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Mark D. Linder
mdlinder@syr.edu

James Lucas

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graduate sessions

PRESTON SCOTT COHEN

10

Preston Scott Cohen
Graduate Session 10
2010.04.15

Syracuse University
School of Architecture
Graduate Programs
Mark Linder, Chair
Mark Robbins, Dean

Edited by James Lucas H with Mark Linder

Graphic design and photography by James Lucas H; series design by Aubrey Hartman; project images provided by Preston Scott Cohen, Inc.

Student participants in order of appearance:
Ryan Novi
Daina Lauren Swagerty
Nicole Blasetti
Taylor Hardee
Seth King

Preston Scott Cohen, founder and principal of Preston Scott Cohen, Inc., is the Chair of Architecture at Harvard University Graduate School of Design. He is the author of *Contested Symmetries* and numerous theoretical and historical essays as well as the designer of several significant cultural institutions, urban plans, and residences for which he has received awards and honors including the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Architecture.

Graduate Sessions is a series of seminars and symposia offering Syracuse Architecture graduate students the opportunity to engage leading scholars and practitioners in conversation and debate. The resulting pamphlets offer unique insights into the work of our guests as well as the ongoing concerns of our students and the graduate programs.

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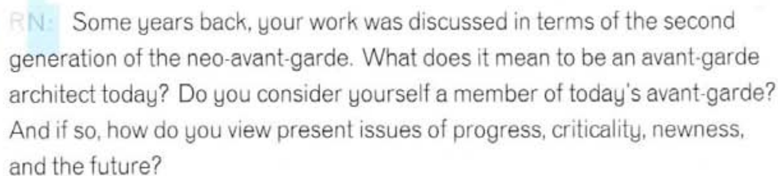
graduate session 10



RN: Some years back, your work was discussed in terms of the second generation of the neo-avant-garde. What does it mean to be an avant-garde architect today? Do you consider yourself a member of today's avant-garde? And if so, how do you view present issues of progress, criticality, newness, and the future?

PSC: Rather than being comparable to an ongoing avant-garde project, it seems to me that modern architecture is more like a series of inversions and reversals of fortune. Successive waves of innovative projects have turned into dominant practices. Many arose from an ambitious and optimistic idea involving societal reform and the abandonment of architecture's aristocratic heritage. Modernism was a new means to think about the world, to rationalize and reconsider the way we live in the world, to produce new units of housing, to reinvent the language of architecture in accordance with new technologies—everything. Once this project reached its goal—hegemonic status—as it did in the mid-century, it died. Every avant-garde hypothesis dies when it becomes a realization. Yet in the case of the mid-century crisis, this is not really an accurate description of what happened. Rather, the problem for us was something more ill-fated—it was the incompatibility of the modern project with the American context. American capitalism could not accept the ambitions of the modern social project that the modern architects were presumably motivated by. Modernism in the United States operated under a very different set of assumptions and economic and productive processes. These had little to do with what the European modernists set

out to do. Modernism in America was always suffering from its impending decline. It was not simply a matter of fashions and the exhaustion of the projects themselves. At stake in your question are the social and political backgrounds that bring down the modern. Modernism failed in a context in which it never made sense. That this failure would be exported around the world, in the form of historicist revivals, is really a terrible undoing of the avant-garde. I don't think we can call the postmodern an avant-garde in the same sense as the high modern. When we refer to the postmodern as avant-garde, we're thinking of the architects that reacted against historicism; we're thinking of the New York Five, who tried to reintroduce an avant-garde, mainly in the American architectural academy. Theirs was a purely philosophical avant-garde, not the avant-garde that involved a social project. This was all happening when I was going to school, and, obviously, I am coming from that tradition. I can't deny that the only avant-garde I could subscribe to—that was ever in my bloodstream—was not really a socially ambitious avant-garde. Rather, it was ambitious with respect to the advancement of the repertoire. Subsequent to Koolhaas, we have been enjoying a far more complex modernity—coming from Europe again, but this time through the optic of New York as he saw it. For me, what is most compelling about Koolhaas is that he tried to drive together in a strange collision course all the modern projects: the hegemonic modernism of American capital, the philosophic avant-garde of America, and the nostalgic pining for the socially motivated modernism of Europe. In his interpretation, each has served to invert the others. To answer you today, I would have to say that the avant-garde is almost a mandatory impulse and yet, we need to give it up finally and to outgrow the idea of teleological progress.

