

Architecture of resistance : an interview with Peter D. Eisenman

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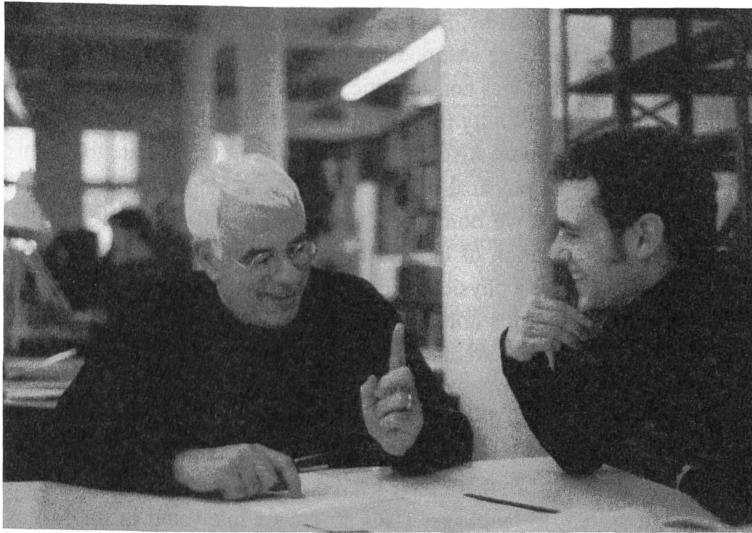
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Architecture of Resistance

An Interview with Peter D. Eisenman

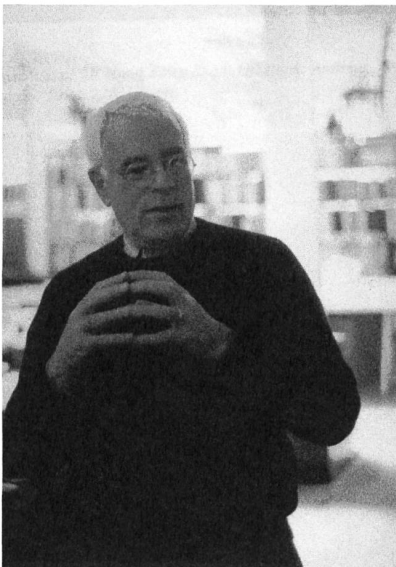
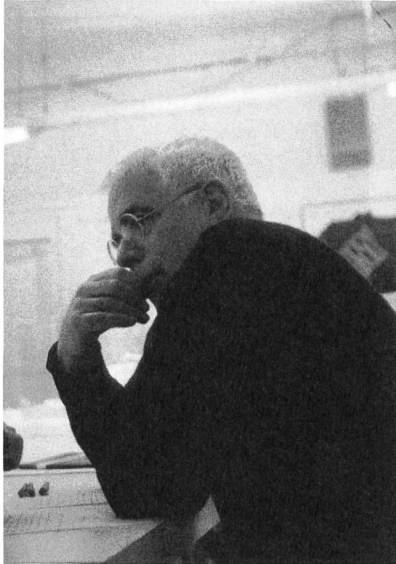
The following interview took place in March 1997 in the New York office of Peter D. Eisenman. It was meant to be a conversation about the visions Peter Eisenman follows in his work.

Mr. Eisenman, what is the role of theory in your work?

When I started to work on architectural theory, there was no architectural theory other than that kind of formula that was set down by Vitruvius, Alberti and this kind of categorical treators. It was assumed that the ends for theory were known already and all we had to do was work on the means. So therefore this provided a rather homogeneous idea of theory.

I suggested that this idea of traditional theory repressed the possibility of opening architectural theory to its own interior. And therefore I went into philosophy as a way of opening up, not only the philosophy of science in the way Brunelleschi went and found perspective, but from learning about philosophical ideas one could open up the possible categories of thinking about architecture.

