that are constitutive.

AL: That's the lovely thing of trying to bring those backgrounds onto the surface in a way. Because, otherwise, there's a repetition of architectural drawings and claims made for the drawing, but in fact it's that kind of background, including the things like the manuals and all the other kinds of pedagogical paraphernalia that sit around the

drawing, that actually help it to enact those kinds of shifts.

TF: And then the question, which seems really interesting, is that it's very easy to see in historical materials what was going on in terms of change, but it's much harder to see in the contemporary where the agency of the discipline is, and in the name of what. Where to find the sweet spots that one can start to leverage and lever. And, in the interest of what, or who?

MSG: I still take the point, as you were saying before, that in a way we don't fully know yet where we are, what we are designing now for; so, I completely agree with Tarsha, that's exactly why we look back in order to learn something about ourselves, about the way we design in the present, about the way we are active.

PP: This ties back to my earlier argument, where I have suggested that only *via* a diligent reworking of architecture—as a field of reason and praxis—is one able to see the possibilities that exist *in* architecture, thus enabling transformation. And, to be sure, architectural transformation should not be confused or equated with urban change—as Larry has described the latter. Instead, one should be able to see these two as both analytically and practically distinct, notwithstanding the fact that sometimes they go hand-in-hand.

Charisma *versus* discourse

AL: I also have a question about individuality, and the role of individuals in these different kinds of projects, because it seems that there's quite clearly

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different kinds of protagonists that are being addressed. Larry, you talked about a kind of diffused subjectivity, and non-unified groups and institutions. Maria, you were discussing the domestic in light of the distinction of the genders in specific architectural examples; Pavlos focussed on specific cultural buildings in respect to their host urban areas. Chris, in your presentation there was an idea of that notion of civic work, while in Tarsha's work, *a protagonist of sorts was the notion of blight in respect of the housing project.* If we can put these different protagonists up against each other, I think it would be interesting. Moreover, there was this idea of civic decency as somehow integral to the city, and then Tarsha talked about hacking away at the freeway, like a meat-cleaver. And just because there are different kinds of concepts of who is the protagonist within the city, I would like to open up that idea in terms of a Foucauldian perspective: does it matter who's speaking, to the person with the 'meat-cleaver' carving a line.

TF: That was always Joel Schwartz's great argument about New York.[4] He said that typical histories of the city, from the left,[5] claim that the right always had control of the city. But, Schwartz laid out this great history where he demonstrated that both sides, the left and the right, the housing philanthropists, the social reformers, as well as the real estate industry and developers were equally responsible for where we found ourselves in 1973—as there was no way that you could distinguish in the discursive pattern that unfolded, who was responsible for the apparent destruction of the existing and traditional city.

LB: Chris did say that the party wall could lead to hatred, as well as civic decency.

CS: One of the real problems is trying to establish the actual and precise domain of the city. For instance, there are language problems, where binaries are opened up all the time between public, as some monolithic thing, and private, as some other, which is completely unhelpful to any study of the city. Likewise, nature *versus* city. They are unhelpful because they don't allow us to understand the topography which we are actually all participating in. I think that that goes so deep, and is in a sense so institutionalised, that it undermines how we perceive the city; it's very difficult to align ourselves to the contemporary-ness, I suppose, of the culture that we have all around us. So, it seems to me, that things have become isolated. The binary oppositions are effectively irresolvable, because almost everything lies in a much more ambiguous zone between the poles.

It seems to me that that ability of the city to act as some kind of great mediating structure, not owned by any one in particular, but formed through our commitment to it, is extremely remarkable, and overlooked often in what we do, and how we participate. Thus, the creation of subjects through architecture is part of that reflexive column response, which can be interrupted, and must be interrupted on certain occasions.

AL: But doesn't the slender tower predicament you have presented, for instance, suggest also that what's at stake is actually not even the city anymore? What is at stake is a series of quite discontinuous problems and incommensurate

perspectives. And I think that was one thing I really loved in Tarsha's talk, whereby a story about transformation in the city was presented in which the protagonist was a problem. That is, I found it incredible and brilliant that her argument followed *this kind of dispute, and the way that the dispute was ultimately the thing that both allowed for the integration of those different perspectives over time, but ultimately it proved as a kind of inhuman city-making agent in some way*.

