

Architecture and Education I Interview 8

Marcel Meili I July 2013

Samuel Penn: I'd like begin by asking how you were taught history at the ETH and how it influenced your thinking. The reason I ask is because you were taught during a very specific and transitional period where the stable teaching of a modernist history programme was challenged by Aldo Rossi.

Marcel Meili: We had a very clear and specific way of being taught history. At the time it was the most important focus in the school. It came from the neo-rationalism of Aldo Rossi – of course he was very interested in history. But what's more important is that we were surrounded by an intelligent young faculty, like Bruno Reichlin and Martin Steinman, and then we had an old professor called Paul Hofer, I think he was one of the most significant historians of urbanism. Hofer was truly outstanding. He was an old man, a very impressive intellectual with enormous knowledge. So for me of course, the whole topic of history was central to my design career. Our first projects can all be explained through their relation to history – let's say modern history and the theoretical content of modernity in Switzerland. I mean it's still something that moves me. I read a lot about history. But today our design techniques are not analogous like they were in the past, but I would say, I couldn't design without a stable background of history – knowing my position within the architectural topography of the last 200 hundred years. So yes, frankly I think even today history is at the core of what I do in design.

SP: Last year I was at the Venice Biennale, on the panel at one of the Salon Suisse talks, and the last questions of the evening was 'is history important?' and everyone said 'yes of course history is important'. And then we didn't really have the time to explore or clarify in what way it's important – because there's two sorts of historical thinking. There's the one where the study of history helps you understand which context you're working in – like you just said – and then there's one in which it directly informs your architecture formally or stylistically.

MM: Yes. I think last year in Venice it was the latter. 'Analogous' architecture is something, a direction, that takes elements from history, to rebuild them. We don't ascribe to this anymore. Maybe we did in the past. You know, I worked together with Miroslav Sik at the ETH for a long time, almost ten years. I think history is important for me because our time is not one of rupture, of a break, or the let's just say that we are not on the way to formulate a new paradigm, in my opinion. We could speculate about this in philosophical terms, but I think it's important. Therefore history for me provides the intellectual topography to know where I'm going. You know, it would be very naïve of me to think that the things I'm doing are inventions or expressions of my soul. These things don't interest me at all. History for me is something about the politics of the design. You know, it's the way I communicate to the general culture, and also to its political aggregate state. I don't know if this helps to answer your question. I think I'm more expert in history since the beginning of the 19th century, than Alberti or Vitruvius for example. I try to redefine my status as a subject that is part of a modern society through my projects. You know, I still think that we're working within the modernist paradigm. Postmodern architecture could only happen within modernity – it is the clearest expression of modernism.

SP: Is it the final result of modernity?

MM: It could only happen within modernity. And I think it was a precise expression. There is no major paradigm change within society at the moment, let's say within the last forty years and maybe even the next thirty, I don't know for sure of course. But we are not working in a time of change. We are working in a time which is about continuity, with history, and links to the intellectual development of Western society since 19 hundred.

SP: Some might say that the return to history as a subject, that particular re-evocation of history, or even historic elements, was because of a moment of crisis – of rupture in society?

MM: Yes, that's what I wanted to say about postmodernism. It was a diagnosis of the crisis – yes. You know I have to be very clear, for me history is an intellectual problem, not a formal problem. Or maybe it's not even a problem. You can't avoid it.

SP: Why do think it became such a formalist tendency in the writings of Reichlin and Reinhardt?

MM: I think it's specifically because Bruno Reichlin started to redefine Rossi's position as semiotic – working with formal meanings. Forms started to become part of a kind of language. It is exactly the same reason postmodernism grew – it was an important reason, it was one of the first trials to

understand modernity as heritage – even in its ambiguous aspects; mass production and so on. I don't know if you ever met Bruno Reichlin? He's an extremely bright individual. He's one of the few, maybe the only, real intellectual I know in architecture. He's extremely well educated, has a tremendous knowledge, not only of the Mannerist material he is working with, but he is regarded as an expert in the history of modern architecture worldwide. More than the Americans. He's a fantastic authority.

SP: You made a very clear distinction between the topography of modern historic knowledge from the post-industrial revolution onward – let's say the 1880's with people like Wagner...