What I found from doing this was, for example in the idea of deconstruction and in the questioning of the metaphysics of presence, is that architecture resisted the denial of the metaphysics of presence, while it questioned the metaphysics of presence. In other words, while language and thought do not necessarily demand presence, architecture always demands presence. And therefore the notion that architecture will always be "at the same time" it can question its being. Therefore architecture poses a very interesting limit problem for deconstruction. What interested me was to go back into architecture to examine these limits – the limits of the possibility of the criticality of architecture in relationship to its being. That is where I am now. I have been working to understand what I consider to be the 'interiority' of architecture, as coming from architecture and not based in language of philosophy. I mean if you go back again in my early work: I was taking all of the analogies of architectural communication back into semiotics and to linguistics.



Whether it was Chomsky, Saussure or whoever. And I realized that in fact architectural language was nothing like a written or spoken language. It was very different, it was not semiotic. It was an affective language, that dealt with the body, visuality in a very different way than visualization in linguistic communication. Also, it was very difficult to separate the architectural sign from its physical being. Where as in language the physical being is transparent. We don't look at the order and size of letters for instance, the organization of letters, the relationship of their physicality even though they have a physicality but it's impossible to look at a column without assuming that it's holding something up. What Walter Benjamin said is that people look at architecture in a distracted way. They don't look at it first as a sign-system.

So what one needs to do, is to understand that architecture is very different from linguistic systems and therefore I have completely discarded many years ago the work that I have been doing on architecture as an analogous sign-system to language. I am no longer interested in linguistics and semiotics – I am interested in architectural theory as it manifests itself not in the history of architectural theory but as it manifests itself in the overcoming, the idea of overcoming in its own materiality and its own history. And therefore philosophy is very interesting to me the way Nietzsche talked about this 'overcoming'. I am not saying that architecture can be solved through philosophy, but there are analogous problems in architecture that philosophy helps us with. And ultimately we have to make architecture. Even though we are inventing a *la prima*, a condition for architectural theorizing. In contrary to what some of my friends think, I don't believe you can do architecture without some form of being. You cannot merely just make things.

To what extent are you interested in iconography ?

I was trying to deny it initially – that all architecture, that whatever you produce, will always have an iconography. But I am trying to reduce the already given iconography, like in a column there are already iconographic meanings – reproduction, logic, order – there are already all of these things existing in a column. What we are trying to do is to reduce the iconographic and limit the familiar. Because the familiar leads to a state of destruction, so we are trying to reduce the familiar iconography of architecture and to produce an alternative that will become another iconography.

Frank Gehry did a church competition which I also did, for the Rome 2000 competition. Frank still had a campanile, he still had a baptistery, recognizable icons. When you look at my design, it doesn't say "church" even though it is a church. And people say "Why is this a church?" Well, it's a church because it is a church. It is critical of the traditional types and icons that formerly were considered to be a church. That is where architecture becomes interesting – when it contains this critical dimension about what a church look like, what does a church mean, what does it symbolize. So clearly my church is very different from Frank Gehry's church. Frank Gehry's church is composed from the traditional components of a church, sort of pushed around the way Frank Gehry does with his forms. My project has nothing to do with the traditional conditions of a church nor with Peter Eisenman forms.

Could you comment on your article 'affects/effects', where you considered architecture today of being a weak media.

If 'effect' was always about the representation of fact, then what is the most effective form of communication? What I am arguing is that media today has saturated the visual milieu with signs and rapid communication, that architecture cannot even compete. Whereas architecture used to be a

strong media in the times of gothic cathedral, in that people understood the mess, today architecture has become a rather weak media. Its established sign-systems are not strong, especially when you want to change those sign-systems. If you don't want to make a classical colonnade for a public building, and you say you want to make it something else, it's no longer media anymore. It has lost its 'effective' media for what I consider an 'affective' media.

The affective media is where the body in space feels the space and understands its own relationship to the space, which doesn't happen in traditional forms of media which cut the body off. We don't use the body to watch a film, to watch a video, or to read a magazine. But architecture has always used the body. What we are trying to do is to say that the difference between 'affect' and 'effect' is the restoration of the body in media.

Does that also refer to the idea that one can't control an iconographic message in a traditional sense?

