Interview with Peter Eisenmann

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STUDENT: While the world is becoming more and more complex, the society reacts with simplification and simulation. How would you explain this contradiction?

PETER EISENMAN: First of all, people have an innate desire to know and to understand. People will always attempt to simplify those things which are complex, to reduce complexity to some level where they can understand it. Newspapers are written for twelve-year-olds, they are not written as literature. The difference between culture and what we know as mass phenomenon is very important. Culture is never something that simplifies in fact, culture attempts to problematize what exists at anyone time in the present. Culture is always a reflection upon and a critique of what exists. If the world is moving more and more towards complexity, the forms of culture: literature, music, poetry, painting, architecture, film, photography will always open up that complexity to further levels of complexity.

There are always two levels of operation: one is media, which is a form of culture, but it is a form of culture, which attempts to simplify and reduce. Whereas there are other forms of culture that are attempting to open up media, to its own reduction. These kinds of actions, reactions and forces are always existent in culture, they are probably more open to us today because more people have access through the Internet to understanding their world. The more you give people understanding the more they need to simplify that understanding to be able to assimilate that information into their own existence.

STUDENT: But wouldn't you say the danger is that this simulation has become as realistic that the people no more recognize, or that they are not conscious, that the whole thing is a simulation and this is not reality?

PETER EISENMAN: Simulation is a form of reality. For many people the Venetian Hotel or the New York Hotel in Las Vegas exist as simulations. People go to Disney World in Paris or Tokyo, Los Angeles or Florida, even though these are all simulacra. The mass of people really cannot tell the difference between Richard Meier's Getty Center, Frank Gehry's Bilbao and Las Vegas. For them they are all *simulacra.* So it is even more important today that works like the Gehry and Meier question their own nature as simulacra. That is what is meant by a bifurcated culture. We are in a condition where Gehry's and Meier's buildings both work as simulacra for the mass of people and at the same time work as some condition of critique of that very simulacra. That is the nature of bifurcation. This also exists in films like "The Blair Witch Project" or "American Beauty" which can be read at a very popular, instinctual level and at the same time as critical projects. One can have it both ways. This is what is necessary today because the dialectical conditions of high art or low art no longer exist as critical sign posits. It is more that simulacra and reality which exist one within the other can be described as a bifurcation that is different from dialectics. Bifurcation expresses a condition whereby all media has a double-condition, where it has both its simulacra which is very real but it also has its potential critical component. It is important, that the student realizes the difference between Las Vegas and a critical condition. To most people they are the

same. For example, does the student here realize the difference between the simulacra of Tessenow and critical content? This is not clear in the diploma work. This is where there is no bifurcation, serious copying without any commentary, without the critical edge. On the other hand, many films have this new critical content, which is not the same as in the 1950's in the French Nouvelle Vague or Italian Neo Realism. Today critical works have become much more like simulacra, there is a bifurcation within them. There is no longer a dialectic between Godard and commercialism. There is a bifurcation where the commercial has become as real as Godard.

STUDENT: The new sensibility makes it not possible to distinguish?

PETER EISENMAN: It is not possible to distinguish, because at the same time there has been a blurring of the distinction. What must be apparent is the blur, not the distinction. And not the pure condition of simulacra or criticality. In other words, there is no distinction, this would be dialectical. Rather something is out of focus. For example the films of the Dogma Group, films which are purposely made to be out of focus with handheld cameras. These films are metaphoric of the condition of film where the difference between a home made film with a hand-held camera and a serious film is blurred. There are subtle differences, which distinguish between simulacra and something else. In order to make something blurred, the distinction between what is real is and what is the simulacra must be known, otherwise it is not possible. So while it is important to know what Tessenow is, it is also important to know what the simulacra is and then what the difference is between the simulacra and the original. This is what I call the repetition of difference. Blurring questions the difference between the real Tessenow and the copy today, or the real New York and the New York Hotel in Las Vegas. The new sensibility does not tend to articulate their differences but rather blurs them. And it is the blurring of their difference, which is on aspect of the bifurcated discourse. Bifurcation is when both sensibilities are enfolded rather than being pulled apart – they exist together.

STUDENT: But this situation of the necessity of the blur; do you think that it's more a response to the question of how to deal with the complex world or is it more a result of this imploding society.

