Dissecting the Architecture Studio: A conversation that never happened

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ABSTRACT

This piece articulates a conversation between Pier Vittorio Aureli and Bernard Tschumi, based on the interviews conducted by Ernesto Silva for the research 'Dissecting the Architecture Studio'. Even though the original purpose of the fixed set of questions was to discuss different pedagogical approaches, this **tête-à-tête** ***juxtaposes their views on institutions, students, teaching, office, and the architecture discipline, putting forward what lies beneath the academic and professional practices of both architects.***

Pier Vittorio Aureli: I remember entering an office and seeing this battery of computers with people just there, doing one fragment. "How I can escape this?", I said. I didn't want to become a scholar – a professional historian, theorist or whatever –, I wanted to remain an architect and yet do architecture in a different way: a way that could also help me to reclaim a more critical understanding of architecture. So, with Martino Tattara – my partner at Dogma –, we decided to pursue our goals by heavily relying on teaching and research. Thus, there is a relationship between our practice and our studios and it is really about this attempt in both the office and the research to go beyond the kind of established patterns that are currently available. In a way, we produce architecture that can be realized through building, through writing, through research. For me, any medium has equal importance. And I have always tried to focus on not teaching occasionally, because if you do, it does not work. Research, in the way I want to do it, requires accumulation. On the other hand, a successful studio is one that produces certain doubts about what has been done before. Success is really that moment in which you self-critically understand yourself. I want my work to be questioned and to be open to all sorts of unpredictable evolutions. Research is about that, going outside of yourself.

Bernard Tschumi: I could almost say that for the first ten or twelve years I was teaching, I didn't have an office. In the early days, I practically lived at the AA. I was there every day. I was writing some articles, but my life was centred on that particular academic institution. Also, I was trying to forget everything I had learned and start from scratch. So, in a way, I was learning at the same time I was teaching. Generally, I would do everything myself and then get some of my students who had graduated to come back and become Teaching Assistants (TAs). After my deanship at Columbia, I started to teach again, and I needed more help because I couldn't be at the studio three afternoons a week, usually only one. The easiest thing was to choose TAs among the people in my office. In that sense, the reason there's a relationship between my studios and my office is practical – it is my time – but also because it's easier to have people who are already familiar with the way you work. Time is a major factor, it's important not to have to reinvent every conversation. Today, many years after I started teaching, the age difference is also important. I don't have much time, and the production constraints of the office are greater. In a way, I know too much. In other words, what we do in the office is often substantially more complex than what we do in school. What is done at school is more a form of investigation, but because you do it on a very short period of time, it is more of a general framework rather than the final result. However, students these days work hard producing an enormous lot and come from many different backgrounds and influences, so one of the important things in the studio is to help them focus on what is most important.

PVA: I am really training students to be focused. This is one of the hardest problems today with students, they

tend to be very distracted and they don't have the stamina to sit down for more than two hours and read a book from cover to cover. Compared to my generation, students are far more intelligent, smarter. I was very naive at their age, I knew much less than them. But because they are so highly informed they are also highly distracted and, as a way to defend themselves from this tsunami of information they absorb, they become slightly indifferent or apathetic. But they are a big part of the whole thing: if the students don't react or they don't challenge what is taught to them then education doesn't work. Additionally, studios are an attempt to, maybe not to influence but intervene in a larger discussion. So, there is an aspect that is really public. That is why I ask students to invest themselves not just in designing their own project but also in editing and drawing, because then you can actually have a public presentation of the work. That is very strong: not doing the studio just as a kind of internal discussion but as something that really attempts to be clear. What I want to leave to the students as an experience is this kind of comprehensive understanding of architecture that includes writing, thinking, design, editing and so on, which also includes very stupid and technical things like being very ordered with your files, how to concentrate...

BT: The word "editing" that you used is exactly correct. It is about editing, editing and more editing. When you edit, you understand better what you are doing and then you see what is missing, so you end up doing a bit of extra work to fill the gaps. That's really a general method of work. And I think it is important that the final jury becomes a conversation; that it becomes a way to contribute within the school. So, you invite critics whom you feel can benefit from what you have asked the students to do and invite people you know will be interested in what you are doing.