I don't want to say that. I believe you can control it. That's what architecture does. It doesn't predict, but it controls. It cannot necessarily predict what the outcome will be, but you can limit a range of outcomes.

When we did our project in the Milan Triennale we set up these pieces of physical space made up of vectors, and proceeded to create openings between them. We knew that when you walk between these spaces the body can't stand up straight but falls over. Now, if you move quickly, if you run, you can stand up straight and get through. That is the predictable outcome. You can control space in a predictable way, that is if you move quickly your balance is not thrown off. Now we know that these things can happen. I cannot predict what one's reaction would be, whether you will learn to run or you will like to fall over. But we can set a limited range for such occurrences.

You have introduced the term "singularity" in the essay – 'Unfolding Events: Frankfurt Rebstock and the possibility of a New Urbanism'.

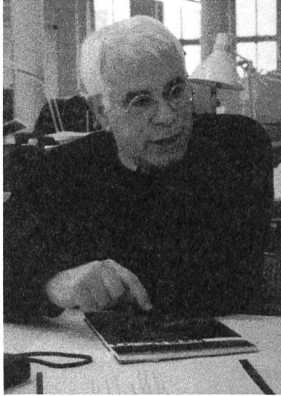
Let me explain what I mean by singularity, we used to believe in originality – the original, the new, the first – which always had certain values within metaphysics. Platonic thought, and Aristotelian thought propagated us to do something new, something original, something pure.

Then Nietzsche introduced the idea of the eternal return of the same. That is the notion of repetition – suggesting that there was nothing new possible, that there was no value to the new, but the value was in the difference – the already given difference in repetition. So for me singularity distinguishes itself from originality, in that it is the notion of that already given difference, that each repetition will not be the same but will be similar. And so we are dealing with questions of mass, of reproduction, of standardization, of repetition. I am interested in the idea that repetition contains the possibility of an already given difference in each iteration.

In the Rebstockpark project you also referred to the idea of the "Siedlung".

Let me go back to another idea – the virtual. The notion of the virtual today for me goes back to Bergson's, to Proust's and to Deleuze's idea. The fact that the virtual contains memory of the past not as a nostalgia, but as an active living present. Architecture for me has always been not about being progressive, that it doesn't get better, but it gets different. It changes things through the transgression of what has been and through the preservation of the memory and the transgression of the memory in the present.

So what you do in Frankfurt, when you are doing housing, is dealing with "the Siedlung" – the memory of the housing in the 20th century. So we started with the question of "the Siedlung" – of what would it be like



today to make a “Siedlung” in Frankfurt? And we asked, what can we do to transgress and maintain at the same time “the Siedlung”-type? In order to produce what we consider to be the missing singularity in “the Siedlung” because “the Siedlung” was always about the repetition of the same. There was no difference between front and back, no difference between this unit and that unit, it was always the same. What we asked was how we could produce the same as similar? And that is where we not only reuse “the Siedlung-type“, but we transgress the memory of the Siedlung with the idea of this singularity.

What you explained implies that your work operate within the premises of typology.

I always rely on the history of type, whether it is in an urban context or not. If we take a context, what we do is we analyze the site not for its original value, but we try to find that which is repressed, that which is covered up by memory. What can we excavate from the past to transgress the actual fact of presence. It is not a singularity that necessarily relates to a urban context, it could also relate to an architectural type.

When you say that you rely on the history of type, is it an attempt to undermine the notion of planning? If one could acknowledge that there is a crises in urban planning – the loss of relying on urban strategies and the tendency to concentrate on the inherent power of singular pieces of architecture – as professed by Rem Koolhaas’ idea of Bigness for example.

Koolhaas’ Bigness theory is the Nietzschean idea of fulfilled nihilism. That it is possible to fulfill the nihilistic, in other words the opposite of the positivistic dream. It’s still a utopian idea. I believe that it is impossible to fulfill a utopian or authoritarian idea, that nihilism in itself contains the impossibility of its fulfillment. And so I am the opposite of Bigness, I’m against the fulfillment of nihilism, I suggest that it is its own impossibility and so I disagree with Koolhaas. Bigness is not to do with singularity it is to do the opposite: that everything is all generic, and not singular.

