

Interview / JULIA GATLEY

INTERSTICES 21

In conversation with Mark Wigley, Professor and Dean Emeritus of the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at Columbia University, New York

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Fig. 1: Julia Gatley in conversation with Mark Wigley, August 3, 2021. [Zoom still]

Julia Gatley: A very warm welcome, Professor Mark Wigley. Congratulations on your incredible career, and thank you so much for joining us tonight.

Mark Wigley: You're welcome.

JG: You're in Spain at the moment. What takes you there and are you there for a short time or a long time?

MW: I think anytime in Spain is a short time, so I try to make it as long as possible. I'm here a lot because my partner Beatriz, her family is from this region and this place, so we have a place here on the water. It's just obsessively wonderful. It's basically a beach, so it's my New Zealand thing in the Mediterranean.

JG: Perfect.

MW: It's borderline criminal, so I really shouldn't tell you more about it. It's ridiculously good.

JG: All the better from Auckland where we've just had a big storm last night. I understand you grew up in Palmerston North. I'm interested to know what influenced your decision to study architecture, and if you recall any particular formative experiences?

MW: Actually, I was hoping you could tell me. I have no idea. Since the age of nine, I would answer the question, "What are you going to do?", I would say, "I'm going to be an architect," and it's probably, you know, I'm very stubborn, so maybe that's just what happened. It was a sort of an error and I just kept repeating it in my stubborn way. There's no explanation. I was not brilliant at building with blocks, and there wasn't, as far as I know, any architecture in Palmerston North, as defined, like as high art. Of course, there was architecture in every sense, everywhere. My only guess is that my parents were great travellers and always would show these wonderful slides of everywhere they had been. I remember very vividly a lot of the mosques in Isfahan and so on. I have a little bit of a feeling that maybe, but this is just sort of romantic fantasy, that maybe I looked at the real thing and then thought I should somehow participate, but I think the truth is probably more kind of crazy, like it's just a mistake. But mistakes are good.

JG: And you completed your BArch here at the University of Auckland from 1975 to 1979, when different staff in the School were running the three sub-schools of Brick, Timber and Steel. In our School centenary book, we categorised the 1970s as "the loose years", so I'm interested to know what your take on the School was back then, if it was loose, and if that was good for you?

MW: Yes, and yes. It definitely was loose, but loose with a kind of purpose, I would say, because I think what was brilliant in that moment was the uncertainty, because there were the three different sort of mini-schools, and the new building was on its way, towards the end of my time there. So, you felt like you were at the end of an experimental period, which was about to be followed by



Fig. 2 From the late 1940s, the Auckland School of Architecture occupied old army huts that in the 1970s became the Steel sub-school. [Photographer not known, Architecture Archive, Special Collections, University of Auckland Library and Learning Services, Acc no. 03/10]

formality, as represented by this big glossy building. So all this sort of anti-architecture, all these sheds, connected to the great tradition of the shed and the mythology of the School, was about to give way to what, relative to that, was not a very interesting building, a new building. It was like the last years. And in that moment, it seemed to me not even ideologically strict. For example, as students, we could move around between these schools. They were not like religions that you had to follow.

For whatever reason, I think I started off over in Steel or something and ended up towards the more experimental end [Brick], because I was attracted to the vertical teaching, the fact that the younger students and the older students were side by side. More than that, the teachers were also acting more like children than

Fig. 3 The burnt remains of the Timber Building, with the new School of Architecture Building, designed by KTRA, behind. [Photographer not known, University of Auckland Library and Learning Services, Record Number 397340]

Fig. 4 Staff and students on the balcony of the new building in March 1980. [Photograph by Denise Moore, Architecture Archive, Special Collections, University of Auckland Libraries and Learning Services, APPFA Photographs Collection]

adults. So, I think it was a great time in which the School didn't know what it was, and it seems to me, it's always great when people don't know what they're doing. "Loose" implies you do know what you're doing, you could do, and you're not doing it. I think it was more uncertain than that, and really fantastic and even the fact that the Timber Building burnt down somehow conveyed this last dance feeling. Dancing, I think it really was. I remember [lecturer] Dave Mitchell really danced amazingly well. He was quite a large guy, but somehow when dancing, he seemed to be doing some sort of Olympic routine down on the floor. This was very inspiring for students, that the teachers were, to use an old word, very cool. As a result, I think there was a great camaraderie. I saw you published that picture where all of us are gathered on the edge of the new building. It was very emotional for me to see it and to see myself there and to realise how many people were in that picture who were such wonderful companions at that time.

JG: The actual Experimental Building that had multiple floors and multiple staircases and platforms, was that the particular scene of the dancing?



MW: Yeah, of course, because it was the only way you could move around in the building, it insisted on that. I suppose it was a bit like every child's fantasy, like a playhouse, where it's irregular, and all the levels. In a way, it really captured, to use your word, the loosening of the screws and so on. I think it was wonderful. Of course, I suppose, and you're the expert on this, but I think somehow all the experiments of the 60s were nesting there at the end of the 70s, so it was last dance, not just for the School, but also for the discipline.