If "ecological design" is a dream of unity and conformity, it is utterly incompatible with architecture, which exists only by setting itself apart from another totality and by offering an alternative utopia.

TH In "Bona Fide Modernity," a piece you co-authored with Robert Levit, you mention architecture's contemporary tendency toward strange forms, and you mention that this is derived from the discipline's tendency to be determined by performative standards. I was wondering if you could elaborate on how this complex formal solution exhibited in the Taiyuan Museum is a product of site-specific performative standards?

PSC Evidently, what Robert Levit and I were talking about then is something that has since proceeded to really take hold. We were criticizing the dominant alibi of the so-called "performative," which was actually a means to explain things that are inexplicable in terms of use, necessity, and productivity. Since the dawn of neo-avant-garde disenchantment, many architects have been feeling powerless and have been desperate to make things matter again. This syndrome results from a combination of two things: a guilty conscience about the fact that what we're doing isn't really optimally performative at all and a wish not to go back to the "functional," which would be regressive. The performative evokes products, things like boats and cars. It suggests a desire to work in the larger marketplace. Yet this is also the very condition that has undermined architecture, the market which drives certain kinds of tastes and values that aren't always what the architect's interests can be reconciled with. So it's a paradox. What Levit and I were arguing is that architects are covering up their actual aim, which is to be original and artistic and to be discovered as such. To bring to the world something that is both exceptional and that establishes their own voice is an ambition of which they are ashamed. Since the high modern movement, I think it is fair to say that architects have internalized a desire to believe that what they do must be inevitable or needs to be as it is. Levit and I knew this not to be true, and we relished exposing the falsehood. Of course, I am as guilty as anyone of employing performative alibis, and, despite my skepticism, I find interesting the condition of my wishing things (whatever they may be) to be

truthful— knowing they will never be, but continuing to be driven by that wish that the specificity of the architectural solution would matter. I confess to making many a dubious claim for my projects. But who hasn't? [laughter]

It took me years to recover from the deep desire to think about architecture without materiality.

TH This makes me wonder about your use of another word in the most recent lecture you gave here—*attenuation*, which you used in relation to 'site as constraint, anamorphic thresholds, plan continuity and discontinuity, and geometry and tectonics.' By definition, attenuation usually refers to the lessening or the weakening of intensity, especially in a physical sense. So I was wondering why you appropriated that term for an architectural situation. Maybe you could explain what's being attenuated and what's being reduced, if that's how you're using the term?

PSC It's the double meaning of attenuation that I am interested in. In terms of space and form, it means to elongate, to make slender, or to stretch. In terms of time, it means to slow down and to make the observer pay closer attention. To stretch is to alter the perception of distance, the experience of passage and space and, more specifically in my projects, to extend the interval of the threshold. The Torus House is composed entirely of the interval of a threshold. The program involves entertaining people in the summer and allowing people to pass through the house on their way to the eventful space, which is usually the back yard. I am reminded of a film by Woody Allen—it might have been *A Midsummer's Night Sex Comedy*—in which he engages in an illicit affair upstairs in an empty house while a party is going on outside, below the window. When people pass through houses on their way to these events, whether in an urban or suburban house, the whole interior of the house becomes an interval. With the Torus House, the question was whether or not that experience could coincide with spatially