My belief is that we don’t start with sameness or with something original, we start with a non-original difference. In the way how Francis Bacon said about painting: that the canvas is not empty, but is already full. And when we paint, we take away this already given fullness.

Could you elaborate on how you reconcile the common basis among urban spaces, public issues, and social subjects within the city?

Right now, I am working on a very complicated public project which takes the idea that cultural facilities ought to be critically integrated. We are doing a ferry terminal in Staten Island with a museum on top of it and a railroad station coming through it, with pedestrians, busses and trains.

The terminus is on the ground floor of the museum. Instead of what Koolhaas’ did in Lille or in the ferry terminal in Zeebrugge, we are having a ferry terminal with a museum on top of it.

I think this kind of inter modeled urban connection desires to break with the gestalt pattern of functional arrangements, and instead bring things together and try to make them work in a public domain. We are doing this in a real project in New York City that is so complicated, we have the ferry rider citizens, the local planning board, the city planning commission, and the economic planning council, who all are involved.

What do you mean when you use the term – “Double Zeitgeist”?

First of all one has to believe that there is a Zeitgeist, otherwise how can you make a transgression of anything, when there is no Zeitgeist?

How would you know that you are transgressing? You have to assume anytime, anywhere in the world there has to be a normative condition. In Switzerland today we think of people like Jaques Herzog in a certain way as a kind of new norm – a new minimalism for instance. Twenty years ago Mario Botta was a norm in Switzerland, the school of Ticino ten years ago – that kind of rethinking Le Corbusier. There is always a Geist, in order for you to be you have to attack the Geist. If Mario Botta is there, you cannot be by repeating Botta, you have to transgress Botta. In order to be today in Switzerland, you have to transgress Herzog. It's not copying, but going beyond.

What I am saying is that the Zeitgeist is no longer local because we have an international culture and an international economy. Switzerland cannot be separated from the international economy, it isn't possible today.

However, even though we have this international culture today, what I call the Holy Roman Empire of today, because the capitals of today have become like the Roman Empire, in all of its manifestations. So you could argue that capital is the international Geist. And that capital will produce an architecture – an architecture of information, an architecture of high-tech, an architecture of Bigness, the infrastructure of Koolhaas. I mean Koolhaas' notion of infrastructure in "Bigness" and "The Generic City" is made for international capital. Of course there are still people outside of that Geist. There are people in Bosnia, Abesinia, Afghanistan, who don't care about international capital. They care about soil, they care about language, blood, territory and that is another kind of Geist.

In every country, however, there is always a large part of the people that are not willing to acknowledge this "second" Zeitgeist.

Sure, there are always these people, but this is the struggle today, between the double Zeitgeist, between fundamentalism and secularism. The Geist is secular. The other is fundamental. And that exists in the US. where we have an enormous fundamentalist movement. You have it in Switzerland, you have it in Germany, it's always the same.

But isn't it also a social condition where this internationalism needs the virtual connection of technology and infrastructure to open up to everyone?

I'm not giving it a value. I am saying that there is a double Zeitgeist that is very different. The Zeitgeist in the twenties, the spirit of the new, the spirit of hope was a social Geist, shared by most people, the double Zeitgeist of today is a Geist that splits the people.

One cannot deny that there is a certain value inscribed in the term – 'fundamentalism.'

I am saying that there are two kinds of people today. In the Twenties or in the time of the French Revolution there was only one kind of people – "das Volk". They were of a singular value. There was a Geist, there was no split. Today, even though we have an international Geist, we have these split-Geists locally.

I think people all want to be part of this international Zeitgeist, even the fundamentalists. Because the fundamentalist don't stay in power unless they can do this. Everyone wants that. There's not enough to go around. But if you gave them the choice, give the sub-Sahara natives a choice, it is very seductive. The Roman Empire as a concept was very seductive, let's say, better than the cold war.

But my architecture is also against the capitalist Geist, because its an architecture of excess, which in fact does not allow the excess to be in capital, in the system, but in the conditions of the building. My architecture is an architecture of resistance.