Fig. 5 and 6 The Experimental Building in 1970, its radical form in contrast to its cottage neighbours, and its interior, a maze of posts, bracing and platforms. [Photographs and montage by Tet Shin Choong, reproduced from “The School of Architecture, University of Auckland”, BArch building report, University of Auckland, 1970, Plate A (exterior) and Plate E (interior)]

The other thing is that I thought at the time, and I think more now, that there were so many wonderful teachers. Really that’s what made the School. It doesn’t really matter what the building was and all that. There were amazing teachers. They might’ve even liked each other quite a lot. Not totally, but quite a lot, and that’s impressive for a School.

JG: It does sound like a great time to have been there.

MW: Yeah, one more thing, there was also a generational thing. Doc Toy was still a kind of cosmic guru, implying that somehow whatever you did, even in New Zealand—and “even in New Zealand” was the way of thinking of it—even in New Zealand, one could connect to the great traditions, not just of architecture, but of culture. I think John Dickson continued that, and then Mike Austin, Dave Mitchell, Nick Stanish, and John Goldwater. All of these teachers were somehow your intermediaries between the local situation and this deep history. My strongest memory of that time is how kind and open and, to use your word again, loose, the teachers were. It was actually a wonderful time. By the way, this is all sounding very romantic, and therefore not to be trusted. As Mike Austin would tell you, all I ever did was complain when I was there.

JG: Oh no, you were one of those students [laughing]!

MW: Oh yeah, and he said to me once, “You complain a lot, but there’ll be a time that you look back and say these were your golden years”, in the sense that you had time to complain, and time to think, and time to reflect. This is one of the many things that Mike told me, that I carried with me and actually try to pass on to my own students.

JG: Well, I believe that Mike is with us in the audience this evening, so we might get a comment.

MW: One of the victims of this conversation [laughing]. I owe everything to Mike because he had this generosity to what hadn’t happened yet. He would trust somebody, if he just let them do what they wanted to do, to go to a place that hadn’t been defined yet. That seems to be the essence of teaching. So I owe everything to Mike, in the sense that he really was my advisor. Some people do PhDs and advisors don’t really advise. He really was the advisor, like a counsellor in a way.

JG: That’s a good time to move to this document.

MW: Oh that thing, okay, but just to say that teaching is the thing that matters the most. Oh this, so it exists.

JG: This is your BArch thesis titled, “A Case for Chance”, supervised by Mike Austin. It is about “the random interactions of independent phenomena”. What really struck me in looking at it was the extent to which it signals all of your subsequent interests in architecture, art, philosophy, culture, and technology. They’re all in there. There’s even a poem called “The legend of the white wall”, suggesting a fascination with white walls long before your book, *White walls, designer dresses*. I’m wondering if you remember this document in particular, and if it was an important piece of work for you at the time? It has beautiful photos right through, too.

MW: Well, firstly, Julia, I didn’t know it still existed. I haven’t seen it since the day I submitted it, and that’s the only copy that you’re holding.

JG: They should never have let me take it out of the library, but they did.

MW: Yeah, but I really had thought that it didn’t exist anymore, and I’ve often wondered. I’ve often wanted to see it, like trying to look at yourself as a baby and the fruitless effort to see if you could see yourself in formation. My feeling is, of course, for me, I know that this is an important document, because it’s where at the end of it, Mike said to me, “You’re good at that”, the writing/thinking sort of stuff. So really, it was the beginning of this trajectory into scholarship, but it’s also, you have to think, it’s not just Mike, but the School, because there was this amazing thing that at the end of your training as a professional architect, you had to write something for three months. It is faithful to the old idea that the architect is an intellectual, that every professional is a thinker. In that moment, I went down that path.

Whether the content of it relates to my current work, it would be better for you to say than me. It’s funny that you’ve spotted the white wall obsession is already there, but for me, it was more like a coming of age, or self-discovery, whatever. The photographs were exactly that, just photographs I was taking. I’ve often wanted to see that document, so I’m really almost shocked that you’re holding it in your hand.

JG: We can probably organise a scan for you.

MW: But do you know, it gets back to this. The trouble is as a theorist, you just pounce on everything, everything is grist for the mill. So the chance that the whole thing was, of course, exactly about what I was saying before, not knowing what you're doing, and mistakes are very, very crucial. That whole sub-thesis was about the history of that idea, that being a little bit out of control, not knowing, is the beginning of knowing.

By the way, why would you want to know anything if you hadn't had the sense of not knowing first? Doubt is like an engine. An engine of thinking, it might be an engine of relationships. I don't want to sound too "fortune cookie", but it's really like that, to the extent that you don't know, you learn, or you grow and so on. Now, I've turned it into a speech. Architecture is traditionally considered to be the opposite. It's the opposite of doubt. Actually, we build to cover up doubt. You could almost say that cities rise up and are their strongest and most permanent where our doubts are the biggest, so how do you take a field like architecture, which is making symbols of certainty, but for those symbols to be in any way interesting, there needs to be doubt. Teaching, school, and studio, and the inside of the architect's brain, and the inside of a school, are kind of laboratories of doubt. That's why those years were very productive, it seems to me in the School, because it was uncertain. There was doubt there, and good teachers nurture the doubt.