Architecture and subjectivity Part B
Question (Godofreido Pereira):

I wanted to go back to the moderator's initial question on what architecture does, or does not do, as it seems to me that there's still a bit of imprecision. I'll probably frame it based on the way Maria presented her work, which relates to the idea of the production of a subject. There's a difference between a subject that's implicit in the architectural project, and a subject that's produced. The architectural project engages in the constitution of subjectivity by itself, by circulating a project, regardless of an object that's constructed. And also, its constructed object engages in the process of subjectivity in many different ways, according to historical and local context, so on and so forth. Thus, when one claims here what architecture is doing, I expect a clear distinction between the operations of the project from the operations of the building. Between the things that the project says it does from the thing that the project supposedly does.

I'll give an example with the case of Porto, given a certain familiarity with it. I might say that I completely disagree with everything that has been said about the building in terms of close reading. But that doesn't provide any truth about what I say. Because I expect other persons, if they originate from Porto, might disagree. Thus, my critique is, I don't know when you are using those pictures if you are speaking about what the project does, or if the pictures are supposed to be confirming that what the project says that it does, that it actually accomplishes. I completely disagree with the way the project exists as a building; for me, it is pretty much a classical monument, with lots of redundant circulation, attracting those endless flows of architectural tourists, without an appropriate connection to the city.

But again, all those things are debatable; it simply would be nice to have precise grounds for debate, and I feel that throughout we constantly shift as to the agency of architecture. Which architecture? Is it the project, is it the building, is it the circulation of an idea?

KB: I know this is partly addressed to Pavlos, but I would really like to provide my response to the main question, which is that *it is immaterial. In my view architecture is both totally over-evaluated, and totally under-evaluated* in the same instance, at present. In my work, but also in my presentation earlier, I argued that architecture helps to constitute both the family and the individual, but of course it does so not by itself. I mean, when one reviews the relevant history, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, one easily notices the mobilisation of a process in which a discursive constellation emerges that correlated a range of discussions which impli-

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cated space; and it was in the development of those discussions where architecture was complicit with all the parties. This goes back to Tarsha's argument regarding the drawing*, whereby the drawing itself becomes instrumental in enabling the development of these discussions*.

So, *it's a combination of typological reasoning that is co-eval with the form of political government*. You come on this around the turn of the century, where we have the emergence of the domestic, or nuclear family. Now, does it mean that the design of a flat establishes that? No, of course not. I mean, Scharoun's flat doesn't make anybody freer or happier than any other flat of the 1920s.

That is, architecture is just one part of a much, much broader discursive formation—that encompasses education, medicine, etc. —which targets subjectivity. We really need to emphasise that *architecture is only one part—albeit a key one—of what is here termed the discourse of urbanism. This is because, architecture spatialises and organises, and it does so with relative autonomy as a field*. But then, for example, if that is linked to Maria's work, the enthusiasm with which we today speak about nomadism discursively locates back all the way to the above-said establishment of the families as urban inhabitants. From the moment in time where this mechanism came into being as something which really pursues the autonomy of the individual. This is verified, for instance, in the drawings of Scharoun, whose favourite residential type was the bachelor house.

Questioner: I didn't see your presentation; I should have mentioned that.

KB: I'm not really saying that my presentation made this clear; instead, I think that the traditional linking of architecture to politics we are a part of, is incapable of capturing the nuances and the tension at play—as *these do not map onto each other. Nonetheless, spatial strategies are one of the primary domains where they transactionally mediate*.

AL: I think that's all quite obvious: the idea that there's a broader terrain where socio-political diagrams are active, and in which architecture plays a certain kind of role, a very unique role.

TF: Where spatial reasoning is key, and the drawing exercises a specific and defining role.

AL: It also gives us a way of posing the problem in a very unique way. But I still think that when it actually comes down to talking about design, why the balcony is here, why the living room is arranged in this specific way, I think still there is a kind of language that's lacking.

Architecture's disciplinary status
Question (Anna Shapiro): Question to Pavlos, actually. Peter Eisenman once stated that he doesn't want his students to look outside the window; he wants them to notice the window. Whereas we all know that Eisenman's interest in urbanism is questionable, he is very much interested in architectural autonomy and the role of the elements of architecture, and the discourse on architecture. Clearly one of the reasons he is so much concerned about these topics is precisely to avoid them designing mediocre projects: where, for instance, there is a very simplistic diagram that attempts to address

the urban area, but isn't as attentive to architecture as we would perhaps want it to be. What would you want your students to notice when they look at buildings?

