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Peter Eisenman | IN DIALOGUE
WITH ARCHITECTS
AND PHILOSOPHERS

Edited by: Vladan Djokić & Petar Bojanić

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OPENING |

Vladan Djokić
Petar Bojanić

in dialogue with
PETER EISENMAN

Vladan Djokić: Dear students and my respectable participants of the conference, on behalf of the University of Belgrade Faculty of Architecture, it is my pleasure to announce the opening of the conference *ISSUES? Concerning the Projects of Peter Eisenman*. The Belgrade Faculty of Architecture is the most important academic institution of the architectural profession in our country and the region. It is a particularly attractive environment for the development and improvement of the profession, which encompasses humanities, arts, and technology.

In this context, the aim of the Faculty of Architecture is establishment of a strategy in order to increase and disseminate knowledge of architecture in the fields of education and research. The task of the Faculty is to ensure the freedom of research, intellectual and scientific thinking, to strengthen regional and transnational scientific cooperation and join work in architectural discourses in the context of contemporary development.

Each school has some special moments in its history. I am confident that this conference is a very special moment for the Belgrade Faculty of Architecture. We have the unique opportunity to host Peter Eisenman, one of the world's leading architects, probably the person who has made the greatest impact in theoretical and educational discourse of architecture.

This time last year, we had a great experience with the conference *Architectural Deconstruction: The Spectre of Jacques Derrida*. At that time, Mr. Eisenman was not able to come to Belgrade, and he participated in the conference through Skype. He promised us that he would come this year to Belgrade, and he will arrive today.

Besides Peter Eisenman, I would like to express my great satisfaction and gladness and welcome all participants of the conferences coming from top American and European architectural schools who will participate in a series of discussions with Peter Eisenman. I must tell you that this event attracts attention and publicity not only in our country, but in the region and further. As far as I have been informed, the audience has an international character, bringing colleagues and students from a dozen European countries, including Italy, Greece, Poland, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, etc.

The conference is focused on Peter Eisenman's long and outstanding activity regarding the architectural discourse. Thematization of almost 50 years of his theoretical and educational work and almost 25 years of his full-time architectural practice is seen here as vital to understanding both the past and the present of contemporary architecture.

Built upon our previous experience with the *Architectural Deconstruction* conference, this year's conference will provide a new and challenging form of interaction. The conference is organized in six sessions as a form of thematic conversations with Peter Eisenman regarding his work. The sessions are titled: *Form. Space, Digital. Analog, Discipline. Autonomy, History: Alberti, Palladio, Differentiating Eisenman, and Against Eisenman*. At the end of the event tomorrow evening, Peter Eisenman will give a closing lecture.

Highly ranked among many schools in the world, the Faculty of Architecture continues to strive for excellence in teaching, improvement in fundamental and practical research, instilling students with a sense of ethics and social responsibility, and sharing enthusiasm for research and awareness of the scientific challenges of the present and the future.

I am confident in the ability of the participants of this conference to meet all the incoming challenges. Thank you.

Petar Bojanić: First of all, in the name of the Center for Ethics, Law and Applied Philosophy, let me thank all of you for coming, and especially the students and doctoral candidates of the Faculty of Architecture. I must thank Nataša Janković and Aleksandar Kušić, without whom nothing would run. I would also like to thank the director

of this cultural center for their hospitality. Many years ago, when I was still in primary school – I spent my first eight years of education very near this building – entire generations of students spent hours in this very room watching war films about *Partisans*. My memory of the events was that this wall, the screen, it was always completely red, the screen shots were full of blood, tears, the noise was terrifying, that we were in agony every time, but that we emerged out of this hall happy because our side won, because we won.

This conference is practically a continuation of the one dedicated to deconstruction and architecture (Jacques Derrida at the time held the status of specter, since the subheading of the conference last October was “The Specter of Jacques Derrida”). As many of you recall, Peter Eisenman, who we will welcome together in a few minutes, was at the time constantly invoked. Although he was not with us then (Jeff Kipnis, the co-editor of that conference, along with Tschumi, Marguerite Derrida, etc., talked to him via Skype), Peter Eisenman was, in a manner of speaking, more present than anyone else. Allow me to use this hint at the beginning of this conference regarding the presence or absence of Eisenman (how was it that Eisenman was more present than ourselves?) to insist on a few key points that offer a possible resolution to the dilemma why we are all here in this room in Belgrade today and tomorrow, and why we should together think the work and Project of Peter Eisenman.

First, we are here because Peter Eisenman does not know what he is doing. Better still, he says or often thinks he does not know what he is doing. We are here to help him by helping ourselves, or conversely and even better, we are here to learn, we are here to help ourselves possibly by altering a sentence Peter uttered earlier this year: “If you said, look Peter, you talk a lot about the idea of a project, what is your project? I’m still trying to figure out what my project is.” In that case, we are here to add another chapter to a long book (“the book of books”), still in the making yet already finished at its beginning, entitled *Eisenmanual* (“the book we are working on now,” says the Eisenman of 2006). Some of you know what I am speaking about, and others have even seen this book. It is important that this book exist, that it be crafted by many (that it be the result of joint work), and that you all one day hold it in your hands, because it is an object.

