Three Interviews: Emmanuel Petit

McEwan, Cameron

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In October 2014 we invited three guests to Venice to give talks related to the buildings we showcased in the performance. The buildings were designed by James Stirling, Alison + Peter Smithson and Michael Shewan - a devotee of Mies van der Rohe. Emmanuel Petit, Dirk van den Heuvel and Sven-Olof Wallensten were asked to talk about Stirling, The Smithsons’ and Mies. The event was called ‘Outsiders’. Before the lectures we sat down to discuss these architects and the context in which they worked.

THREE INTERVIEWS

EMMANUEL PETIT

An Interview with Cameron McEwan

Emmanuel Petit is an architect, writer, and teacher. He is editor of ‘Phil Johnson: The Constancy of Change’, which received an Independent Publisher Award, and is the editor of ‘Schrödinger through Ambivalence: Writings on an American Architectural Conception of Knowledge’, which includes essays by, inter alia, the author of the book ‘Irony, or, The Self-Critical Opacity of Postmodern Architecture’, for which he received a grant from the Graham Foundation. Recently published texts include ‘The Architecture of Irony’ in the Victoria & Albert Museum’s catalogue for the exhibition ‘Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970 to 1990’ and ‘Invention and Decay: Aastas Isaezaki’s Architectural Poetics: Metabolism’s Dialogical Other’ in Perspecta 41. He curated the 2010–11 exhibition ‘An Architect’s Legacy: James Stirling’s Students at Yale, 1959–83’, and co-curated Peter Eisenman’s exhibition ‘Barefoot on White-Hot Walls’ at the Museum for Applied Art in Vienna in 2004. Petit is partner in the architecture firm Jean Petit Architekten in Luxembourg City and was recently appointed Sir Banister Fletcher Visiting Professor at the Bartlett School of Architecture.

From your point of view and the point of view of colleagues and press in the States, how has this year’s Venice Architecture Biennale been received? Without having seen the Biennale yet, it is quite dangerous to say anything. But we know that Koichi Tsune has a complex relation toward the notion of disciplinarity: for that reason I have the feeling that he is going to tease many architects by saying that everything that has been defined as the discipline of architecture is arcane and complicated and that things can be easier, fresher and more directly related to real life. But I do not have a problem with mediation - cultural mediation, rhetorical mediation, and with intellectual reflection on the world. Where architecture becomes ‘architecture’, you never engage reality directly and immediately, but you mediate with all the tools that the discipline of architecture puts at your disposal. They include every cultural notion that you can think of - language, history, criticism, and the like. These are the ways you build and cultivate any discipline. Heidegger, who has unfortunately been too much appropriated by postmodernists who highlighted the more coy or navel aspect of his otherwise very tough thought, claimed that in order "to be," you have to cultivate "being." I feel that it is not so different with the discipline of architecture. Now, I have the suspicion that the Biennale is saying that architecture can be ’simpler’: that a look at the physical elements into the construction of buildings can somehow be a proxy for everything architecture is about. Having seen in magazines the photograph of a mechanical piece taken from an escalator and placed in the exhibition, I get a bit worried by this religious trust in the material world. I don’t think the steps of an escalator are going to generate the cultural richness and depth one can rightly expect from architecture. If this was the case, then any trade fair could be seen as a precedent for the Biennale; I do not hope this is the intention. In fact the Biennale was created because there was a feeling that trade shows were not good representations of the aspirations of the profession. But before I go on, I would like to see the exhibition first.

Yes, on initial reading it seems like the implication is toward the professionalism of knowledge in architecture, rather than architecture as intellectual reflection. So it’s a slightly paradoxical theme. Let’s turn to Stirling. It is interesting that Stirling has been recently revisited by Amanda Lawrence and Anthony Vidler to name two prominent critics. Why did you feel the need to revisit Stirling’s work, and why Stirling’s students? I’m thinking of the 2011 exhibition you curated at Yale.

The Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal acquired the Stirling & Wilford Archive a bit over a decade ago. The CCA together with the Melton Centre in New Haven asked Vidler to curate a show on the work of Stirling. In this context, the Yale School of Architecture under its dean Robert A. M. Stern decided to do a parallel show on the work of Stirling’s students for the reason that Stirling taught at Yale for twenty-four years. I was interested in Stirling because when I studied in Switzerland, Stirling was virtually the only post-1950 architect we were allowed to talk about. I heard the name ‘Venturi’ maybe once or twice in my six years in Zurich, whereas Stirling was the good guy, the good ‘postmodernist’ - if he was a postmodernist, that is, but I don’t have an issue with that. So I was interested in Stirling anyway because he mastered the balancing act between being considered a modernist and also a postmodernist. He seemed interesting to me. When the opportunity came up to look at the students of Stirling I became interested because it also gave me a way to look at the history of Yale under a whole series of different deanships: starting with Paul Rudolph, who brought Stirling to the States, through Charles Moore, Cesar Pelli and others. This is a pretty relevant period of Yale history. It also allowed me to look at work that was very Stirling-esque without being Stirling and to therefore help me to understand Stirling himself.