articulated attenuation. Today all of architecture is a coincidence. It's not a performance. It's about a remarkable coincidence of an idea about life and an idea about architecture itself. I say this knowing that architecture cannot be separated from life. But the separation is a useful heuristic device nonetheless. And in Torus House there it was: attenuation in both senses of the term. On the one hand, the primary interior space of the house is like a large-scale, scooped-out inside of a wall with a large aperture, but in this case rotated ninety degrees, with the hole serving as a stairwell. On the other hand, the space and staircase are integrated with the client's social life. With the Goodman House the question becomes *does the concept of the interval resonate when it is made vertical again (i.e. when it is returned to its normative orientation within the scenario of living that inspired it)?* I believe it does because it is still remarkable to have a tunnel passing through rather than into a house. But, the doubt that leads to the question is important to have. I must admit that the idea is not as potent in the vertical access as it is when re-oriented to the horizontal.

I can't deny that the only avant-garde project that was ever in my bloodstream was not really a socially ambitious one.

DLS: We are also interested in the representation of these projects as an idea. Depending on the means in which an architect designs and represents their work, the realization of the project as it enters the construction phase can create a strong divide between conceptualization and construction. The ways in which you have represented the smooth and continuous surfaces of projects like the House on Terminal Line, the Torus House, and the Wu House seem to transcend built reality because they have exceptionally smooth and complex surfaces. So I'm wondering what happens in construction when you introduce explicit seams, the effects of time, and densities, the weight of materiality? How do you negotiate these transitions when you enter that moment?

PSC Clearly, the ambition in these projects was to be utterly and perfectly virtual, *amaterial* (not *atectonic*, which is a very different thing). The amaterial condition is something that I inherited from the tendency to abstract. For the discipline, this may be one of the most damaging things about the period in which I was educated. Personally, I don't regret it. In fact, the tendency to evacuate materiality has led me to its intensification. One could argue that it took me years to recover from the deep desire to think about architecture without materiality. As far as I was concerned, until Rafael Moneo arrived at Harvard in the mid-eighties there had been no compelling discourse about materiality. I don't know if it happened by accident or if it was inevitable, but years later, when I began to build, I became preoccupied with another idea, that of transposing the qualities of one material into another. Instead of representing architecture as an amaterial condition, it becomes a *transmaterial* condition. When it is wood, it appears to be traces of formwork for poured-in-place concrete, in the Goodman house. When it is a precast concrete curtain wall in Tel Aviv, it appears to be stone or marble. It seems uncannily stone-like—you'll know when you see it, when you desire to touch it and when you finally do. Nanjing is tile but it seems to be seamless sheet metal. Taiyuan is clad in stone laminated lightweight honeycomb panels. The stones are so large that they seem to be metal and yet they are too perfectly flat to be so. I am thrilled by the idea that when you break architectural surfaces down into constituent flat parts they reveal a different conceptualization of materials, a condition previously precluded through abstraction.

NB: Your earlier houses share both the deceptive materiality and a complex geometry that tends to provoke conflicting readings. In describing Cornered House, you acknowledge that the house can be read in multiple ways, both as an amalgamation of intersecting forms and as a monolithic shell that deforms in reaction to internal energies. It seems that you are deliberate in your manipulation of perspectival reading, and we see this still

in complex forms like that of Tel Aviv, where both interior and exterior are shaped by twisting hyperbolic parabolas. We're wondering: do you hope for an audience to be compelled to investigate and ultimately discover an underlying formula that shapes these geometries, much like you did with the Italian villas in *Contested Symmetries*, or do you hope that the inherent formal logic remains unattainable? As architecture students, we often have the advantage of a "cheat sheet" to the architect's work. How do you want the broader audience to receive these projects?

Modernism in America was always suffering from its impending decline.