It's a trick, because architects are then called on to go in public and pretend that they know what they're doing and know what buildings represent, so there's this very boring role, very conservative role, that buildings play in society, but they're generated by very crazy people who think that buildings can talk. Only architects think that buildings talk, so this is what's wonderful of a school. It's like a room of children who think they can talk to buildings, and we fruitlessly try to tell the rest of society that that's really happening, and with not much success. For thousands of years. End of speech. That was just trying to go directly to the question of doubt, and chance.

JG: They let me take your PhD out of the library too. Completed in 1986, entitled "Jacques Derrida and architecture: The deconstructive possibilities of architectural discourse", again supervised by Mike Austin. The urban myth in Auckland is that early on in your enrolment, you went to New York and knocked on Peter Eisenman's door, and that he really encouraged your focus on deconstruction. I'm just wondering if there's any truth in this, or if it's a myth that has spiralled out of control.

MW: No, it's not true. No. But probably like most myths, there's truth in it, but it's not true. More or less, the way I remember it, but why would you trust my memory? You know I used to watch *Coronation Street*, and Ena Sharples once was having a beer or a stout or whatever she had with Minnie Caldwell, and she says, "I don't like to go down memory lane because the last time I went down there, I got mugged."

So, if we try to remember this moment, what happened was, in what was for me a very interesting journey, I ended up writing about deconstruction and always imagining that this was basically a philosophical position of the late 1960s, so basically feeling there in New Zealand, more or less happy, whatever, trying

to think through the implications of a philosophical movement of the late 60s, not thinking that that had any relevance to anyone, anytime. Then, an architect called Stanley Tigerman came to visit New Zealand on some kind of scam, selling Formica, and there were allusions to deconstruction in his lectures. For the first time, it occurred to me this was not just a personal fantasy, many decades later, but actually there were people who were interested in it. That started a desire to go over to see who was interested in this stuff.

When I went to New York, I did meet Peter Eisenman, but it was the other way around. He was interested in what I was doing with deconstruction. But there was great pleasure to discover that suddenly there was a community of people for whom this subject was not historical, but urgently relevant. I found all those conversations extraordinarily exciting, so exciting, and I think that Mike sensed this, I could easily just have stayed in New York. He actually sent me a message saying something along the lines, "If you don't come back and finish your PhD, we're going to ..." and the word I remember is "terminate you", which is a very un-Mike term.

I took that to be really a serious message, like you need to finish this PhD. This again was a great gift to me, because I came back and did finish it and then returned to New York to continue those conversations. So, it's a myth, but Eisenman, who became one of the assessors or the readers of the thesis, was an important reference point, because also of course, in his orbit were other people interested in the subject and so on.

Now, why do people want the myth to be that myth, because the myth would be once again, that somehow a New Zealander would need an American to guide them towards a French philosopher?

JG: It would look that way, yes.

MW: There's a classic New Zealand thing. I love the classic New Zealand thing. I'm the perfect example of that: we are not worthy, we are so distant from the world, we're genuinely modest, which is immediately followed by the opposite, which is an extraordinary arrogance, because since we are so distant from the world, we're pure, direct. If I'm reading Derrida, I'm getting it right for the first time, because I haven't been corrupted by all this other stuff going on. So, there's simultaneous genuine modesty, combined with this extraordinary arrogance, in equal mixture, that's the thing, and I think that myth is about the first part, which is the New Zealander feeling like there's got to be this other voice. That was interesting. You arrive in New York and they have the opposite point of view, which is like, "Hey, what have you got to say?" It was great.

JG: When you decided to move to the States, was that a risk in terms of being able to work or did you already have the job at Princeton lined up? Were you imagining staying awhile?

MW: No. No, I never thought anything would happen. That PhD was done as part of a first wave of PhDs taught by Mike, who had himself a PhD. Maybe Mike was the first.

JG: He wasn't the first, but he was one of the earlier ones.

MW: Right, so let's say the first generation to be taught by others who had done a PhD. The idea that this would be a career is ridiculous. It was the exact opposite.

I can't say it strongly enough, but it's really hard to do a PhD when you think that this is the basis of a career, because then everything you write is aimed towards a hypothetical audience that will love you, and then give you a job, but the problem is, PhDs are about changing the field. You're actually writing for an audience that doesn't exist yet. So I think again I was very lucky to be writing in a time in which it was a very stupid thing to do a PhD. And therefore you could really follow your instincts and try to do a good job and all that.

So, when I went to New York, it was just because I wanted to keep going with those conversations. I was appalled when Princeton gave me a job, and I was so sure that they would recognise their mistake, that during the first year there, I insulted everybody all the time, because I thought, this is it, I've got one year, or to say it another way around, I just was honest or direct. Of course, it turned out they loved that, so I stayed and all my diplomatic colleagues were fired.

JG: Did they give you a one-year contract to start with, and then it grew?

MW: Yeah, every year it was one year and one year, and then it got a little bit bigger. Then before you know it, I had gone from the outside of that institution to the very inside of it and so much so that I was no longer the rebel, so I ran away to Columbia, where again I was on the outside, but very quickly found myself on the inside there as well.

When I said before I was being honest, I probably just had a bad character. I was very undiplomatic, let's say, and again, it's really hard these days to be undiplomatic. Everybody's so risk averse.

So far in this conversation, Julia, there's a lot of luck here. There's a lot of lucky breaks.

JG: Luck and good timing.