What was Stirling’s relationship between his teaching and his practice in London? Was that when James Steward was a partner? The first time Stirling taught at Yale was in 1959 when Leicester started. Rudolph was completely taken by the Leicester building and decided to invite him to come to the States. Stirling loved to go to America. It gave him all kinds of freedom. He liked this international life of a practice in London and teaching in the States. He would assign projects he was working on at that moment in the office so his studio projects parallel his own career. He would ask students to work on Derby Civic Centre, the Tuscan Government Centre, the Staatsgalerie, Cornell Performing Arts, the Sackler gallery, and many more of those projects he had worked on.

These were the project briefs he gave the students? Yes, and he gave a prize at the end to the student who proposed a scheme most like what he might produce - a tie, or a blue shirt! … and then a second prize to the student, who came up with a better solution than his own. But yes, a direct parallel between his practice and his studio teaching existed.

How did you distinguish the development of Stirling’s work? Bob Stern wrote to the alumni who studied with Stirling and asked them to send in their work. So we built an archive of Stirling’s students’ work because it did not exist before. The advantage of working with an archive is that you can start with an analysis of the stuff in front of your nose. The work is there, and you work with that. And for me there were breaks that one could easily perceive and trace. These breaks were meaningful because they reflected a change in the architectural discussion in general, and so we divided the exhibition into five different stages.

The early work is not terribly Stirling-esque, perhaps because he was more like a casual visitor in the school. That was from 1959 to 1964. The work still looks influenced by then dean Rudolph, but also Louis Kahn and then Kevin Roche - who at that time had completed the Okland … a building that looks like a cascade of terraces built into the ground and to walk on. In Stirling’s studio there was a project that looked exactly like that. In the second half of the 1960s you get the whole Archigram and “English” pop influence.

That’s when he was part of the Independent Group. That’s also when he became formalized as a Davenport Professor - a Professorship, by the way, which he shared with Robert Venturi. So you get this pop influence. Craig Hodgetts is probably the most famous and idiosyncratic student of Stirling at that time. He is an L.A. architect who also published his projects from the Stirling studio in Archigram. That episode we called “The New City.” You can imagine an
architectural output from shipping containers with flashy colours, hovering trains and space ship architecture, and so on. It is the modernist's dream to demonstrate to the rest of the exhibition and around the time of the Derby Civic Centre. This series of projects dealt with ways to integrate new architecture into the existing city. This also focuses on an architecture of Krier influenced by Stirling. The time from 1977 to 1978, the Tuscan Government Centre episode we called "Architectural Agglomerates" which is a study about urban figure/ground. This is the exact time when Collage City was published. Giambattista Noli's map of the mid-eighteenth century became an important tool in the architecture discourse at this time, and led up to the Roma Intertesta workshop in which Stirling participated. The last part of the exhibition then we called "Fragmented Monumentality" which dates from early-1970s projects including the Staatsgalerie, the Säcker gallery, and the Cornell Performing Arts Center. All these projects had a sense of monumentality but without "serious quotation.

The notion of monumentality and the theme of "urban insertions" leads me to two questions. The first, to what extent was Stirling an urban architect - an architect interested in the monumentality of singular buildings or an architect interested in urban fabric? And secondly, and thirdly, the theme of the "double view" of Stirling? This question of the 'double view' of Stirling considers whether Stirling was more interested in the object of architecture, or in the city as a whole. If the claim of the critics are split. Colquhoun or Frampton didn’t think Stirling did anything valuable after around 1975 when Stirling participated in the Dusseldorf competition will tell you something. Project. This is the moment when Stirling’s turn becomes recognisable. The path through the city becomes the dominant trope in his architecture whereas before, he works with Constructionist objects, but are also the response to the city, and they certainly do in a different way than the Staatsgalerie.

**Does this relate to the double view?** Can you expand on these ideas? I think you understand this double aspect in Stirling, one must look at Auguste Choisy on the one hand, who represented his analysis of Athenian architecture from a worms eye view, they are all apart and reassemble in unexpected ways. If you are witty you can see through the logic of objects and recombine them in truly inventive and fresh ways because you are not worried about being too serious, and you have the intellectual faculty to combine things that are (logically) combinable. That is the technique Stirling always used. It allowed him to design buildings that look like they couldn’t possibly exist, the objects they are totally fresh because like chemists he could turn shit into gold!

**Is it interesting, there is a kind of witful attitude with Stirling?** There is some serious cheekiness in Stirling. Without a doubt! Even in the early work. For example, Leicester is cheeky. You have to have the guts to do what he did with that building on one of those English university campuses where you are probably not even permitted to utter bad words. This is a serious universe, not in a serious country, and he comes along and designs this weird building. Of course it’s not really funny, but it is sure and witty. The intellectual strategy is similar later in his career. In 1972, in the later work he becomes funnier, but you only be funny when your position is safe enough that the world will take it. If you are funny without having established what is possible or not possible. But funny guys don’t survive. Yet humour is the highest form of the intellect. Everyone manages to be serious, but very few manage to be funny or witty.

