

Block Interview

Neil Leach interviewed by Carmella Jacoby Volk

CJV: How has the ‘rethinking of Architecture’ changed since the publication of *Rethinking Architecture* itself?

NL: I taught in Columbia GSAPP in 1999, soon after the publication of *Rethinking Architecture*, and I can recall being told by one of my colleagues there that *Rethinking Architecture* was a very useful collection of essays, but 10 years out of date: ‘It’s all about materiality and technology now’.

In a way he was right. And it is already 10 years since *Rethinking Architecture* was published, so maybe the ideas are now 20 years out of date. Certainly my own thinking has shifted, and the opinions that I see reflected in my students these days reveal only too clearly that debates today are indeed centred on materiality and technology – if not as an end in themselves, then at least as a way of engaging with issues that are more relevant today, such as environmentalism and structural concerns.

Looking back on the 80s and 90s, the preoccupation with issues such as ‘meaning’, by both the more conservative disciples of phenomenology but also the more avant-garde proponents of deconstruction and other structuralist or poststructuralist outlooks, seemed to fall fairly and squarely into broader postmodern concerns. The fundamental paradigm seemed to be based on literary philosophies, and the way that this translated into architecture seemed to present a highly scenographic outlook, where if materiality was discussed at all, it was seen from a distinctly poetic outlook. And for sure the intellectual debates were all centred on a rather narrow definition of history and theory, and the engineer and other scientists were all but ignored.

The general interest today has shifted away from these more literary based philosophies towards a more pragmatic - but no less theorisable – discourse of materials and technology, fuelled no doubt by the digital revolution. And with it comes a critique – at least in some circles – of the superficial scenography of postmodernism. There is now a new set of concerns that have become increasingly dominant – concerns such as environmental sustainability or structural performance – which broadly come under the heading of ‘performativity’.

To my mind these are based not just on aesthetic or stylistic shifts, but are motivated by deeper, ethical issues. If we use fewer resources, for example, in constructing our buildings from a structural viewpoint, or in maintaining them from an environmental viewpoint, then surely architecture can step into an ethical framework, and address a series of concerns that were overlooked in the era of postmodernism.

I am now preparing a second edition of *Rethinking Architecture*, and am considering what new content to include. The biggest shift, then, that happened since the original publication of *Rethinking Architecture* is that a new paradigm has come to the fore, one that we might call 'New Materialism'. Indeed of all the thinkers from the first edition, the only one who has really survived is Gilles Deleuze – at least the Gilles Deleuze that is championed by Manuel Delanda and others, and whose work opens up toward a more sympathetic engagement with concerns about process and performance. It is a shift that opens up beyond the otherwise limited horizons of literary based philosophies, to embrace material thinking and even scientific thinking, as concerns that should be foregrounded in our contemporary age.

So, for example, the whole realm of science that was – if not dismissed – then somehow relegated in importance in intellectual terms in an age that looked to History and Theory as the true domains of intellectual enquiry, has now been reappropriated by thinkers such as Manuel DeLanda, to become once more a site of genuine intellectual enquiry. Also, engineers, for so long overlooked as playing merely a supporting, secondary role to architecture in the construction process, have been revalorized and respected for the contribution that they can make from stage one in the design process. It is no coincidence, then, that many of our most progressive architects are engaging with talented engineers, such as Cecil Balmond – engineers that Manuel DeLanda has described as 'material philosophers'. So too, architectural students of today seem to be more fascinated by new scientific theories, such as 'emergence', as championed by Steven Johnson and others, and books such as 'A New Kind of Science' by Stephen Wolfram, and pay less attention to figures, such as Heidegger, whose denigration of science and technology seems so out of place in our highly technologized cultural horizon of today.

The other field that has become more dominant has been psychoanalytic theory, although this, of course, like phenomenology and (post)structuralism, offers us another depth model of the world, which is again concerned with meaning. This is in part because of the presence of certain key intellectual figures – Slavoj Zizek within the world at large, and Mark Cousins within the discipline of architecture – who have begun to open up the previously somewhat doctrinaire world of psychoanalysis in new and highly provocative ways.