PETER EISENMAN: That is a difficult question to answer because a bifurcated answer might be required. You are asking me now to be a social historian or critic. I do not really have an answer. It is a question, which you should ask a sociologist or a critical theorist. Why? What we do as architects, is, we learn our discourse first. We cannot help but learn in ones time. And then you apply that discourse in that time and in that moment. It is not possible for me to make a Schinkel building today, it would not have the same value as it had in the nineteenth century. So the question is, how does one find value in what one does? That question needs to be understood by architects. In other words, I am always looking to define how my work has value at a particular moment. And how that value can sustain itself over time. This is something that is important because, for example, certain movies of Godard have value today and certain you look at and say they have little value. The question is how does one make something in 1950 that still has value in the year 2000? How can one make something in 1750 that has value today? This has something to do with what I would call the interiority of the discourse. In other words, at every moment in time, the discourse has its own conditions of being. Those conditions of being are made up of the history of the discourse, what I call its anteriority, and also the conditions that the discourse finds itself in vis-a-vis contemporary culture, that is its normative condition. So, in order to do architecture today, you have to know Palladio, Bramante, Piranesi, Schinkel, von Klenze, etc. as well as the conditions that exist in which you are going to place this anteriority. For example, Semper does an opera house in Dresden in 1834, it is a beautiful building, and it is burned down in 1848 and in 1863 they ask him to rebuild the opera – and he says no. Semper argues that he is not going to rebuild his earlier building because it would not have the same meaning. So he builds a new opera house. Now, it is the same Semper, it is the same discourse that he is operating

in with the same knowledge. But now he has to put forward that discourse within the cultural context that he is living in. Now you are asking me whether we are putting forward our work either because of the complexity or the implosive nature of the society. I think both of these conditions operate upon how we put forward our work. I would have thought the most active condition of culture today is media. My children have no problem with virtual space and time. They are the people that are going to be very problematized by what we would call real space and time. We will be dealing with them as clients. And we are dealing with you who also have no problem with virtual space and time. How do we deal with architecture? What makes architecture of any significance to people who live in a virtual world? I think this is an interesting issue, and I think architecture has to deal with these issues at the same time as it deals with its discourse. Architecture has its own problematics. I would have thought, architecture does not solve problems, rather it problematizes the political, the social and the economic realm. Therefore architecture could open up the problematic of media to real space and time, or what we thought to be real space and time.

And to bring these two together, that is virtual space and time, in a non-dialectical way. Today one can play chess against virtual opponents, real people who exist someplace. They exist in chat rooms, there are love affairs which occur in media, there are all kinds of strange things have been happening through virtual connections.

STUDENT: So by trying to find a solution...

PETER EISENMAN: ... not a solution, to bring them into some kind of focus. By bringing these two together, you put them out of focus. The idea is, to put media and real space and time out of focus, in order to blur the distinction between reality and media. This would be a bifurcation and not dialectic. There are no books, there are no processes like collage. Collage, which has been absorbed by media, has no real value today. We need to find those techniques that have been used to make critical work, to open up and problematise conditions. We need to find what those are, and how to learn about them. I do not have those answers, I am not certain there are answers, I think there are questions and I think my lecture was about posing questions, not answers.

STUDENT: As the new sensibility is somehow coming out of a development in society ...

PETER EISENMAN: ...no question! ...

STUDENT: ...is the idea of bringing the new sensibility into architecture the idea of getting closer to society, and, as the architect, looking closer to what is going on in society, or is it the idea of using the power of this development to sustain architecture?

PETER EISENMAN: I do not know if it is closer or not. I think great architecture has always been close to conditions of culture in general and has always responded to them. Architects do not operate in a vacuum. When I talk about genetic coding, I am talking about recent advancements in biosciences, in biotechnologies. When I say we have moved past the mechanical - industrial complex to conditions, which are no longer mechanical but digital, no longer industrial but biological, I am responding to a general cultural context. If you talk to students in biology, in sociology, in physics, you realize that there have been these shifts, that the paradigms that we are operating under have undergone dramatic changes. We need to be always cogniscent and sentient about our responses to these changes. But I think architects always are part of culture. You know you go to the movies, you hear rap music, urban music, hip-hop and jazz. Architecture is always responsive to and commenting upon these changes. This is because it is the last discipline to react, because it takes the longest to produce. A project takes five years to finish. In that time things are moving so rapidly, there is such acceleration and change that the computer programs we use are out of date before we finish. The kinds of techniques we use to document what we are doing have changed. I would argue that we are both, the last people and

the first responsible for a critique. Historically one can read at any moment in time the forms of culture mirrored in architecture. There has always been the condition in which architecture is both, behind and ahead. While today is always different from yesterday, the condition of difference is a continuing set of differences. Today, when I say, a new sensibility I am suggesting that if you were in Germany in 1939 you would say there had been a new sensibility. If you were in France in 1789 you would have said there had been a new sensibility. What I mean by the word *new* is to understand that there have been paradigm shifts in the society. We all are aware of them – what we need to find out in terms of our own discourse is how to deal with them? In other words, as architects, not as social historians, or social commentators or people in critical theory, we are architects. And so, what do we do? This is the interesting issue and I do not know this answer.

STUDENT: Do you think, that these shifts are either a bad or a good development, or is it just a development in general, so that there is no need for the architect to give the whole society a direction, like they tried one hundred years ago?