PP: I will respond both to this and the previous comment that addressed my presentation. Ever since the early phase of Modernism—as evidenced, for example, in the chapter 'Architecture or Revolution?' of *Vers une Architecture* —the field has allowed a sort of deep-seated socio-political optimism to drive its broader ambitions to the point of convincing both professionals and the wider public that architecture really shapes both city and society at will.

Now, this optimism is maintained more or less intact until things got uncertain, with the notorious failures and 'failures' of the post-war housing projects. From the 1960s, architectural thought increasingly shifted its critical apparatus with a vengeance as to the authors and the works of Modernism. This criticism is only party justified in its argument and not at all justified in its approach. Irrespective though of my appraisal, and this is the key point, this criticism is premised on a major contradiction. Notwithstanding its almost vindictive critique of Modernism, it retained one of the latter's most debilitating dispositions: namely, the overestimation of architecture's agency. For it is overflowing with castigating remarks that it's architecture's fault that the cities of the day were really bad, as well as that modernist architects suffer from a 'Fountainhead syndrome', promoting an uncompromising megalomania.

In other words, if architecture's capacity to resolve socio-political problems is insufficient, then the same applies to its capacity to generate them. This is one of the principal faults in a large part of architectural criticism ever since—such as, that of Charles Jencks, whereby Pruitt-Igoe's demise, for instance, is seen *purely* as a failure of its architecture. Architecture doesn't have the capacity to control socio-political reality; it merely influences it. Even in its extreme instantiations, architecture doesn't manage to deliver adequate socio-political demarcation. Put differently, we keep overestimating what architecture can do. Now, because we constantly overestimate it, we underestimate what architecture actually does, which is to have created an incredibly sophisticated history of different responses to questions of urban strategy.

This statement is the springboard from which a response to the criticism of my analysis of Casa da Música can be provided. In my presentation there was a deliberate attempt to move away from a series of critical tendencies in architecture—such as, commentary on the authors, what these architects have been saying about the project, what the building 'means' for Porto from an inhabitant's or visitor's perspective, or what the views are of the audiences that are meant to be cultivated there. Instead, I have tried—with both textual and graphic materials—to reason through a spatial history of how we have been pursuing cultural buildings for the past two centuries, in a way that is aware of the traditions of both architecture and the city. The underlying ambition was to register how the project is comprised by a series of typological moves that display both devotion to and deviation from this sedimented history.

And if you look at this history, it's intriguingly sys-tematic; I mean there is systematicity in how space is organised, regimented and deployed in the differen-tiation of the fabric. There is still a very promising study to be conducted, which will try to understand the transactional relation between this spatial history and the emergence of culture as 'a reformer's science'—to use Tony Bennett's expression. It's this discursive constellation, amongst others, that has been utilised to make us the subjects we are now. That is certainly not within the grasp of the architect, or the builder, or the visitor, or the inhabitant. It's a very complex history of institutional bodies and set-tings, behaviours, laws, regulations, like Tarsha's dis-cussion of …

TF: Blight, eminent domain.

PP: Exactly. There is this interesting anecdote from the nineteenth century, when museums were initially made proper public institutions, affording the wider public, for the first time in history, the chance to encounter, say, the masterpieces of the Renaissance. People were kneeling in front of reli-gious portraits, because they couldn't tell the differ-ence between attending mass in a church and visiting a museum. Being unversed in culture, they were kneeling as they have been ecclesiastically trained over a lifetime.

So, you see, no matter how much you want to control the socio-political register of reality, as an architect, you cannot. What you can control though, is what I've described earlier. There is a pro-found spatial history at our disposal, which enables very sophisticated ways of responding to architec-tural and urban situations. And, finally, getting to

Anna's question, my response is that architectural pedagogy really needs to take the preceding seriously. I mean, really, really seriously.

LB: I really like the question about precision and effects at the same time. I think that the way it's been answered is already taking us a long way to understanding what it is that we might want to do a little bit better. If we think about Central Saint Giles [in central London], it's indicative of a changed approach to a series of themes, where, let's say, urban issues and building form come together. And perhaps it's most noticeable in the definition of the lobby. If we examine it, it's immedi-ately obvious that that office lobby is kind of in keeping with what we think a basic office lobby ought to be today. But it's not the only version of what a basic office lobby ought to do today.