PVA: The jury is very important. I usually invite people that can help you judge the work of the students as well as the studio and help you redefine its focus. If I can, I invite few people: I am more interested to have people that have more time to elaborate their thoughts. I also tend to invite the faculty, because I want to interact with the place, the university. It is a way to establish a sense of community that is very important. Without a community, there is no research. If you don't construct that kind of community you don't produce any knowledge. The 'common' that now we discuss a lot is really about that.

BT: In my case, if I look back, my studio has practically always been an isolated manifestation. It also becomes related to the general strategies of each institution. That isolated manifestation, for example, at the AA, was very much part of the way everybody worked. You knew what the other studios were doing, and you would do something different in order to, somehow, establish a form of dialogue that was not based on what you have in common but rather on differences. So, at the time, Rem Koolhaas was re-exploring the entire Constructivists' era; Robin Evans was re-exploring the 18th Century town; and I was sort of a 'Situationist', right? It wasn't a concerted effort, it wasn't coordinated; it was really based on establishing a distinct identity.

PVA: Actually, when my studio started, it was very isolated. So, it started like an island. I have to say a very important person that was there – a mentor for us really – was Elia Zenghelis. And of course, things evolved and we formed a kind of community of people that started to be interested in architecture in a different way than the work that was trendy at the time. The thing is that I am not interested – and that was clear from the beginning – in being different. I don't want to end just being provocative or reactive to other things. I always like to have a community to exchange the work.

BT: And there is a huge difference, for example, between the AA and Columbia, and the AA and the American universities in general. At the AA, I would keep my students for as long as two years. In America, graduate school is only three years instead of five. So, students generally want to change studios, and therefore you only have them for one semester. That's a very different way of functioning. You don't necessarily build up the same way, you don't transmit in the same way; you may have an agenda of your own, but the students are new every time.

PVA: It is very short. And 'six months' are not really six months. It's like a competition time, so you only produce a nice project and there is very little time for anything else. A research is a process; a struggle that has its moments of crisis, otherwise it wouldn't be research. And I think that maybe in one year you can achieve that. But not in six months. The whole pedagogic of design in a short studio is really that of design-driven work. Architecture tries to organize your own skills, which are important, but for pushing an idea... If you have just skills and not ideas, I think it is a

problem. The brief in my studios is very important precisely because I want to avoid the design-driven studio where people just play with shapes because then the assessment becomes what is more elegant or successful, not really conveying any larger issue. So, I never give the brief for the project. I never propose a strictly defined methodology because once the research is over the project will require the formulation of a methodology. In the end, I am really interested to arrive to a point where students can confront the tradition of the discipline and make a critique of what has been done within this tradition.

BT: What is taught, whether one wants it or not, is always coloured by the history of architecture before you. The problem with architecture is that it is always filled with preconceptions, with preconceived ideas. I have always been critical of teachers who teach what they already know, because then they keep transmitting the same notions. They give students the solution they already know and ask them to work toward that solution. That's a form of teaching that is successful in many schools in the world. I have always wanted to do studios where I don't know the answer. I do the studio in order to find a new and different kind of answer.

PVA: For me, it is very important that the studio doesn't end up in an empirical method driven by design but to include basically what I think architecture is about. I try to organize seminars, for example, or writing assignments, or things that allow students to also understand how to make a bibliography, how to construct an argument, how to write an essay, which is a project in itself that doesn't need a kind of project afterwards. I ask students to write a lot, to draw a lot, yet at the end, they have to come to a very traditional project. I don't like too much the studio becoming like an artist workshop. The studio is like a carpet binding ideas, lectures, seminars, sometimes things that are very far from architecture, but I push the students to understand the link between this kind of wider perspective and the making of architecture, especially through very traditional mediums like drawings and text. I think drawing is very important. Drawing is not just an illustration of the project; it is about understanding the medium through which architecture becomes visible; the medium through which architecture is constructed. In fact, the issue of drawing is central in all my work.

BT: I would say I am interested, as I often maintain, in architecture as the invention of concepts and finding ways to materialize them. In other words, the concept is something that is very abstract – it doesn't have a form or a shape – so you need to work through certain devices. For example, diagrams, which are a way to give two- or three-dimensional translations or transpositions of the concept. Then you arrive at an architectural project, at what you might call a 'physically constructed materialization'. But the strategy is almost always the same: by raising a question.