MW: Yeah, but you know ...

JG: That's probably a good time to move on to working with Philip Johnson. You were co-curating the 1988 exhibition, *Deconstructivist architecture*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, with the book of the same name, published at the same time. How did the project and collaboration come about? What was it like working with Philip Johnson?

MW: This is a long story, but the short version is it's going to be exactly what I just said before. The reason I ended up curating that show is because I was invited to a dinner, where there were a few young scholars and a number of architects—Eisenman, Gehry and a few others. The dinner had been called by Philip Johnson, and during the dinner, they explained a concept for an exhibition they were going to do. I thought it was a shitty, stupid exhibition, and I said so, just because that was my mode at that time. This is quite soon after, a few months after, I had left [New Zealand]. I had just started the job at Princeton. And I said it was a very stupid exhibition.

Then, Johnson said something like, "Well, what would you do if it was you?" I said, "I would make an exhibition that proved that Frank Gehry is finished." They all looked aback. I mean, I really was thinking, I said, "Because that's the purpose of an exhibition, to celebrate the work of the last ten years, let's say, to create space for new work." Gehry, whose work I greatly admired, I thought he had done

some amazing work in the previous ten years. My argument was you get to MoMA and you celebrate work when it's finished. Like it's a high cathedral.

Gehry came up to me afterwards and said, "I really liked what you said. You put a gun to my head, but you're wrong, and I'll show you." I didn't know he was working on Bilbao at that moment. He's a street fighter. So as a result, I just found myself there, so then they said, "Okay, you're going to do it." So, I did it, and at the same time I was starting to teach, there was my first exhibition and first real teaching job, although I had been teaching at the school in Auckland, which was a great privilege as a PhD student.

Again, we didn't say it before, but there was such a kindness. As PhD students, we basically had lunch and coffee and so on with the faculty. This is a continuation of that thing of the experimental school, the young and the old. That was where I was doing all the complaining, sitting there permanently, the whole day, complaining. Basically, I just went with that, into that situation and started to curate.

And, what was it like to work with Johnson? Amazing, because Johnson was old at that time, but still fast. I mean, he walked faster than anyone and talked faster. Basically, people at the museum hated him, because he, of course, had invented that department. He was thoroughly unimpressed with what they had been doing, and the whole point of this exhibition was to rattle the cage. They hated the exhibition. They hated the thought that it was happening. Therefore, they hated me, because I represented Johnson. It's like the revenge. He's supposed to not be there. So they tried to block everything. The way it worked is Johnson allowed me to make every decision, every single thing, and he acted as the cover and defended me against all the institutional forces.

I have to say it was exhilarating, because at MoMA, they know the politics of typefaces. I got into arguing. I remember a couple of days before the exhibition opened, a man came to me and he said he was in charge of etiquette at the museum. He was incredibly well-dressed, like something out of a movie. I was just marvelling at the fact that there was such a person. He said, "Which colour flowers do you want during the opening, red or blue?" It couldn't be red because that would be a clumsy reference to the Russians, and it couldn't be blue because that would be the counter, so I said, "Could we have both?" He said, "It's never happened before. Let me go and check." He disappeared. He came back the following day, and said, "Your wish has been granted." It was like this. It was super exhilarating. Johnson somehow knew that what I was doing was rocking the boat, so he supported it all the way. I have to say it was a very great privilege and very, very interesting.

After the exhibition opened, very shortly afterwards, it started to surface, Johnson's intimate links with fascism and anti-Semitic writings and all of this. I just broke. I couldn't, you know. So I don't regret working with him, but I'm totally supportive of the removal of the name and disconnection of things that are unforgivable, but it came just after it. Now, if it had happened during. What kind of opportunist am I? That's when I would have learnt. If I had learnt this during, I wonder sometimes. I don't trust myself to have just walked out. I probably would've acted out. I would've stayed there and made this part of the story, but you gotta understand how innocent, and again, innocence was incredibly useful in that moment.

JG: You kept working further with deconstruction, reworking your PhD for publication as *Derrida's haunt* in 1993, and the introduction acknowledges that a lot had happened in the field of deconstruction between 1986 and 1993, including Derrida writing about architecture and collaborating with Tschumi on the Parc de le Villette. Your own position had also changed from periphery to centre, and you'd obviously made friends with at least several of the key players. So, what impact did those things have, do you think, on the development of the PhD to the book? Your move from periphery to centre in particular.

MW: Yeah, it's funny listening to you, you know me better than I know myself. A couple of things come to my mind here. I mean, the exhibition itself insists that that work is not derivative of deconstruction or a demonstration of it. The argument is that if you were interested in deconstruction, this is the aspect of architecture that would attract you. The idea was that a small set of architects were triggering certain doubts around the status of geometry and so on. Yes, there are occasional direct links, like Derrida working with Tschumi and things like this, but they're not, let's say, at all what interests me, although what Derrida writes about Tschumi in that collaboration is extremely interesting, in the history of Derrida's work.