In the second edition of *Rethinking Architecture* I will therefore also include not only a section on New Materialism, but also a section on psychoanalytic theory, the reason being less that this has become central to architectural thinking than the fact that a category of thinking that had remained for some time as the unwritten chapter of architectural thinking has been filled in at last by some notable contributions.

So this is the shift that I have seen happen over the last ten years – a shift away from literary based philosophies to a more constructive theoretical engagement with technology and materiality.

You mention ‘digital technologies’. What role do you think that these have played in the paradigm shift that you have sketched out?

I think that one of the big mistakes that Heidegger made was to underestimate the adaptive capacity of the human being. His comments on the supposedly permanent alienation of certain environments failed to recognise that nothing is alienating forever, not even an environment as hostile as a prison. One of the effects of this capacity for adaptation has been that human beings have assimilated increasingly to the technological world to which they have been exposed. Indeed, I often think of the generation of students whom I am now teaching as the ‘mutant generation’, in that they have been brought up with the computer, and have totally assimilated to that form of operation. Walter Benjamin talks about how during modernity human beings would adapt to the jolting jarring mechanism of the factory by replicating its operations in their own movements. Perhaps the same could be true of the mutant generation, which has absorbed the networking, fluid operations of the digital realm into its way of thinking.

On the one hand, then, digital technologies have become part of our horizon of consciousness. They are part of the way that we think today. Yet on the other hand, we could also point towards the capacity of the computer to support the culture of performativity that I have just sketched out.

I think that it is important to understand that the potential of the computer goes well beyond being a mere drafting tool. Its real potential lies in playing a role in the design process itself. By this I mean not simply the potential that the computer opens up in terms of a formal language, through the operations that it affords through certain software packages, but also its capacity as a search engine and as a tool for optimization.

In a culture of performativity, the key question is how to produce designs that actually perform. In an analogue world there were few mechanisms for testing a form out, apart from,

say, a wind tunnel analysis for aerodynamic behaviour. Most often the only way to test out a design is to build it. However, digital modeling has changed all that. Not only are there sophisticated packages becoming more and more available for modeling and testing performance. But the potential exists for introducing performative parameters into the design process itself. For example, if we think of scripting – the use of computer code to generate design, a practice that is becoming increasingly popular in schools of architecture – we can see how performative concerns can be written into the very process of design itself, so that the results are already optimised. What this realm offers is not so much an extension to postmodern scenographic form-making, but a critique of that realm. And this, I think, is the real potential of scripting – the potential is to focus more on process than representation, more on performance than appearance. We might speak, then, not of forms as such, but ‘formations’ – formations informed by performative considerations, buildings as landscapes of information.

CJV: What is the relationship between computers and humans? Is it a master-slave relationship?

NL: The comment that I am sometimes offered about computers is that they somehow ‘obviate the human’. This I find very curious, because much of the techniques being used today are precisely attempting the opposite. Here I refer not only to the kind of techniques of visualization that laypeople find so helpful, but also to the way in which computers can simulate human behaviour, and therefore model designs more closely on the human. Certain forms of multi-agent systems, for example, can be used to generate emergent pathways in a bottom-up process that counters the top-down insensitive imposition of ideas that some still associate with the digital world.

The question of master-slave relationship with technology has an ancient history. Let us take the example of attitudes towards technology in the workplace. Are we to subscribe, for example, to the argument that claims that humans are alienated from the means of production through modern machinery, or would we support the argument that the use of certain technologies alleviates the human condition?

To my mind, the most positive way to understand the contribution of the computer is as a potential prosthesis to human operations. In other words, by itself it is neither inherently good nor bad. It simply can be a form of ‘extension’ to the capacity of what it is to be human. If we accept that technology can be assimilated – especially when the human interface has been well designed – then sooner or later the divide between the human and the technological is overcome. Eventually we come to use computers in an unselfconscious

fashion so that we write or design, as it were, 'through' the computer, much as we drive 'through' our cars, without being fully conscious of the individual operations – braking, accelerating, changing gear etc - we are undertaking.

CJV: Can we detect a certain antagonism towards Heidegger in your discourse?

NL: Well maybe I suffer from a certain Oedipal tendency – the urge to murder the father - in that – like Derrida – I was taught Phenomenology (and Heidegger and Gadamer in particular) when I was a student. And – again like Derrida – much of my work has been an 'overcoming' of Phenomenology.