PVA: I defend the fact that architecture has to be much more daring than just being design. I mean, it is something that has design as a fundamental chapter of its field of application, but it is really a form of knowledge. This kind of capacity of synthesis I think is a unique aspect of architecture compared to other forms of knowledge. Of course, it is a difficult process, but it is necessary, otherwise, architecture really will lose its critical capacity.

BT: I think it is unbelievably important. Architecture is one of the only areas of knowledge that is taught through a project. It is not through accumulating knowledge from books and by passing exams, it is through creating, inventing and developing a project, or an argument, if you prefer. And I will use these two words as synonyms. It is an extraordinary mode of education we all search for, and a general statement that applies to anybody as an architect. And I believe that when I write, when I'm around the school, when I was a dean... For me, these are all projects. I don't write like a writer; I write like an architect, in a constructive and probably structural way, just as I would construct a building.

PVA: Well, the thesis is to have an argument that goes beyond the actual design, I mean the design that you made could be one answer, could be one application, but I think what matters more is your position, your argument. You really have to position yourself; you really have to understand that without that kind of magnet, without the argument, the hypothesis or the thesis, architecture becomes simply business as usual.

BT: Indeed, I feel that all architecture is about making an argument. In other words, architecture is not something that relies on certainties, precisely because architecture is a form of knowledge. So, I do that with my projects: I investigate certain issues based on the circumstances and the conditions in which I work. In teaching, this is even more extreme, because you are in an educational context where you have a significant amount of freedom. You can, literally, do anything

you want.

PVA: I think, to me, the project should have two components: the architecture resolution and the argument.

BT: But, in terms of the achievements of the studio, the question always comes down to whether we will be able to structure an argument or to contribute to the argument.

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A project is an argument and an argument is a project. A definition that runs through the text and becomes explicit in Tschumi's statement: "I will use these two words as synonyms". Architecture, then, belongs to an intellectual arena: thought constructed into an argument, later modeled through or built into a specific matter. In other words, architectural thinking is not rooted to a building but to the act of building, of projecting; an intellectual dimension – a "form of knowledge" – that can be advanced or explored in different spheres (academic or professional) and result or take the form of a myriad of formats (from drawings and models to exhibitions, publications and buildings). An architect that understands this is an architect with an agenda: an architect that constructs an argument through his work, whether it is within the studio or the office.

This piece is based on a research project conducted by Ernesto Silva entitled 'Dissecting the Architecture Studio', which had the purpose of questioning whether a speculative practice within architectural pedagogy was still in existence. Using the interview format as a methodology of scrutiny, the set of questions constructed for the research were – despite the different interviewees – practically the same. Hence, while this particular conversation between Pier Vittorio Aureli and Bernard Tschumi is in part fictional – it never took place – the words spoken were in fact real and remain faithful to their original intent.

In that sense, there is no prospectus, bibliography or reference list, because this 'dialogue' is not a typical scholarly research. Such an inventory could have very well included anything – and everything – ever written by either Tschumi or Aureli. Or cited the work, studios or texts by architects like Juan Herreros, Enrique Walker and Andrés Jaque. However, the structure was moved by the conviction that any intention of making the piece look like a traditional paper would have missed the point and, thus, meddled with the argument.

In fact, the idea for the article originated from another dialogue, one between Ernesto Silva (the interviewer) and Rayna Razmilic (the editor). As a narrative device, this time using editing as the methodology of scrutiny, this *tête-à-tête* not only shows the substantial points of convergence between both architects but also allows us to go beyond the pedagogical approaches originally discussed during the research, putting forward that which is underneath Aureli and Tschumi's academic and professional practice: that is, their understanding of architecture – all architecture – as pure argument.

Bernard Tschumi was interviewed on November 30, 2012, at his office in New York. Pier Vittorio Aureli was interviewed on April 18, 2013, at Yale University. "Dissecting the Architecture Studio" was a research developed within GSAPP's AAR program, with Juan Herreros and Laurie Hawkinson as advisors. This text, on the other hand, was envisioned and edited in mid-2018. m