The PhD is the opposite. The PhD was interested in the architecture that's inside deconstruction already, like what are the ideas about architecture on which deconstruction depends, even in the word deconstruction? It's the kind of inverse. One is the architecture inside deconstruction, and then you were asking what happened when deconstruction went inside architecture? Probably, I turned the PhD into a book to, as it were, reassert that previous attitude that I had, but actually it's not a shift of position. They are complementary. I insisted at the time that deconstruction would not be productive of some kind of style. People were very sceptical of that, because the museum is like a machine for style. I was, I guess, proven right relatively quickly, and the status of that exhibition changed relatively quickly.

Now, I'm almost embarrassed about how much honour is shown to that exhibition. In retrospect, I realised it was very, very focused, very polemical. I mean, all of those architects that were in there, of course, went on to become unbelievably important. I don't, in any way, think the show contributed to that. I think it's the other way around. These were already very, very bright [people]. Think of Zaha Hadid. Really just one of the most amazing architects of our time. She didn't need an exhibition at MoMA to be who she was and would become, but nevertheless that happened. Notice how all those directions were entirely different ... Rem Koolhaas. Most of those people had not built anything at that time. They went on to build almost everything, but there's no debt there to the exhibition. At the time, they all were very aware of the fact that I was using their work to make a theoretical point. They were all happy to be celebrated at MoMA. Why not? But there was not a tie, so I'm saying all this, because actually when I turned the PhD into a book, I didn't have to fight for anything. In a way, the show had become almost embarrassingly respected. Turning the PhD into a book was a nightmare. It was like root canal work. If you leave a book alone, as you probably know, for three years or whatever it was, you're a different person. The first thing you have to deal with is someone else wrote it, and then when you write a book, you write a book to find out who you are. Imagine trying to find out who you are by rewriting a book by someone else, which is a previous you. There you are, somehow caught

between the old you and the new you. Nevertheless, I did it. Somehow it seems to mark that inquiry. Really, again, the book seems to have lasted in the sense of it still seems to trigger a certain attitude and hopefully a seriousness about the right of architects to think philosophically. This was at the heart of that mission.

Could an architect do this? I was only, only a New Zealander, only, only an architect, only, only young, all these things. Do you have the right to write about the most extraordinary French philosopher? My point would be, yes, you have that right, and the kindness that Jacques Derrida himself showed to me and to that work was incredibly embarrassing. I found actually when I was with him, he was always incredibly kind, but I couldn't speak. I could literally not speak because I was almost offended by how kind he was towards the work and then curious about it and so on. Again, he was a teacher.

JG: That's fantastic.

MW: A very long answer to your question, but boy, it was hard.

JG: It does help to explain a little bit why the next book, *White walls, designer dresses*, was so different, with the focus on modernism and challenging the original claims of the protagonists from the '20s about their architecture being a lack of style, given that architecture is always aesthetic. It draws out a question about the relationship between theory and history. I know that you've written about this separately. I'd like to invite you to say a little bit about the relationship between history and theory, as you see it.

MW: It's a bit of a risk for you to ask me that. Let me try it this way. I teach one class every year. I taught it for thirteen years at Princeton, and I've been a long time now at Columbia, but every year, I teach a class called the History of Theory. By the way, it's always the same class and it has the same syllabus. It hasn't changed, which is a crime, I'm sure, but it's a conceptual experiment. Could you have the same syllabus for decades? Of course, I think every time it's different, because you connect the ideas to the world differently, but it's really about how history and theory are inseparable, that every architect is a theorist, like I said before, but that also means a kind of historian, historia, telling a story. So, yeah, in that moment, it was very deliberate.

Also, I was obsessed. Of course, if you look in the *Deconstructivist architecture* show, in the PhD and in the book that came out of it, at the centre is a kind of obsession with the relationship between structure and ornament, that which is supposedly necessary and that which is supposedly not necessary. Yet, somehow it seems necessary to have the non-necessary thing around. That's the obsession. It's the only thing I'm interested in, probably ever.

So, there's this book, which seems, as you point out, much more historical. It's about the same thing. It's about the relationship between the surface and the structure—fabric, dress, the clothing, that which you don't need, but of course you do need. They're linked.

I think it was also, and to this day, very influenced by Beatriz Colomina, my partner, who as she always does, produces a kind of exhilarating sense of history, like history becomes an unfolding. Again, this is another part of the luck, the luck to be with Beatriz, the luck to be with Gill Mathewson when I was in New Zealand, who was doing her pioneering work on gender in both practice and in theory.



Figs. 7 and 8 Wigley as a keynote speaker at the Accessory/Architecture Conference, University of Auckland, 1995; and Mike Austin and Beatriz Colomina at the same event (Colomina was also a keynote speaker). [Photographs believed to be by Lynne Logan, Architecture Archive, Special Collections, University of Auckland Libraries and Learning Services, APPFA Photographs Collection]

Again, look at Gill. It was practise and theory together. So I think you learn a lot, if you're lucky, if you're lucky to be with super interesting people, you learn a lot.

I think you can see in that book on white walls, that Beatriz's expertise on Le Corbusier has infected me. Basically you're part of a conversation, which is the conversation at home, in the streets, in the school and so on.

In the end, I don't know if I like the book. Maybe I don't like any of them, but it's interesting that it's artists who are the strongest readers of the book. There's not a month goes by when I don't get calls from artists and so on. That's, again, another thing, very interesting. I said before, do architects have the right to speak? Then, there's another question. Who's listening? Listening seems to me such an under-estimated part of life and getting back to Mike, he was a great listener. Listening, this is something. Who's listening to us? I think when artists are listening, you know you're not so stupid. So I think it's a stupid book. For me, personally, I think it's clumsy. The issues are important and probably that's why the book's a bit clumsy. It really mattered a lot to me.