PSC 'Unattainable' is a beautiful word and I love it, so you know that you're teasing me with this seductive evocation. [laughter] The formal readings that I performed and that multiplied in the Cornered House, perhaps most of all, involved the conventions that represented a type, the suburban house, which is understandable and legible. It was important to work within a language and to master it according to the idea that it is able to be understood by a wide audience. I owe much of this sensibility to my own childhood experience and to Venturi, who manipulated architecture to very particular linguistic ends and effects. *Complexity and Contradiction [in Architecture]* is obviously a brilliant thesis. The Cornered House speaks a different language, too rarified for Venturi. He would not consider it to be sufficiently conventional, and it isn't. I was pushing the vernacular toward a non-conventional language until it became something more like Cubism, as if I was hoping the repertoire of the familiar could somehow be expanded to include the unrecognizable. There was a historical moment in which people were willing to accept from Picasso the most contorted representation of the human figure as a portrait, even though it must have seemed utterly monstrous. I desired a monstrous depiction of the suburban house that would nevertheless be familiar. Perhaps this is an enchanting way to think about

architecture, yet it is only applicable in a very limited way to other types of buildings. Beyond houses, it is almost impossible to talk about recognizable distortion at all. I don't think I would ever make a museum and say *now it looks like a museum and now it doesn't* or say that it's a mutated representation of the typical or ideal museum. I don't believe anything like that can happen at the medium or large scales of architecture (or at the extra large scale, for that matter). Frankly, that would be pointless and ridiculous. So what is it that I would like people to experience, read, understand, or decode? Tectonics and structure, probably more than anything else. The massing of Cornered House not only involves the transfiguration of typical gables and hip roofs: it also has tectonic implications unrelated to the limited signifying capacity of domestic architecture. The gable form of the Goodman House pre-existed, but the timber and steel structure led to the development of a curtain wall with unusually scaled fenestration, rather than a conventional balloon or platform frame. So it goes well beyond the problem of recognition in the gable form. In the Tel Aviv museum, what I believe will be significant and profound is the apparent lack of support, given the thinness of the slabs, the lack of *poche* in the vertical dimension, and the discontinuity of vertical structural columns and walls. I call it the "Look, Ma! No Hands" effect. It is distantly analogous to the house problem, in the sense that the memory of a conventional condition sustains what makes it remarkable. Usually columns rise from bottom to top and plans stack up, but not in Tel Aviv.

Thank goodness for construction—it carries so much authority and helps us to forget so many of the pointless things we have said and done.

DLS. In a project like the Tel Aviv museum, there are moments of simplicity and complexity as you just described, like the relationships between spaces and circulation, formal gestures, etc. And we like to see these relationships as dynamic—the simple and complex—because they're always in flux.

Sylvia Lavin in an *A+U* article identifies this dynamic relationship as well. However, to consider both of these states and their relationships as they pertain to each design element in a project of such a magnitude and such scale would be an absolute exercise of control and precision and balance. So at what point during your design process do you decide that this simple–complex dynamic becomes static or really under-controlled (if it ever really *does* reach that point)?

Architects are just dragging around this rubbish of stylistic modernism as the tricks of the trade. It turns architecture into sad and pointless décor.

PSC This dialectic between the cool and the hot is conceived dynamically. Usually I begin with what I consider to be the end of the story—the outcome that I believe I am aiming for. Let's say I want something particular to happen between the spaces for stillness and the spaces for movement, and I want something that can hold those two conditions in tension. I try to estimate or forecast what line or what set of planes would cause it. It's a somewhat painful process because I am trying to isolate a problem that can't be isolated without knowing in advance what the whole project is going to be. The project is not something that is an outcome of a linear operation. There's nothing linear about the struggle to find those particular conditions of architecture that create attenuation and do so while being the building that I desire. I can't just look for something attenuated while I have other needs and wishes to be fulfilled. So I'm trying to make this a museum of a particular kind that's going to support different temporalities and curatorial programs, move different kinds of events, openings, and ceremonies. There will be aimless wanderers as well as viewers of art that constitute different audiences and experiences. How do those experiences come together? How can some galleries be closed during exhibition preparation while others remain open? There are

many other things to deal with. Architectural tension is unpredictable and continuously mutates in the process of taking form. When you're looking for an exception or an anomaly, it's difficult to describe its criteria.