Second, we are here today and tomorrow to think through a paradox and a necessity, the limit between the architect and the great philosopher Eisenman (one of the last true simultaneous readers and writers), the limit between Eisenman the builder and Eisenman the writer, and finally to think the dissolved limit between the work and Project of Peter Eisenman. For that reason there is no session especially dedicated to philosophy, nor should this surprise anyone, and it certainly does not surprise me, one who is, if you will allow me the opposition to Peter and you, a philosopher. In a way I am sorry that Michael Haneke, the director, was prevented from joining us today (the session "Opticality" is here missing) and of course, we are missing a session on football (by which I mean soccer). We urgently need to examine the love and nature of thousands of bits of trivia about various football teams, names of players, repetition of names and the status of memory and repetition in the architecture and the architect Eisenman (in August of this year I asked for the German team sheet against Yugoslavia in 1972, whereupon he offered details and began to recite the Schalke 04 players from that season). Certainly, we would not be here had Eisenman built nothing, had he not listened to Manfredo Tafuri who told him the following: "Peter, you have to build because ideas that are not built are simply ideas that are not built." However, Eisenman would also not be here with us today had he not followed another simultaneous dictum or principle, which he mentions in a 2004 interview to the German *Zeit* (the title of the interview is "*Ich war ein Nichts*" or I was a nothing): "*Alle grossen Architeckten sind gross dank ihrer Buecher*" (all great architects were great thanks to their books).

Third, I think that it is important for us here to salute a translation into Serbian of a book by Eisenman, composed of the most important texts from the first period of his work. In coming up with a title for the translation of the English original *Inside Out*, Vladan Djokić, Sanja Milutinović and myself dared calling this period of Eisenman's work *O idealnom objektu arhitekture* (that is, *On the Ideal Object of Architecture*). This is a twist on Derrida's testimony that his interest in philosophy was only secondary to him, that

he had to prepare himself for philosophy, or, even better, that philosophy prepares for something much more important, that he really wanted to write a thesis “on the ideal object of literature.” But it seems to me that the examination of the “ideal object” is the essential endeavor of “writing architecture” and truly one of the most important gestures of what Eisenman calls “architectural philosophy.” The ideal object of architecture is correlative to the examinations of the form, thinking the “interiority of architecture,” the theory and conservation of the discipline of architecture, but also to the incessant insistence of Eisenman on the correct reading (this is the key “educational act or gesture”), the disciplined reader and analyst, the disciplined architect who defends tradition and the architectural discipline by analyzing it and deconstructing it beyond all improvisation. Why? In order to create through analysis, to create through reading, in order to act. In a letter to Derrida (“A Reply to Jacques Derrida”) from 1990 – this letter is the reason Eisenman’s engagement is more than philosophical (he creates new concepts thus satisfying Gilles Deleuze’s criterion of what a philosopher does and ought to do), and the reason for the dilemma regarding Eisenman’s presence greater than any presence – he writes:

In my view, your deconstruction of the presence/absence dialectic is inadequate for architecture precisely because architecture is not two-term, but a three-term system. In architecture, there is another condition, which I call presentness, that is neither absence nor presence, form nor function, neither particular use of sign nor the crude existence of reality, but rather an excessive condition between sign and the Heideggerian notion of being: the formation and ordering of the discursive event that is architecture. (...) You see, Jacques, it is one thing to speak theoretically about these matters and it is another thing to act on them. (...) My architecture cannot be what it should be, but only what it can be. Only when you add one more reading of my work alongside your reading of it in pictures and texts – that is, a reading in the event of a building – only there will you see the play between presence and presentness, only then will you know whether I have been faithful.

I will use Eisenman's "only when you add one more reading" to once again offer my most heartfelt thanks to all of you here, who have come from various countries to once again read and analyze together. In particular I would like to thank, and Peter will allow me to do so in his name as well, since he participated actively in the drawing up of this program, Sarah Whiting who arrives early tomorrow from Houston (and is here only a single day), who wrote about Eisenman in inspiring fashion, and who is, as you can see, ready for one more reading. What is a friend, my dear friends? Quite simply, one who is ready for one more reading, always one more reading and one more analysis. In order to delay violence it is necessary to always once more focus and turn one's attention. Sadly, there are some notable absences here today and tomorrow, such as Sylvia Lavin, Thomas Weaver, Akira Asada, Pier Vittorio Aureli, Tony Vidler, Mark Jarzombek, but we will see them at the follow up to this conference. Since Peter Eisenman is an honorary fellow of the Centre for Advanced Studies – Southeast Europe, based in Rijeka, where several of us are also engaged, it is possible that we will meet again in the near future.

