

Interview with Mark Wigley and Paul Walker

PW. Insofar as you are different from New Zealand architecture, or its lack, you apparently offend it. Was it necessary for the New Zealand condition to provoke an agent which would in turn provoke it?

Do we need to be offended at the moment?

MW. New Zealand's lack of architecture is precisely what makes it central to the world thought about architecture. It was also necessary that the complete denial of architecture here would produce some kind of licentious behaviour.

PW. I'm suspicious of this. My experience is only New Zealand, but I suspect that wherever I was, I might equally discover a unique condition for my region. I would discover the regionalism of my architecture to be unique, to have a unique and privileged role. This is what you seem to say about New Zealand architecture or its non architecture. It's a kind of unique keeper of past models, or something. And this seems to me, to be echoed in the

relationship of architecture to philosophy that you propose or trace: it's a privileged relationship.

Doesn't this make you suspicious that you're simply privileging wherever it is—New Zealand architecture—you find yourself?

MW. Yes. It is my current description of my work, but one which came after the work, that what I did was to generalise my contempt for New Zealand architecture into a contempt for architecture as such, to get over the contempt and admire architecture in the way it covertly resisted certain things. In a way I wrote a personal history bound to a certain location on the earth, bound to certain qualities of my education, and so on, that precisely calls into question notions of place, location, and all that. It would be nonsense to claim that my description of the relationship between architecture and philosophy was not influenced by the fact that I was largely outside the architectural world by virtue of being in New Zealand. I think it would be nonsense to say that I wasn't effected by the fact that I wasn't in the United States when I wrote my thesis.

PW. Would there be any discipline in New Zealand that would not feel itself in such a provincial position?

MW. Probably not. I think that all provincials are obsessed with their provincial status. Those who think that they are not in the provinces are also obsessed with their belief that they have got away from provincialism; they too exhibit all of the symptoms. To argue about the provinces is to argue about the relationship between the centre and the margins, or the inside of an architectural game, for example, and the outside. Everybody is trapped. We are all obsessed with provincialism, and we all start our argument from wherever we are told we are placed in this game. In New Zealand we are told, and tell ourselves, that we are outside. So that is where I started from; then I attempted to argue that the kind of things we

deviously protect here are inside the world, at the centre; and then I came across a series of texts which made talking about that interesting. Equally, the people who are on the inside take things like deconstruction in a way coloured by their thoughts that they are first, that they started at the beginning, that they are at the centre. I am saying that because I began thinking, as a provincial, that this angled the work I did and dictated its character, but I end up alongside the position of people who started off believing that they were at the centre.

Precisely by following up those respective positions thoroughly one ends up calling into question the inside/outside relationship, and therefore calling into question one's own provincial status, and in a certain sense rejecting it.

PW. There are different kinds of provincial status?

MW. Yes. I think the different provinces have a different sense. Australia has a different sense of its relationship to the inside. The people in New York who abhor provincials are extraordinarily provincial in their attitude. The force with which New Yorkers limit themselves to Manhattan is, in some way, much more oppressively provincial than the way in which we just say that it is obvious we are isolated—here are billions and billions of gallons of water cutting us off. Over there they work very hard and point to maybe a hundred yards of water, attempt to demonstrate that a hundred yards marks the beginning and end of thought, and entertainment, and theatre and so on.

PW. Is there anyone who isn't bound to be provincial?

MW. No. In my view the belief that you are not provincial is the belief that you are God. The full force of Western philosophy is based on the premise that one day we will get to the centre, that the centre is definitely the place to go. That is the imperative under which we all operate. So while I cite my provincial status as being extremely important in the construction of my arguments, at the same time, having completed those arguments, I then gener-

alise and proclaim that to be the condition of all rigorous inquiry into architecture.

PW. It seems to me that in your thesis you say architecture has a kind of provinciality with respect to philosophy, which makes the relationship between them special. But couldn't one equally write a thesis called 'Jacques Derrida and Law: The Deconstructive Possibilities of Judicial Discourse,' that would equally claim such a relationship for the law?

MW. Yes. There is a book by Gillian Rose called *Dialectic of Nihilism*¹ which proclaims that Derrida is somewhat uninteresting because, at his most interesting, what he says is actually already written into the legal tradition. But the argument has a different quality.

PW. I am asking if you can entertain the possibility that something other than architecture can claim an equally privileged relationship with philosophy.

MW. Yes, but we necessarily proclaim our own area to have such privilege. The particular privilege that I would ascribe to architecture would be different to that ascribed to other fields.

PW. Obviously you would have to use different philosophical writings in the construction of the argument.

MW. But I think it would have a different structural relationship.

PW. Am I right in saying that architecture is privileged in philosophy because it has acted as a powerful metaphor?

MW. I would rather say its privileged status comes from appearing to be a metaphor but turning out to be much more than that. My argument would be that the privilege architecture has is that unlike other metaphors employed by philosophy this one can't be rejected as a metaphor, can't be abandoned easily. Philosophy regards metaphor as being precisely

that which can be abandoned, but which is supplemental, illustration. But the concept of metaphor is itself dependent on an architectural argument. Therefore the architectural metaphor cannot be abandoned. One cannot abandon the thing with which one constructs the idea of metaphor so simply.