You can see that all the other books are the same book in different forms. Even the more recent work on radio and so on, it's the same. You're not going to get a new idea from me. You're going to get the same half idea that I had in Auckland, that same half idea. It's amazing. You can take a half an idea and maybe it's like a graft or something. You can grow half an idea for the rest of your life. If you have a whole idea, probably it's all over.

JG: We'll take you to your ideas about artists a little bit more now, asking about your work from the late '90s and the early 2000s, the focus on Constant's New Babylon, with exhibitions and publications exploring an artist's visions for a city, for a post-revolutionary society. Then, in the last ten years, you've done books and exhibitions on Gordon Matta-Clark, known for cutting buildings open. What is it about artists who work with architectural subject matter that interests you most?

MW: I think the question would be, what's an architect and what's an artist? By the way, Gordon Matta-Clark's definition was that art doesn't have plumbing. Of course, it's not necessarily completely true, but I think of architects as people for whom buildings are questions. Society thinks that buildings are answers, but for architects, a building is a question. In the same way that a painter, a painter is somebody who doesn't know what painting is. They paint their whole lives to try to understand why they love this thing, painting. The greatest painters are the ones for whom painting is their biggest question. For architects, we think buildings are questions. We're mystified by them and we find them enthralling. We'd talk forever about buildings.

You do a conference on door knobs, architects would go for a week, but people who make door knobs, won't go to a conference on door knobs. They make the door knob, and go home and have a life. Architects don't have a life—never have a life. We cannot stop talking. So for us, buildings are questions.

Then, for artists, an architect is supposed to be a figure of certainty, when it's actually somebody who is doubtful about what a building is. Artists, who are professional doubters, who ask us to change our ideas about what things are, when they get interested in architecture, you get a doubling of that. Somebody who's curious about everything becomes curious about architecture, itself as a form of curiosity.

Matta-Clark was trained as an architect first, and then his work is so provocative that everybody calls him an artist. My view is he's just an architect who's not boring. He just lets the doubt that is at the centre of our field become the work itself, whereas the rest of architects tend to then seal the doubt.

That also plays into the whole gender argument, because architects pretend to know what they're doing, so they assume this masculine, this man, explaining ideas about architecture, and the architecture which is radically uncertain, produced by complex collaborations of people, clients, and situations and so on, but then somehow we act as if a single figure, and preferably a male figure, could represent the certainty of this thing that's so doubtful.

Constant, on the other hand, was a painter who pretended to be an architect, as a criticism of painting. I guess I'm super interested in figures who cross those lines and then really research those lines. Matta-Clark's career was only ten years, as one of the most important architect/artists of the twentieth century, but it's really ten years of work. The New Babylon project of Constant is also about ten years, so it's amazing what you can do in ten years. Imagine you work for ten years on one architectural project, and the last five years of that work is criticising your own project. Who could not be interested in Constant?

I just got lucky. A friend, running a museum in Rotterdam, had an instinct that I would be interested in Constant, knew that I was lecturing about it and asked me to do an exhibition. Exhibitions are the single most exciting thing in the history of the universe, because they're so multi-dimensional. You're communicating your obsessions, but also you have to tune into the obsessions of the visitor. It's just very, very exciting, so I love, more than anything else, to do exhibitions.

So if you're going to make an exhibition, and there are millions of exhibitions all the time, wouldn't you want to make an exhibition about people who are changing the rules? I'm interested always in those figures that do that.

JG: When you've done a book and an exhibition together, what do you like to do with the exhibition to make sure that it's different from the book, but bigger, in terms of the images being bigger, and how can the exhibition be different?

MW: Well, it's horrible to go to an exhibition which is a book on the wall. Actually almost any text on the wall is horrible. Wall texts are the worst, most infantilising thing. Normally, it's better to treat them as separate projects. So for example, when Beatriz and I curated the Biennale in Istanbul, we deliberately made a separate book, the *Are We Human?* book, which has nothing to do with the exhibition, but has to do with the ideas that were in our heads while we were making

the exhibition. There's another book, which is the catalogue, so always, you do it like that.

With the most recent one, the Matta-Clark show in Shanghai, there was an enormous book that, to my knowledge, nobody has seen because the show opened during the pandemic, which means it didn't really open. The exhibition itself was a timeline, so when you entered the exhibition, you were actually inside a 3D timeline. It was like being in a swimming pool, with dotted lines of the lanes were the years. In that sense, there was a little bit more relationship between the chronology of the book and the chronology of the exhibition, but they are different things.

So, it's a long answer to your question, but I think the worst crime of an exhibition is to produce the sense that there's a book on the wall, because why bother? Get the book. Books are better in the end. Books are forever. Exhibitions are short-term. Buildings are short-term. Books are forever.

JG: I wanted to ask you just a little bit about your time as Dean of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at Columbia from 2004 to 2014. Was that a full-time gig, like it would be to be the Dean here; did you feel that you were doing much research during the time that you were Dean or was the deanship all consuming?