That being said, we are forced to amend today's program slightly: the first afternoon session will be a bit shorter to enable us to meet Greg Lynn online. He joins us at 7pm from Los Angeles to once again discuss the digital with Peter Eisenman. This special appearance of Lynn at the end of our day will be a promise and possibility to hold a conference in Belgrade next year, a follow up to this year's "Archeology of the Digital," held in Montreal and organized by Lynn. With that in mind I would like to salute his excellency, the Canadian Ambassador to Serbia. Finally, at the beginning, let me insist on the fact that these discussions and readings of Eisenman's work and Project are in reality an appreciation and recognition of his engagement in architecture. It seems to me that it has been a long while since we have seen an architect analyze in such meticulous detail the work of other architects, old and contemporary, learn from them, study and analyze their work and projects before students, write about them and interview them (in issue 28 of the magazine "Log," edited by Cynthia, Eisenman discusses the work of some of you present here today). In this way, his work has

become richer and more complex, while the possibility of analyzing it once again has become ever more difficult.

I wish you all good luck, and I wish, of course, that you emerge from this room the way I did all those years ago.

Dear friends, please welcome our host here today, Peter Eisenman.

Peter Eisenman: First of all, it is necessary to point out the irony, or the double meaning, in Petar's introduction, which is slightly critical. Because as Petar well knows, one of the best critiques of my work was written by Jacques Derrida, who wrote, "Why does Peter Eisenman write such good books?" And of course, writing a good book in the Derridean idiom is not positive. Therefore, it was interesting that Bojanić spent quite a bit of time talking about the good books that I have written. So I caution you all about thinking that this was positive. The second point is that the search for a project, which Petar talked about, is probably one of the issues that will animate this conference. There is a problematic condition in present architectural work as to what constitutes a project and what the nature of a possible project today is. And of course, that is a problem that all of the participants will address – not only about their own work, but also about the work of other colleagues.

Third, my own work has always been formed, in a way, as a dialectical condition – that is as a resistance to the accepted terminologies of my three different mentors. The first being Colin Rowe, the second being Manfredo Tafuri, and the third being Jacques Derrida. Each one, in turn, not only rejected, but also resented the mentorship of the previous person. It was clear to me that Manfredo Tafuri wanted to extricate my thinking from the work of Colin Rowe. And indeed, it was something that was very appealing to me, because since my dissertation in Cambridge in 1963, to move away from the almost suffocating nature of the teachings of Colin Rowe was necessary.

To this day, it is problematic for me to understand what the alternatives within architecture and the city are to Colin Rowe's idea of contextualism. It is a problem that I grapple with all the time. Questioning, what is the difference between the work I do and that of Colin Rowe? And of course, one of the issues that stands between

my work and Rowe is the question of the ideal. It was the ideal that in some way animated Rowe's work, which was not possible for me to accept. That put me in a closer relationship with Tafuri. And then there was an anxiety in the work of Jacques Derrida. Both Tafuri and Rowe objected to the questioning of architecture through a philosophic-linguistic system of signs, which attracted me to the work of Derrida.

Tafuri would often say to me that my work was a trap for any critic or philosopher in that it was a closed system that had its own rules and priorities, and that if you accepted those rules and priorities, it was impossible to make a critique. Of course, it was an important moment in my work, to do a project with Derrida – a project where both of us had an understanding of the difficulties in dealing with the other person. What Jacques and I realized after the work was that architecture and philosophy were two different disciplines and it was difficult to put them together. I realized that one of the important issues in architecture was the ability and capacity to be able to *see* as an architect, and I realized that philosophers don't *see*. Certainly, they do not see as architects. It is difficult for a philosopher to understand what is meant by *seeing* architecture.

In fact, my first lesson in architecture was precisely about how to *see* as an architect. When I was with Colin Rowe in 1961 on my first trip to Italy, Colin put me in front of a Palladian villa while he drank a beer in a café. And he said, "Peter, go look at the building and tell me something that you see that's not physically there." And of course, as a young architect, I did not know what he meant; *see* what is not there. In fact, that is precisely what learning to *see* as an architect is.

But what is so interesting about the relationship that Jacques and I had was in the book *Chora L Works*, during the project in Paris. Jacques, after looking at the project and adding his own drawing to the project, said that the problem with the work was that we were doing a garden and he wanted to know where the benches were. And I said to him, "Jacques, where are the benches in your texts?" Because there are no benches in either place.

And finally, when we published the book, it was important for me to punch holes in the book as a literal idea of absence in presence. So we

went to great expense to punch holes through the book – symbolic holes, as it were – that were very important to the idea of the book. Clearly Jacques understood what the holes were about, because he insisted that he get a copy without holes, saying: “You punched holes in my text?”

To conclude, what is important is that not one of Rowe, Tafuri or Derrida, at the time they expired, was talking to Peter Eisenman. I trust, at the end of today’s session, that all of the critics and friends that are here will still be talking to me.



Peter Eisenman, Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, 1998-2005, Berlin, Germany