RN In *Contested Symmetries*, you say that architecture is and should be a site of surplus and strangeness. You also describe the state of the discipline today as 'post-problematic'—an architecture in which few forms are considered either unacceptable or unreachable. The impact of digital media has enabled the proliferation of strange forms while at the same time rendered the architect's intent irrelevant. Considering the problem of form in this era of surplus and strangeness, where do architects stop? How do we determine what *not* to do?

PSC 'Post-problematic' is a reasonable way to describe the situation we're in, which is to say that on many levels, we have so much freedom in terms of our choices about our idiom or—dare I say—*style*, which is such a taboo. [laughter] Now that I think about it, the post-problematic is something different than it was when I first wrote about it. Today the post-problematic is the result of a consensus that our mission is something like the performative or the (allegedly) sustainable, both of which are attempts to make architecture disappear as a problem. As Dan Sherer would say, it's about everyone pulling together in the wrong direction— [laughter] —which in this case means away from architecture. The sustainable project involves, at least ostensibly, the idea of combining urban planning, landscape, architecture, interiors, and the design of things like appliances and automobiles. But this particular dream of unity is utterly incompatible with architecture. Architecture exists only by setting itself apart from another totality and by offering an alternative utopia. With the so-called ecological, nothing is exceptional. In this regime of conformity, architecture is blended with the totality and undifferentiated from it. So this utopia is the disappearance of architecture. Moreover, it is a veiled effort to reconcile all of our violence against nature through

new violent constructions of landscapes and buildings that somehow in the name of sustainability constitute a new morally sanctioned act of destruction. Let's imagine that we believe in it and we're all pulling together in a kind of happy pursuit of that. How does architecture survive under this condition? It would have to always try to produce itself anew and understand things again in another way, be different than what everything else is. Recently I was wondering how I could try to make that idea clear. Imagine that you could invert the situation and instead of landscape and nature taking precedence, architecture takes over everything. We're imagining a scenario in which everything is architecture. So it would just be the production of exceptions—exception upon exception upon exception. We've seen this before. We've seen it in Campo Marzio and in the recent panorama of original forms and shapes yelling their heads off for attention in Dubai. It's a distopia. In the case of Campo Marzio, it's a fantasy. It's a poignant representation. There is a big difference between Campo Marzio and Dubai: Campo Marzio is about virtuous and remarkable masterpieces of architecture. It's the idea that the masterpiece corresponds with the exceptionality of each building, and that each is a great work. Dubai is all together only the capital manifestation of a certain kind of powerful iconography without the aim to achieve a greatness recognized by the architectural discipline. So let's be clear that we've seen different versions of this idea of architecture taking over. In either case, though, the interesting thing about architecture taking over is that at the moment everything becomes architecture, we reach the end of architecture. Totalization is the end, whether it's all architecture or it's all not architecture. In either case, architecture has to reinvent itself to deal with the problem. That could be the reason why the sustainable could become an important constraint for architecture, why it could force architecture to reinvent itself. That's interesting. It doesn't reinvent architecture by absorbing it. It dissolves it, and that will require architects to reinvent it. That's exciting. I hope that's what will happen. We're going to have to live a long period though, I'm afraid

to say, in which it is dissolved, in which architecture appears to have dissolved into a conformity and a certain kind of complacency, and what I would call consensus. You know consensus-building is one of the great goals of capitalism.

Today all of architecture is a coincidence.

NB: Returning to architecture as a site of "surplus strangeness," you've say that excessiveness or strangeness in architecture "stimulates the most intellectual pleasure when it comes about through some kind of necessity rather than by will," and as a result architecture must "seek rules and scenarios that make strangeness mandatory." You've claim that this kind of architecture, one that questions the contextual norm, requires the invention of surrogate problems. If the discipline has to generate and respond to surrogate problems, does it risk entering a state of arbitrariness?