It is understandable that the thinking of Heidegger and others is still taught in certain schools of architecture. After all, schools of architecture are precisely that: they are 'schools' of architectural thinking. A certain tradition of thinking will be propagated through the simple repetition of ideas. One inspirational teacher will teach one generation, and then that generation, schooled in that way of thinking, will tend to teach the same ideas to the next. But I do think that the continued interest in Heidegger and the phenomenological tradition is very disturbing in the twenty-first century. I note that in Israel you held a conference recently about Phenomenology, and almost all the speakers were devotees of this particular tradition. I admit that when phenomenology first became popular it served an important role in challenging the prevailing spirit of positivism that dominated certain aspects of architectural culture, but I think that there many, highly persuasive reason to move beyond Phenomenology – and especially Heidegger - today.

To begin with, Heidegger himself has been challenged very convincingly by more recent thinkers, such as Derrida and Lyotard. The nature of much Heideggerian discourse in architecture fails to take on board any of this critique, and, as such, remains highly uncritical itself. I can recall once asking Dalibor Vesely what he made of Derrida's critique of Heidegger in *Truth in Painting*. He launched into a scathing critique of Derrida, claiming that he was a relativist, nihilist and so on. In fact nothing could be further from the truth. What Derrida is doing in *Truth in Painting* is to expose the potential relativism that operates within the discourse of hermeneutics, which is based almost on a religious form of 'divining' the truth behind an object – of appropriating that truth - , but lacks any epistemological foundation, apart from the authorization of the interpreting agent. And so in my opinion, it is Heidegger – and not Derrida - who should be accused of relativism. And this is a view that I know to be shared by Christopher Norris.

But the problems with Heidegger go much deeper than this – especially from a political perspective. And here I am not referring to his questionable affiliation with the National Socialists – an affiliation for which he never apologized, I note. (Lyotard calls this not simply his ‘forgetting’, but his ‘forgetting of forgetting’.) Rather there is something sinister in his whole discourse ‘of the soil’ that grounds his notion of ‘dwelling’. Once one realizes that the discourse of ‘dwelling’ can slip only too easily into a discourse of the *heimat* or the homeland, the really sinister side of Heideggerian thinking comes to the fore. The Israelis of all people – a nation that has both suffered from that logic, but also threatens to make others victims of the same logic – should be wary of such a discourse.

‘Dwelling’, I believe, is an obsolete term in a culture that has become increasingly nomadic, and where the home is so often exchanged on the market place, and where spatial identification has developed in new ways. We might look towards more pliable, flexible forms of identification with space – ones which can accommodate the transiency at the heart of contemporary society, and operate in a more rhizomatic way.

Then there are the problems that could be found with phenomenology. It is fundamentally an aestheticising discourse that romanticizes the world, and creates its own ‘historical cocoon’. Phenomenology is blind to certain key issues that dominate culture today, such as social, economic and political thinking. And this does not mean that it occludes the social, a-political and economic, but rather by ignoring those issues it enters into a politics of acquiescence that accepts the *status quo* as it is. From a political, social and economic perspective, phenomenology remains utterly complacent and uncritical. Karsten Harries’s celebration of the American farmstead and consequent denigration of the trailer park in his book, *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, is a prime example of this. What he overlooks is the simple fact that most people cannot afford to live according to the romantic idyll of the farmstead that he champions. Phenomenology is simply blind to all these questions.

Beyond that there is obviously the fundamental misconception in Heidegger that technology – or technological thinking – constitutes a form of alienation. As I have tried to point out in my book, *Camouflage*, human beings have an astonishing capacity to assimilate to new conditions, and nothing is alienating forever. (The issue, rather, as I tried to argue, is that of design. If technology is well designed it can overcome the often problematic interface between subject and object, which has often been taken as a form of alienation.) In a society where we operate within a highly technologised cultural horizon, we need to find more sympathetic ways of understanding our relationship with technology. Equally, terms such as ‘authenticity’ have been exposed as highly moralizing terms, often appropriated within a world of commodification to stand for their opposite. The same goes for terms such as

'genius loci' that have been associated with Heideggerian thinking, which seems to support rather than resist postmodern culture.