Leicester is a very serious building so he became very serious, quite quickly which then allowed him the opportunity to become witful or witty, almost immediately. And he is British. By now the world expects from Brits to be funny and eccentric. Krier is from Luxembourg. A Luxembourger cannot be eccentric and the world does not expect somebody from Luxembourg to be eccentric.

**So do you subvertively then?** Oh I’m of a very different generation, which is part of a global culture where these rational differences have eroded and where the rules and expectations have completed changed. But this was not the case in 1971. This was the time when Brits were supposed to be funny.

Yes, Choisy is the opposite of Noli. One represents the object of architecture looking up, the other looks down, one is a singular object the other is a city plan. These opposites are reconciled in Stirling’s work. You could also say that the double aspect haunts more people than only Stirling at that time. Peter Eisenman, who uses in the 1970s are very Choisy-like, although he never represented them as a worms eye view, they are all about the isolation of the object in a white space.
and someone who takes the whole notion of metaphysics seriously but needs to be funny because he knows that might not be his métier.

The other great intellectual period of architecture is in the 1920s when you have Le Corbusier, Hilberseimer, Mies, Gropius, Loos, whose theories and projects for architecture and the city in designs and in writings. Can these periods be compared? Is a comparison possible?

Yes, but there are different kinds of ‘intellectual’. And most of the writers from the 1920s who we read and appreciate have something to say about the 1920s. They not only talk about the 1920s but they also appropriate the architecture of the 1920s for their own work. It is difficult not to talk about Le Corbusier. He had the ability and the rhetoric that related to all aspects of culture. The melancholy that was built into this is Koolhaas. He is the most Zeitgeist of all living architects.

Turning now to the category of project, a category recently reassessed by Eisenman, Pier Vittorio Aureli, Daniel Shere and others. In an issue of Log you open an essay on MVRDV titled “Projects for the Post-Territorial City” with a description: “Can you explain the idea behind this project?” In that text I particularly critique MVRDV’s contribution to Nicholas Sarkozy’s Grand Paris competition. MVRDV produced a film which begins with a flying cube over Paris which is supposed to represent the volume of the built space that Paris will need for the next twenty years. The cube then nests the Eiffel Tower. The image evokes sci-fi precedents in the sense that it suggests that an “other” intelligence appears in the sky over Paris and then nests itself in the city. On the other hand, ground, this ‘machine’ breaks into numerous small cubes according to a swarm logic, which then nest themselves in various locations throughout Paris: this is how the future of Paris will be. The whole MVRDV project is that it views architecture as some otherworldly appearance with its own logic that acts independently of the cultural sphere. Now why would we want that sort of world? I love sci-fi but I don’t see the point of pretending that the future city gets built by a non-human agency. If the city organizes itself according to the logic of numbers, as MVRDV argue, and if we build a city of numbers and of statistics, then we capitulate to pragmatism and lose our ability to intervene in the environment. That’s what I call a ‘project’. I don’t see the point in arguing for an agency that lies beyond the world or inside a machine or inside an artificial intelligence that will eventually take me up! I like it in films when I develop popcorn, but find it infantile in the real world.

Argues against this idea of enlightenment without, intelligence. It seemed to me that MVRDV’s project is what man’s enlightened state allows man to posit example that produces a city not made of form but of statistics, then we capitulate to pragmatism and lose our ability to intervene in the environment. That’s what I call a ‘project’. I don’t see the point in arguing for an agency that lies beyond the world or inside a machine or inside an artificial intelligence that will eventually take me up! I like it in films when I develop popcorn, but find it infantile in the real world.

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Yes, it’s a project that says something about architecture project at a particular historical period, like your MVRDV example which produces a city not made of form, but a field of statistics that analogically reflects a particular period. Among the questions that relate to Eisenman. Why is he such a good educator? He is the best teacher I have met, and that for two reasons: One, he has a very strong method or a strong education, he is brutally honest. He tells you exactly what he thinks and nothing else. If he sees something that he thinks is not working, he will say so. Is it if you are going in the wrong direction, it is not a matter of thinking about which one of the two will make the problem better. If you are going in the wrong direction, there is nothing you can do to make it better and you need to do something else. It is a method of teaching and communicating that is absolutely effective.

And Eisenman is in the book on Colin Rowe that is currently circulating. But what now, What will be included in the book? Ten essays by ten architects and by me. The contributing architects were all close to Rowe but then tried to get away from him by turning towards very different interests. They include: Maxwell, Vidler, Eisenman, Ungers, Krier, Koolhaas, Colquhoun, Slutzky, Hoesli, and Tschumi. Had Stirling and Hejduk been alive I would think they would certainly be included. The book testifies to the many directions architectural theory took in the second half of the 20th century.

I look forward to reading it. Thanks very much for this interview.
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