PSC: It certainly risks entering into a state of *esotericism*. [laughter] In retrospect, I am not so sure that it was a good idea to talk about excess. We've learned so many times about how arbitrary and provisional the foundations are, based as they are on custom as was pointed out by Perrault over three centuries ago. I don't think we should experience any particular anxiety about arbitrariness, but we do, and I believe this is because of a specific and prevalent concept of modernism in which functional-necessity was inculcated. We seem to have never recovered from that. Despite many differences, this seems to be the thing that really holds many architects in line. Yet there does seem to be some kind of divide between an architect's perceptions and those of the rest of society. Speaking for myself, when I see all these fenestration patterns and special shapes, I know they are unnecessary. They're added on or just ball-and-chain dragged along by some architect's story. What a nightmare—architecture reduced to this level. And they also renounce form, these people. They tell some story so that none

of the form matters. It's not simply that they don't like form; it's irrelevant, so all of that form is arbitrary; they wish it away, they don't account for it, and it's just hanging around. Today, modern styling is used in the same way that the aristocratic crust of the pre-modern decorative architecture was pointlessly carried around for so many years. Architects are just dragging around this style, this rubbish of modernism, as the tricks of the trade. It disillusions architects, but it also just turns architecture into sad and pointless décor. Yet I do think we can introduce consistency and coherence. I can painstakingly show you where the arbitrariness lies—lays? lies? lies, yes, excuse me— [laughter] —and the particular form that results when the dimensions and angles of the space and form are not well correlated with the formal principles that are in play. The minute I see the correlation trailing off, I know that I've entered into the realm of the arbitrary. Many of those forms to which I've been deeply committed are motivated by a desire to invent a characteristic of architectural attenuation and its social implications. I have to have that ceiling like that. That slab has to be that thin. That hole has to be at that angle to relate to the upstairs. I know exactly why that happened. But there are ebbs and flows of things that need to be (or don't need to be) the way they are. Eventually I begin to believe in some of the needless things because in buildings they take on a life of their own. This is a great thing about buildings. Thank goodness for construction. It carries so much authority and helps us to forget so many of the pointless things we have said and done.

To bring to the world something that is both exceptional and that establishes their own voice is an ambition of which they are ashamed.

RN: Perhaps you could further comment on the situation as you see it between the built entities, the built world, and the architecture world. In a previous graduate session, Greg Lynn commented on how he felt that the

built world is actually pushing the architectural world instead of vice versa. Perhaps you could comment on the relationship between the design situation and the built environment.

PSC: I think Greg was saying that the technology is being brought into architecture and challenging architecture to move forward and into other arenas. I agree, and historically this has happened. I think one of the clearest and most beautiful examples of this would be Mies van der Rohe's confrontation with steel construction, the industrial construction that he classicized. He was transforming the idiom of architecture by absorbing the steel extruded section. He dealt with what he called *the spirit of the age*, which was manifest in the industrial construction and rationalization of his time. The spirit of the age: if we were to think about it today, it would have to do with computation, information, and the market economy which thrives on this medium. For Mies the problem was to cause beauty to arise from the raw material produced by industry. What is it that people want to do today with the new media, the new means of production that Greg and others are talking about? This is an open question for me. I'm looking at it more from a point of view of what architects want to do with it. They're not passive receivers of this information, if we want to call it that. Mies was in a particular way motivated to make technology become architecture. So the real question is 'what are the motives right now?' not 'what is the technology?' That's the way I would think about it and how I differ from Greg. Technology leads to experimentation and free play. That's a very valuable thing. I don't want to deny the sheer pleasure and the accidents of invention that could become transformative as a result. Maybe that's actually what Greg is referring to and that's all we need right now. Maybe that should be enough for me. I think I am too captive to the idea of trying to find a way to think about architecture vis-à-vis its longer arc of development and our roles in it and that which defines the intersection of form and the social organization that

it produces. I really want to know what that is. Maybe you can leave it aside for a little while, and have periods where you suspend your commitment to making buildings that do powerful things with the social and the formal. But I don't know if I have the patience. I can't let go of those things long enough to just play in the sandbox. Maybe that's a weakness because it has limited the inventiveness that I have entered into. It's an interesting question: How can you operate in a space between motivated and unmotivated experimentation? I don't think the industry motivates anything. It offers opportunities and offers the possibility of accidents or theoretically motivated things to happen. It's not pushing anything for us as architects. Architecture's an applied art and an applied science. It's not a pure science, that's for sure. But if anything, it's an application of knowledge about many things and it's a discipline (I hope.) [laughter] Some people are not investing in it as a discipline—or so it seems to me.