Conversely, if we look at the Angel Building, it takes a quite different approach. But you can see that the drivers are the same. So, the historical con-ditions are the same, and yet the two ways of defin-ing an office lobby are so different from one another; nonetheless, together they form a kind of body of thought that encompasses other possible solutions: for example, one might never do today what was done at the Gherkin. And so, collectively these delineate a spectrum of possibility, which could lead us in multiple directions. All we know is that the spectrum is really differentiated at this moment in terms of what we think people want to do in an office lobby.

Now, how precise is that? Not very. In one respect, it leaves us open still to a lot of exploration. So, if we sit in this lobby, are we any better at our work? Are

we any better at making new friends? It's hard to tell, in some ways, but we might imagine that we are more sociable, more able to engage with our network or value chain, or have a better capacity to do hosting, or things like that. Hence, we tell ourselves a number of stories.

AL: That's what I'm saying.

LB: But I suppose what Pavlos is getting at is that is exactly the point. It's discursively organised, and it's this discursive organisation that we're trying to understand a little bit better; not in the sense of whether we are any better at being good mates to the people who show up and meet us in the lobby.

Generic *versus* specific

AL: I think that's precisely where I agree, but I feel like it doesn't go far enough. Because the emphasis is always on the discursive. And, actually, the thing that always astonishes me when we talk about architecture, is that buildings don't talk to us. They have been often presented as interlocutors, sometimes very eloquent ones, who can tell us what they're doing in very articulate terms, but ultimately, they're dumb, mute, things. To a certain extent, and it's interesting as well, that when we're asked to explain the agency of architecture, we refer back to a pamphlet, or to an instruction manual, or to a kind of institutional setting. So again, something that talks about talking, rather than talking about the design object itself, and its effect; I think that's interesting, that a propensity is always to move away. And I think it's because it's hard; but also because of our education, we're not

very good at it, and so we don't have a kind of precision for how we talk about non-discursive effects.

LB: I think there's an easy way to handle this, and I think you're looking right past it, and it's in a sense what geography has always done. This is given by the fact that every place is different from every other place, but they still have to be comparable; the way of dealing with that problem is to engage with *a bifurcated system of reasoning*. So, all of your points about offices, comments about Porto, they're absolutely reasonable, because what Pavlos didn't do, was give you the monograph on how this building works in Porto. In a sense, you could have competing monographs on how the building works in Porto. And so that other sort of discussion is still open. The reason why I'm emphasising, in a sense, the comparability, the discursive and so on, is not so much that I want to set aside what is an equally valid part of the discussion. It's just that it's always been the case that for geographical reasoning, as well as architectural reasoning, *there's an irresolvability between the particular and the general*. 355

KB: But can I just come back to the dumb object for a second. In a way, yes, you're right.

LB: That's a bit disingenuous, but you know what I mean. 360

KB: Absolutely. But that's exactly a key point. And I think both the drawing and the building is totally other than language, or meaning, or anything else. So effectively we probably don't spend enough time speaking about these dumb objects, as well

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as analysing what these dumb objects actually do in their dumb objecthood.

AL: Exactly. That could be the next conference.

Signification and interpretation

Question (Godofreido Pereira): That was a series of beautiful answers and I agree with all of them. And yet my request for precision was not precision in identifying what the object does. My request for precision is precision in declaring when you say that the architecture is doing something, at what are you referring to? A slightly different thing. And it becomes evident when you present. And for me the ambiguity in there is not that I disagree with what is presented; my point about Porto, for instance, was that I could agree or disagree. The latter is beside the point. My concern is when you present images, and you speak about them as if they have some sort of status of evidence, about what are you actually referring to? You complement them. So, when you're speaking about Casa da Música in Porto, we can go on having all of that conversation, just looking at plans and sections. But you present the images that you took on site, and the photographs of the guided tour inside.

The same thing can be argued with the case of Renzo Piano's Central Saint Giles, as well as other projects we have seen today. What are those images evidence of? What is being evidenced, when you go on site, and you're there, and you're experiencing it, what is being evidenced by the images that you take? That is, *I'm saying that there's a constant slippage that sometimes is not properly declared, about what is the status that these images are evidencing*. That is what I mean about being precise about what is architecture doing.