But, undoubtedly, at the same time that which I am calling architecture is not something which is isolated from that thing which you called law. So I would dip into legal texts and argue that they were architectural texts in disguise, and a legal theorist might read architectural texts as somewhat blurred versions of legal texts. I think other disciplines could not make the same first moves as we can with architecture, but the endpoint of these sorts of arguments is much the same; after some time the legal arguments and the architectural arguments could not be simply separated.

PW. It seems to me that you might not be able to make the same moves in law but you might still presume your moves were the privileged ones. Do law and philosophy have the same relationship between them as architecture and philosophy?

MW. While both disciplines can thoroughly demonstrate a privileged relationship, traditionally law is seen to be worthier of that privilege in that philosophers have dealt with the question of law more extensively. I suppose the interesting question would be things like painting, to compare painting and architecture, whether painting could assume the same status. Except painting never existed as a discipline.

PW. I'm not sure architecture has either. I accept arguments about architecture that suggest that it is really only constituted as a discipline in the Renaissance or the 18th century.

MW. Yes.

PW. I wouldn't see architecture just as being discourse on building for instance. I would

want to argue that architecture is a discourse on building that is structured in a certain way and that this structuring doesn't happen until quite late. That would make any kind of allusion to architecture in Plato's text, say, something difficult. I don't think that to discover reference to building is enough.

MW. My view is that those references to building were discovered in the Renaissance. To put it in a slightly different way: hidden bonuses in the contract between architecture and philosophy were discovered in the Renaissance. In a way the contract only became a contract at that point. In the Renaissance, certain conditions laid down within the [philosophical] text were exploited by a group of people to produce a discipline. They became construal conditions. I'm interested in following this history of the idea of the contract, and relating that to the history of the idea of architecture.

PW. This brings me to my last question, which is about the relationship of building and architecture. For me this has become an obsession since working in an architectural practice, and one noted for the strongly tectonic qualities of its work. However, I feel remote from building. My experience is that the obligations placed upon me in my work situation seem quite self-contained and removed from any ultimate obligation to building. This may be false. Maybe the workplace is cleverly contrived. Would you sustain a definition of architecture as discourse about building?

MW. It's a particular kind of discourse about building. In any view it's a discourse that attempts to disguise the horror of building; it attempts to keep the nature of building unobserved, to construct a shield around building. Architecture is a kind of collective discourse on the nature of building, but it is a discourse which is desperately concerned not to interrogate building too closely. So it has concentrated on considerations of ornament, for example, which lead us to believe that building is non-problematical. In a sense, it's an attempt to keep us to one side of building. The concern of the architectural discipline is to reaffirm

the insight on which philosophy depends; that building is non-problematical, and by definition virtuous and uplifting, in the sense of lifting something up, erecting it on sound foundations, and so on, and that by these gestures it is necessarily moral.

In a sense, culture is then defined by its ability to build.

My particular interest is in articulating the horror of building itself. To return to Eisenman, his recent work is more challenging than the earlier work because it occupies building. And this is precisely why he has no disciples in architecture; it's impossible for Eisenman to have architectural disciples because all architects refuse to stage an in-depth encounter with building itself. Rather, they act around building in a certain way to claim that territory and prohibit others from occupying it. I think the only interesting work in architecture today is that which inhabits the realm of building.

To get access to that realm the traditional relationships between structure and ornament and between building and architecture have to be skilfully undermined, against the full force of the discipline. That kind of undermining is what I'm most interested in. Eisenman is its only successful exponent. So he is correctly seen as dangerous; he is undermining not just the foundations of our discipline, but also the assumptions on which we base our ideas about everything that we have.

PW. By whom is he seen as dangerous?

MW. By architects.

This is complicated. You can argue that up until two or three years ago he was seen as superficially dangerous—he was assigned the role of being the dangerous fringe of architectural inquiry, and it was felt he would soak up all that energy and allow the rest of the profession to get on with the business of doing architecture. Eisenman was appropriated by

the discipline as a demonstration that it was actually worried about its own condition, inquiring into it. But that has changed and now he is seen as truly dangerous. He can no longer be simply dismissed because he has now moved his projects into the heart of building. He's involved in the construction of major projects. And he's maintained the same conceptual rigour that he demonstrated earlier.

I'm waiting to see what the next project will be, and the one after that, because a very incisive inquiry has begun and it could have very significant results. At the same time quite a few of Eisenman's generation are sceptical about the condition of their own work.

PW. What kind of work—mainstream, postmodernism?

MW. Absolutely.

PW. I suppose my view is that the architectural mainstream will contain Eisenman as English departments contain Derrida, reduce the work to a set of motifs with which they can replace other motifs. But business will go on as usual.

MW. I wouldn't promote his work as a new wave; I think it will always remain without followers.

PW. Building must be a difficult location for dissent or inquiry or criticism because it costs money, you've got to get someone to pay for it, to get someone else involved in the act. Or you work covertly. Other disciplines perhaps do not face such severe stringencies.

MW. I agree. But that is also an assertion of architecture's privilege. I would tend to invoke rather than the financial costs and so on, the philosophical weight of what's being tampered with. But what our culture values philosophically it also values financially. Is it any surprise that it's hard to find support for a project which questions the nature of support? Obviously

one can only do that in a slippery way. That is the problem, if you want to undermine building. There's a limit to how surreptitious you can be. So-called deconstructionists who happily pull apart texts are immediately horrified at the thought that the room in which they are doing that might have some of the gaps in it revealed. Everyone is aware of the influence of building.

Notes:

- 1 G. Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism: Poststructuralism and Law* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1984).