SK I was wondering if you could further kind of situate yourself within this discipline with respect to your peers and talk about those whose approaches you admire and maybe even a few that you disagree with.

Architectural tension is unpredictable and continuously mutates in the process of taking form.

PSC Obviously I admire Peter Eisenman because he set a fire. I recently interviewed him about his architectural production. I did this because seemingly every interview had focused only on his writing and not on his buildings. I also wanted to turn the tables in terms of his legacy as the interviewer. In the past, he was always the one who interviewed other architects about their buildings. What I basically asked him was to home in on a single problem that I think pervades all of his work. As a case study, I took one of his early inventions called the **L**, which was the generator of many of his houses and several other projects. It was a particular form which

implied a transformation if imagined in a certain way. You could imagine that it would undergo changes of a certain kind and that it would proceed to give shape to another form. On the one hand, he used the **L** to provide evidence that architecture can be defined as potential. On the other hand, he represented many frozen states of being that it potentiated, creating an architecture that is analogous to the superimposition of multiple still frames in an animation, and he built what he called the traces of its process of coming into being, all in attempt to transcend architecture's static object-hood. He found a means to make criticism operative in a productive way that no one else had before. And I would say that he found modernity in the past—in his interpretations of the Italian renaissance for example—in ways that no one else had before. I think Koolhaas too is an unmistakably significant figure in architecture for many reasons, not least of which is his narrative of what happened to modernity, his synthesis of the European and American models, preservation, urbanism—*everything*. In a way, he's an architect of all of these problems. Beyond that, he also has also contributed some idiomatic transformations (as opposed to the paradigmatic ones). Obvious examples would be the Educatorium or the single surface in the Jussieu Library project for which he's so famous. And there are his consolidating forms—consciously conceived *automonuments* extending the effects of "bigness" into architecture. These are monoliths of extraordinary power and density, following upon his observations of New York which have helped us to see otherwise neglected conditions of building production that possess so much potential. Then he looked at that horrible hegemonic late modern stuff that no one else knew how to look at and found in it incredibly motivated conditions. And now when he talks about *junk space* let's not be mistaken: this is a description of everything that is *not* architecture. Unlike bigness, I do not think he will ever venture to design junk space. Not a single episode of his work suggests that he would design the conditions he found in junk space, a poetic reflection on a world in which architecture is utterly

impotent or inapplicable. He understands the power and the powerlessness of architecture. He has criticized compellingly the pathetic sorts of obsessions of architects like Eisenman (and that also means me). He relishes the possibility that we could get rid of it all. He's looking for another revolution. It's exciting to imagine: being free of all of one's trappings and all of one's thoughts, finally being absolved of all these obsessions. [laughter] It would be thrilling to be liberated from yourself, to jump out of your own skin. When you read "Junk Space," you feel like you're jumping because you can't bear it. It's euphoric. [laughter] These two are the architects that I would first put on the table.

Isn't it interesting that this architect—once seemingly minor compared to Mies and Corb—turns out to be so supremely important?

SK: And beyond Koolhaas and Eisenman—some who might be less known for their writings?

PSC: Siza is a great architect whose plans are of the highest order. And Herzog and De Meuron have added to the repertoire with their inventions of new ornamental and broad stroke formal devices. With regards to Herzog and De Meuron, I might say that I've been disappointed in several of their buildings while others have been astonishing. When I saw the stadium in Beijing, it was under construction, 6000 workers swarming over this beautiful thing. It was steel, it was heavy, it was just so raw and intense and gorgeous. And finished, it looks like plastic. It really lost something. But I want to say this: No matter how disappointed I may be in some of the finished buildings, they are the architects that attract my attention the most, and I love even the projects that disappoint me. I still look at them and love them for what they mean and what they do. No doubt, idiomatically these architects are profoundly important.