MW: Yeah, okay, I have to roll out the couch to answer this one. Firstly, it's not a full-time job, because that implies that there's a certain amount of time in the week and then you fill it all out. No, it's ten times a full-time job. Basically, you do that during your sleep. You never stop thinking about it. Incredibly exciting, stressful, complex. You're like a gardener, you're seeing what can grow. Your main responsibility, like that of every teacher, is to the ideas that people haven't had yet. How do you create an environment in which people could have ideas that they don't have yet? Just try to incubate that, to create an incubator. It's incredibly exhilarating and super satisfying when you see it flourish, when you see the flowers grow and you see colleagues and students do amazing things, but you use every micro-second of your life to do that.

So, the answer to your question is, I didn't do any research, basically, for more than a decade. I didn't write. I did a couple of exhibitions just to stay alive a little bit, but I never made the books that would normally go with those exhibitions. So, the answer is a big "no". I basically took time out from research. That's why I'm on the couch, because, was that a good call or not?

JG: I'm sure that you've enjoyed being back in the research space. You've certainly been prolific since then, exploring in particular human interactions with technology from radio and television to social media and artificial intelligence and their relationship to design. Do you have thoughts on where technology might be taking architecture or the architect now?

MW: Not really, but, I immediately want to reverse your question and wonder where could architecture take technology. Again, the assumption our field would normally have is that technology is biological, it's evolving in a certain direction. A fast architect catches up to that, or a young and fast architect. And we tend to think that young is fast. Not always the case. We all know that there's some kids that are much slower and some grandparents that are faster, but there is an ageism built into the way we think about technology.

This was the central focus of the exhibition that Beatriz and I curated in Istanbul. Technology is what makes the humans human. Technology is the most human thing about us. It is us. So technology never simply takes us somewhere, since we are technology.

Having said that, we are most of the time blind to our technological condition. We don't really think about the prosthetics. You and I are looking at each other through our glasses, through the Zoom and so on, so we act like that's a technology outside of our body that we are just using, but of course, we're different people as a result of these prosthetic extensions.

If you take the argument that technology is what makes a human human, you're saying an important question is something like, well, what is the future human? Where are we going? What relationship might architecture have to this? There's a couple of angles on this. One is what is the architecture of that, because if it's my glasses and your glasses, it's also the room and the buildings. Of course, the buildings that we occupy are part of us, part of our species.

With radio, we became insects. This was an exhibition I did in Rotterdam, where I tried to explain the idea of the human insect, that we became insects towards the end of the nineteenth century, as we learnt to communicate to each other with antenna. We became a different species. We think differently, and this is both a new kind of human, let's say a new kind of client for the architect, but it's also a new kind of space. We live in a different ... you and I are now in a Zoom room. It has absolutely dramatically changed the status of architecture, but architects hate radio. You'll find very little discussion about radio, despite the fact that radio transformed our species utterly, and transformed space and time utterly, and we claim to be interested in space and time and humans, and we don't like to talk about radio because radio seems to insult buildings, it just passes on through. So the whole history of architecture is a defence against radio.

So, for me, there are two sides to your question. One is why don't we just look at ourselves, look at what we have become and think about how we then might respond to that architecturally, like what might our design work be?

Also, the implication is that the reason I say, "no," to your question, I don't know where technology is taking us, because precisely technology is the generator of uncertainty about what constitutes the human. Hence, the question, "Are we human?" Whatever technology is. I love Marshall McLuhan, almost all of it, but especially his idea that each new technology changes the human brain and body, and this change is so shocking that it's invisible to us. We cannot face it until the technology is replaced by another one and then we can see it, so we only ever see, as he put it, in the rear-view mirror.

So, even looking in the rear-view mirror, architects could respond to radio, television, and the internet. Probably, if you follow McLuhan, we are already some even stranger kind of species. I'm convinced that architects need to not only be in the forefront of that conversation, but are in a sense responsible for that conversation. There are wonderful thinkers, writers, and curators in and around architecture that are working on those questions. In that sense, I feel myself part of a community, but as you can hear from my answer to your question, it's a super obsession.

I mean, to not think about radio and the relationship of radio in architecture is to

be a real idiot. Nobody thinks about radio and architecture. Therefore, architects are a certain kind of idiot. There you go, and it's true. We blind ourselves, and our clients ask us not to consider the fact that we are a different biological species. Architecture is almost used as a prophylactic, as a kind of avatar of an old idea of materiality and so on. We almost have a discipline of architecture devoted to veiling the fact that we have become ... let me just give you one more example. Bacteria. We are, you and I, bags of thousands upon thousands of bacteria. We can't be human without those bacteria, so to be human, to be alive, is to be bacteria and to be with bacteria, in a very complex co-mingling. How could architects not talk about bacteria? I guess we are just, I don't want to say Neanderthal, because Neanderthals were pretty smart.

Architecture is a pretty big stockpile of stupidity, not exactly because we're stupid as such, but in a way, a kind of stupidity is what's asked of architecture and we deliver. At the same time, I'd rather talk to architects than anyone else about what something could be, because of this doubt thing. So, sorry for the speech.

JG: There's a question in the chat from a student, and that is, could you please share some practical advice for architecture students about pursuing their career in architecture?