CJV: What do you mean by this exactly?

NL: It was one of Fredric Jameson's most insightful comments to say that Critical Regionalism – far from resisting the homogenizing placelessness of globalised culture – was in fact promoting it, by offering 'difference' as another product on the market place of Late Capitalism, and was therefore complicit in that which it sought to resist. I really like this kind of dialectical thinking.

One can detect a kind of repressed fascination in the 'opposite' in certain strands of phenomenological thinking. For example, I find the 'denial' of technology and rejection of the computer in particular within phenomenological discourse a little insincere. I often sense that there is a 'repressed fascination' for this realm that reminds me of the incident in the film, *American Beauty*, where the character who presents himself as homophobic emerges as being gay. The standard psychoanalytic account of homophobia is that often it is a case of someone in denial of certain desires, which he/she then projects on to the world outside and then criticizes. So any claim often contains its opposite, the more so the more forcibly the claim is made – as Queen Gertrude once comments in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: 'The lady doth protest too much, methinks'.

So too, one could even argue that phenomenology is in fact a product of postmodernism – the antithesis, which is at the same time the repressed other of postmodernism, that reveals its own duplicity in the system. I am often left wondering what differentiates the historicizing 'cocoon-like' discourse of phenomenology from the historicizing discourse of costume dramas of postmodern television – something that phenomenology would claim to resist. My argument is not that phenomenology can be equated with postmodernism, but simply that it might be somehow complicit in that world. I believe that we should be suspicious about phenomenology, and question its relevance in the world today.

The fact that phenomenology is trapped within a mythologizing realm, and its disciples adopt a kind of uncritical infatuation with the subject only adds to my suspicion about it as a quasi-religious system of beliefs. What is desperately needed within phenomenology is a critical voice that allows it to develop as a discourse, as our cultural conditions change. Otherwise it will find itself totally marginalized and irrelevant.

CJV: So what kinds of alternative theoretical models should we adopt to understand how people relate to their environment?

NL: In my recent book, *Camouflage*, I try to offer a left-wing alternative to Heidegger, using the tools of Critical Theory to rethink that question of how we relate to our environment. I offer a series of different models, derived from a tradition that stems from Freud and Benjamin and extends to more recent thinkers such as Julia Kristeva and Slavoj Zizek.

One of these models is that of 'becoming' that can be developed from Deleuze's thinking. Deleuze offers a very provocative description of a wasp and an orchid, where a certain kind of wasp settles into a certain kind of orchid for what the scientists call a form of pseudo-copulation. (The orchid has developed a certain technique for ensuring the cross-fertilisation of its pollen by posing as a female wasp and attracting the male wasp to engage in a form of simulated mating.) Curiously Deleuze does not mention this sexual aspect of the relationship. But what Deleuze does pick up on is the adaptation of wasp to orchid and orchid to wasp. They have assimilated perfectly to one another. In Deleuze's terms, they have entered into a process of reciprocal 'becoming'. The wasp has become the orchid and the orchid has become the wasp. The 'housing' of the wasp in the orchid is obviously a very architectural image, but it also speaks of the transiency of contemporary existence, in that the orchid only provides a temporary refuge for the wasp. But what this delightful story conjures up is the process by which human beings can grow into and become part of their environment, and, by extension, their environment can become part of them.

Another model which I offer is that of 'belonging', a concept that derives from Judith Butler's thinking as filtered through the work of Vikki Bell. This is a theory that looks at how identity itself is 'performed', and, as a consequence, at how architecture can act as a form of stage-set for those performances – a stage-set that can be imbued with certain associations and memories through the activities that take place there. What this model goes on to suggest is that through the repetition of certain ritualistic movements within a space, we can achieve a sense of 'belonging' with that space. The space literally becomes 're-membered' through certain corporeally embedded memories, and a sense of temporary attachment takes place. But what I enjoy most of all about this theory is that it sees identification with space as being temporary and strategic. In political terms, we should talk not about fixed, permanent definitions of space, but about temporary strategic appropriations of space. (And this, again, is perhaps a concept that ought to be adopted more often in a place such as Israel.) What is more this attachment to space is plural and provisional, and allows for a number of other spatial identifications to exist simultaneously. I really like this concept.