PP: OK, I think the answer to your question, has to operate at two levels. Firstly, we should clarify how signification in general works, in order to be able to conceptualise how it operates in architecture. For this, I will go back to Kipnis, and to an argument he has repeatedly advanced, which stresses that meanings and/or feelings are not coextensive to a signal, but the latter's after-effects once it has been partitioned in certain ways by particular receivers. The reason for this seeming digression is to register that one cannot have anything with the precision you are talking about, for that would entail that we are dealing with static, predefined and idealist identities. This can be illustrated *via* the example of a nesting-bird's call, which whilst evidently organised—it presents rhythm, pitches, duration, intensity, etc. —affects different receivers in different ways.

For instance, the call signifies parent to the offspring, it signals partner to the other bird with which they are nesting together, it suggests disciplinary interest if you are an ornithologist, it might indicate beauty if you're a birdwatcher, and it implies prey if you are a hawk—or any number of other predators. So, even a simple signal—a standard vocal emanation—from a zoologically humble species is an *irreducibly complex signal*. In other words, you can never flatten all those interpretations of the signal into one unified, precise, message that you can comprehend fully, as it works on many

different levels. At the same time, this conception engenders that receivers parse the same singular event into primary signal and inconsequential noise, leading each to partition the same matter diversely—without a common, essentialist, denominator.

Now that we have clarified the general framework within which signification operates, we can turn our attention to the case of architecture, as well as the images I have been using. Earlier I made evidently clear that in this context I am not interested in the intentions of the architects, the demands of the clients, or the views of the users—which is not to say that these do not matter. Of course, they matter; but they matter to other recipients—not to us, here, today. That is to say, these matter to other subject-positions: such as, the consultant architect who provides services, the responsible professional, the architectural biographer, the active citizen and the like. For us here today, in the midst of an academic conference on architecture and urbanism, this information is not particularly useful, because it would tell us little of how to review these projects as disciplinary moves in respect to a broader urban discourse. This goes back to the preceding discussion regarding architectural knowledge and pedagogy today.

In my presentation, effort was invested in understanding the intimate and reciprocal tension cultural buildings exert within their host urban areas, and the three case studies were presented as departures from the time-honoured urban strategy—which, I have claimed, is fairly dominant these days. Moreover, I have argued that these three have accomplished to stage alternative urban spatial strategies

precisely *via* their specific typological articulation. The images and the text have been mutually supporting, because graphic figuration and linguistic representation are understood as performing different operations in spatial reasoning. They can never impinge thought exactly the same way. This is something that both Jean-François Lyotard and Michel Foucault have spent a fair amount of time to understand and explain.

Irrespective of my evaluation of these case studies, what one really needs to consider is what I have clearly argued between the lines; namely, how come at this moment in time, it is an immense challenge to find even one or two books with diligently constructed maps and arguments seeking to understand the correlation between buildings to their areas. Notwithstanding the fact that we have tons of books being published every year around the world, most of them present site plans—if they provide site plans—merely as one of the tasks that need to be ticked off a list. And, in a way, the most provocative thing I have done today was to centre my argument as to the way we should reason about cultural buildings in respect to their urban areas, as opposed to the usual arguments pertaining to the cultural offering of the institution or the signifying qualities of the building. Given that cultural buildings are often deployed as keystones in strategies of urban development or regeneration, is it not curious that the field almost fails completely to address this as a problem? This is another way to inquire how come we are so incapable of talking about something which is at the heart of what is otherwise our job?

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Notes and references

1. Colin Rowe, *As I Was Saying; Recollections and Miscellaneous Essays,* Volume Two: Cornelliana, Alexander Caragonne, ed. (London, The MIT Press, 1996) pp. 79–101.

2. The reference here is to a PhD Research Seminar led by Lawrence Barth at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in 2005–07, whose members are the three guest editors of this Special Issue of *The Journal of Architecture*: Katharina Borsi, Tarsha Finney and Pavlos Philippou.

3. The 1851 Model Apartment by Henry Roberts: for a full discussion, please refer to Robin Evans, 'Figures, Doors and Passages', in, Robin Evans, ed. *Translations from Drawing to Building and other essays* (London, Architectural Association Publications, 1997).

4. Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals and Redevelopment of the Inner City* (Columbus, OH, Ohio State University Press, 1993).

5. For example, Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York, Alfred A Knopf, 1974).