MW: Well, it's, of course, a big mistake, but you've already made it. I mean, when you tell your parents that you're going to become an architect, their faces fall, you could have done something serious. So given that you've made the mistake and that you've joined this group of people for whom architecture is a question, then you're part of a very exciting community of misfits all around the world. There are one million architecture students, more or less, in the world at any one time, all of whom are excited to think that architecture could be ... What architects have in common is optimism. Despite the fact that actually the world is a super shitty place, and there's no reason to be optimistic about anything, architects are always feeling like even a small change of the physical environment could lead to a better society, better culture, and so on, so it is astonishing to be part of a community, who all naively but romantically think that there's a possibility of a better society and the way to do that is through some kind of relatively small adjustments to the physical fabric.

So, I don't have advice. I think you've already joined this community. It does mean, though, it's good to listen and enjoy the fact that we don't know what architecture is, and if we don't know, as a young architect, you don't not know any more than anyone else. You're actually right up there. That's again, getting back to the spirit of the experimental school. If the best architects are the ones that feel like they know the least, then the older architects are jealous of the fact that the young architect really doesn't know.

In a way, take advantage of the fact that you're in that position of not knowing, and be reassured that you're surrounded by people that would like architecture to be boring. Your role is to resist that, and it's fun, and you're not going to get paid. Nobody's going to love you, and nobody's going to quite believe in the idea of architecture. That's already lost, so just try to not be boring. I think of all the crimes, boring is the most damning. I have no practical advice. Just don't be boring. Why bother? That's interesting. I don't think architects are human, really. Actually, they look human. All architects, from a distance, look like human beings. It's only when you get close and you listen to them, you hear that they're

crazy. They really think the physical world is talking, so you've joined this group of kids that think the world is alive.

By the way, in thinking that the world is alive, you join most indigenous communities on the planet, who think that the physical world is talking, so you're suddenly in a very, very exciting place. I would totally enjoy it.

JG: Fantastic. My final question is what's next for Mark Wigley? What are you working on at the moment?

MW: Well, to survive being mugged on memory lane. I only ever work on one project. It's not important. It's just a fact. I can only work on one thing at a time, when I'm researching and so on. The last three or four months, I'm obsessing about a single building in Havana, a Brutalist building of '67 to '71. I'm desperately trying to stop being obsessed with it, but it's not working. Basically, if you say, "What's my future?" I don't know. I can't get out of this building. The text gets longer and longer. I get more and more fascinated. So I don't know what comes next, but basically I jump from one project to the other.

I'm in a very privileged situation. I also feel a little bit that as a workaholic or whatever... With the pandemic and so on, none of us know what's next. Actually, this doubt that I've described before, it's a kind of arrogance, if you think about it, when so many people on the planet don't know if they can survive to the next day because of poverty or institutionalised injustice and so on. The idea that there's a community of people who can claim that not being paid, like I just said before, is a form of suffering, in order to doubt, then there's a responsibility to figure out ways in which that doubt might be of wider use to other species. Maybe if we thought about other species first, we could think about ourselves better in the future.

I think that nevertheless, the pandemic means that even as scholars, I think we have to consider almost the next project we do might be the last one. If I say, "I don't know which project comes next," I think it doesn't mean I'm light-hearted about it. I think each one might be the last one. Maybe the artists and writers and so on that we admire are people who felt like the next project was it, was the one, finally, and probably the last one. I think if we all imagine that we're playing the end game, and it's not a game, it's over ...

But having said all that, then I may be nervous to start the next project. I always think that way. Maybe this is what there is of an architect in me. Getting back to the door knob, architects think that the door knob is the beginning of the physical and emotional relationship to the building. We think always that the smallest thing has a viral impact on every scale, so people in outer space get improved by changing the door knob. Maybe as scholars, we feel the same, that even the smallest, most precise, detailed study of a person or a phase of history has the possibility to transform the whole thing. I have that arrogance, and I think most writers do. You do. We all do in a way. Again, the mission is how not to be boring. And if you're going to be boring, go to the beach. If the decision is to be boring, then get to the beach as quickly as possible.

JG: At least enjoy it.

MW: Yeah, the great thing of New Zealand is to get to the beach, it's never more than half an hour. I think this thing of the island, this is also why I'm obsessed

with this building on the coast of Havana, because I think islands, and the idea of the island, is so important. Maybe this is once again, the arrogance of the New Zealander, “Hey, we’ve got the island thing and you don’t.” From islands, you think about your place in the world differently than those who believe themselves to be at the centre and believe themselves to be the world. The thought of being outside the world, but therefore inside your own world, creates a dynamic that’s super interesting. That seems to be not very different from the dynamic of making a house for someone. It’s in the world but not in the world.

Really, I do believe that all the work that I’ve done is based on this idea of New Zealand, feeling disconnected. What if architecture’s relationship to all the other disciplines is the same as New Zealand’s relationship to the world, like I’m not worthy, we’re just late, we’re not real serious scholars, we’re not a real discipline? On the other hand, what’s more fundamental than architecture? I think our whole discipline has a kind of New Zealand sensibility.

JG: Thank you so much for your time today. It’s been absolutely wonderful talking with you, and I really, really appreciate it.

MW: Thank you. You’re very kind. Thanks.

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