PETER EISENMAN: I think that has changed. I think the modern architect thought that he was a St. George figure slaying the dragon of contemporary urbanity. The progressive view of the architect as a hero figure is gone. The architect is no longer a social arbiter. Before 1789 the architect was never thought of that way. It was only in revolutionary cultures in Western Europe, that the architect was given this role. I think 1939 ended 150 years of the architect as the hero figure. I think that sensibility is gone: we no longer have the architect in the role of the moral delineator.

STUDENT: So has this something to do with the impossibility to change things, or is there just no necessity that things are changed by the architect?

PETER EISENMAN: I would have thought, that architecture is always about the transgression or the problematising of the present. It is not a critique of the present to make a better future it is merely to critique the present. This is what has changed, the notion of the critique, the transgression of the *Zeitgeist* has nothing to do with progress. It has to do with the conditions of the present. The architects critical role has not changed, rather the nature of that critical role in relationship to the past and to the future has changed.

STUDENT: Thank you so far. A last question:
How far can your teaching at the ETH Zurich be considered as an experiment, and is there a difference to your work with the students in the United States?

PETER EISENMAN: First of all, I teach to learn, I teach to open up my own thought to different conditions. The kind of questions that you ask me are going to be different than students in the United States ask, because you come from a different cultural background. What I teach has to do with the development of my own discourse. So in that sense I teach similar ideas in similar places. The project for the Paris competition was done by students in both Princeton and at the ETH. I am interested in how the students respond differently because of their cultural background to the theoretical conditions that are in my discourses. My theoretical work is evolutionary, but I do not change it because I am here or there. What is different is how the students respond because of their cultural context. First, I am teaching in English, which means they are dealing with a second language. Second, they are dealing with an American architect and a French cultural problem. I have a Dutch assistant – he taught with me in Princeton last year. The difference is in the conditions that the students have in relationship to their institution, what they expect from the institution. What I provide for them is a mirror, which I do not provide necessarily when I am in the United States, because I am a sense of those institutions. When I come here as a *Gastprofessor,* I provide a mirror for the students to see themselves through my lens in relationship to their own culture. What is valuable for me is for the students to hold up their mirror for me to see my ideas in a different cultural

context. To see how I need to modify my own ideas relative to the cultural experience that you have had. When I teach in the United States I work from textual material. I may work from Tafuri, Loos, Le Corbusier, Piranesi, Palladio, etc. Next term I will work from Walter Benjamin to see how that operates in this context. To begin from a textual condition and move it into a design condition. To say that design is in some way underpinned by some sort of textuality. In that sense next semester will be more of an experiment than this semester.

From what I can gather, students feel that guest-professors are not really part of their reality. Their reality is what is to be seen at the diploma exhibition and they have to be very careful to maintain that reality. Guest-professors do not teach diploma students. This is something that could be changed, to open up the discourse to people who want to pursue ideas other than the accepted discourse of this institution. I think, this is a very exciting place, but I also feel there is great homogeneity. In such a large school there is not enough cultural diversity in the work. If this were a small school it would be acceptable to have a school of tendency, but such a tendency is overbearing for the size of this school. To bring other energies, to open the air, as it were, to bifurcate that sensibility would be a very useful thing.

STUDENT: You said the students should be full of motivation but should not work motivated in a certain direction.

PETER EISENMAN: I am not interested in proposing a direction for them. I am interested in using their work as a way of the students examining why they are doing what they are doing at any moment in time. This is what is important about a teacher and a student. I work in my studio as I do in my office as I do in my seminars. My work is of a certain whole, I do not change in what I am thinking and doing. In fact, I give seminars in my office every summer to set the conditions that I want to work with during the next year. I always set up the theoretical basis for the work each year and then develop that work. My teaching is only a part of that evolution. In my office now we have reality, eight buildings that we are going to be working on, but that in itself does not give me a chance for theoretical growth. My theoretical growth is in designing and teaching in places like this. I have managed to continue my teaching continuously for forty years. It is not important for me to teach *Eisenman* but to open up myself to growth and change. Not to develop little *Eisenmans,* but to develop people who are also open to growth and change. This is what the evolving conditions of relationships are.

STUDENT: As a résumé of the last three months, do you think that the students on this, lets say, directionally motivated school, are able to open up as much? And, speaking of that motivation, could you imagine that it not only results from the idea of the school but also comes out of the students themselves, that they want to be as motivated as possible?

PETER EISENMAN: I think we have to talk first about the general cultural condition. It is a condition where students are not necessarily like they were in the sixties, they are not motivated to disagree. They want to get their diploma to go out and make money like everybody else is doing. They are very clearly motivated in that way and they want to know how to do that as best they can. I think again, the way you get to this kind of an attitude is by blurring that sensibility not by attacking it. Any kind of radical attack today has got to be a subtle attack, because if it is too dialectical it does not operate in the society as we find it. So the motivations and the changes in alterations and motivations have to be very subtle. My work is like drilling holes in an oil drum, not to blow the oil drum up but to cause it to leak. And creating leaks in the drum you cannot get all the oil out, but you gradually get some of it out, and I think this is useful.

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