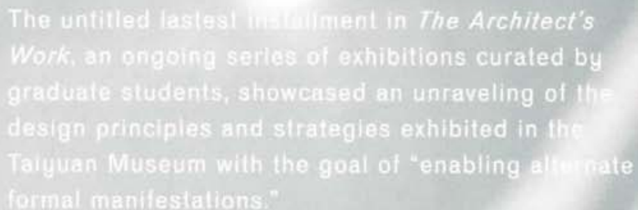
NB: It sounds like it would be safe to say that for you the primary value lies in the problem, rather than the architecture that's informed by the problem. Is that fair?

Totalization is the end, whether it's *all* architecture or it's all *not* architecture.

PSC: Clearly, the problem matters to me more than anything. When I go back to my favorite buildings, like the Muller House of Adolf Loos, I see the kind of spatial tension that could only be the result of deeply embedded problems. Look at the way the plan shifts according to the positions and axes of one or another run of stairs and the way the rooms are so tightly packed and interlocked while remaining independently coherent. Of course the outside, with its minor disturbances, conceals nearly all of the interior intensity. First, architecture must be lucid enough to seem almost inevitable except for the imperfections. Only then is it capable of eliciting and escaping our comprehension. The process of decipherment, provoked by the clarity and the anomalies, produces evidence of the problems that motivated the forms we are faced with. Now that I think about it, the architect who has had the greatest impact on me, ultimately, in terms of the theorization of the relationship between the inside and the outside, is Loos. Isn't it interesting that this architect—once seemingly minor compared to Mies and Corb—turns out to be so supremely important? His account of the conflicts between architecture and the photographic medium, between architecture and bourgeois society, between the inside and the outside, individual desire and rigorous anonymity, are still contemporary. He produced pieces of architecture with an enormous ambition, applicable to the whole of architecture's problems and to the city. And yet, it is important to understand that this figure dealt with such big problems in a only few buildings. I find myself thinking again about his Tribune Tower [proposal], a paradigmatic

operation on the idiom if there ever was one. This was the colossal precursor to a major problem we still face today: the arbitrary relationship between urban and architectural forms. After the emergence of the skyscraper, the removal of all ornament, and the disappearance of craft, what form should the indifferent building assume and how should it behave? The dialectic between the impersonal metropolis and personal interior—not to mention the status of the canon, of style and taste, of the struggle with the values that architects wish to revoke—was a radical critique in the time of Loos that led to a reconfiguration of the discipline. While confronting deeply political, social, and cultural realities, Loos transformed the framework of the spatial language, the plan, and fenestration. That is exactly what architecture should do, and it remains the reason that his work is so singularly important for the continuing possibility of architecture. Yet reading some of his essays today, we are not able to identify with all

of the things he was talking about. Many of his essays are like private conversations with his contemporaries about the fashions and the market of the time. We have our own contemporary obsessions, and there will be some architectural innovations that arise from these, yet the discourse I am talking about does not arise from the open-ended experimentation that is so prevalent today. I'll admit that it might be a regressive tendency of mine, but I'm wary of boundless experiments that are pursued simply because we can do certain things that technology affords us to do. I don't think Loos was willing to experiment randomly with anything. Neither are Siza or Koolhaas. It's not enough. We can talk about our iPods and whatever technology dominates the contemporary public imaginary, but no one in the future is going to be able to understand the aimless responses to our own timely obsessions, and no one is going to care. Architecture can't be sustained unless we have a problematic condition that is insoluble or remains provisionally unsolved in an extreme and lucid way.



The untitled lastest installment in *The Architect's Work*, an ongoing series of exhibitions curated by graduate students, showcased an unraveling of the design principles and strategies exhibited in the Taiyuan Museum with the goal of "enabling alternate formal manifestations."