MM: No no, earlier. I start before Semper and Schinkel. This is what I consider and try to understand as the modern corpus of knowledge in contemporary society.

SP: And before that it's somehow more or less irrelevant... a different epoch?

MM: No, it's not irrelevant at all, but it's an aristocratic society... a pre-industrial society, it is a stratified society in a completely different way.

SP: So could you ignore these other older periods in principle?

MM: I'm not saying that I begin with modernity at the expense of other periods. I also know Vitruvius and Alberti and have quite an extended interest in Baroque architecture. No, it's more that in the first half of the nineteenth century there is a real shift within the intellectual concept of architecture which is linked to a new economy and organisation of society, and of course also new types of production which mark the beginning of the modern world.

SP: Would you say that the reading of history informs your design?

MM: First of all I would say that this is one of the major points. That of course I discovered history by going to lectures and reading a lot. But the key moment is when you start dealing with history in the design itself – that moment is charged with the most energy. The problems we encounter as designers are for Markus and me a trigger to deal with historic issues in a more precise and even academic way. What really interests me in architecture is the media itself. Through design I'm able to discover my own status in contemporary culture. I learned about my contemporary condition through the project, and I think this is fantastic – maybe movies are the same but there are not many disciplines which have this aspect, that you can use it as a tool to drill into reality – economy, art and sociology and so on – and this was also the case in the terms of discovery of history, my main interest always came from the design question. So for example I only got to know Mies van der Rohe through solving edges, corners or tectonic aspects which I wanted to understand and get to know.

SP: This seems to be a very contemporary condition – discovering yourself and your own position in society through the work. I would say that this is perhaps unique to the times we are working in. It's not the way that architects thought about their practice before.

MM: No, not for a long time.

SP: Studio Basel carries out research into contemporary life conditions of urban societies – after all the research, how does all the acquired knowledge feed in to the actual production of architecture?

MM: I'll try to explain it to you because we are often asked that question. You have to understand that Studio Basel is a political project. It is a concept for a school that is extremely focused on design and construction problems and making projects. We have quite a traditional concept. It's one of the very few important international schools that still teaches architecture as a profession. All of us, all the four teachers, have also taught in the United States in Harvard – and there you could see, because of the crisis of architecture there, that the students had much more intellectual and scientific interests, and they were also more able to dig into theoretical problems. Studio Basel was our contribution to open the soul and the intellectual angle of our students. We think that architecture is undergoing such an enormous crisis of professional status at the moment – students have to be much more inventive in relation to their profession, and they have much more to understand about the society they work in. When I studied to become a professional architect it was very different. Switzerland is years behind, so that means we still have a profession that is well regarded, but this makes the students here have an ambivalent intellectual status. We would like to, through their project, make them curious about the

society they work in and to help them understand what the conditions of the cultures are. That's what I mean about it being a political project. Our research tries to add an aspect to ETH students in a field in which they are clearly weaker than, let's say, AA students or specifically American students.

SP: If there is a political dimension to the work of the school, it would also mean that the school has a political position?

MM: No no, I don't think the word 'political' has the same connotation in English. When I'm talking of the political, I'm not talking about it in general terms, but more the political positions of the four teachers in relation to how architecture is taught at the ETH. It's not about whether we have a left or right leaning. It's more about the politics of intervening into the field of structural power. And education is of course a structural power.

SP: If I were to presuppose something about the work of the school, I would say that it's position could be seen as offering resistance to the globalising tendencies of architectural production?

MM: Yes of course it's a position. Our new book is called 'Specificity' for this reason. We think there is such a thing as globalisation, even in architecture. But to a certain extent Studio Basel is anti, or rather a complementary position to Koolhaas' term of the generic. Because we think that on this globe, even if there is an enormous synchronising of different cultures into what we could define as globalisation, there are nonetheless so many conditions that you can't avoid – there are different climates, topographies, modes of production and coming back to history, even the heritage of a society is almost a natural condition. You can't just ignore this. What we think is that the interaction of all these aspects, even under globalisation constantly produces fresh specificities. We think that a city is in a biological sense almost like a person or an individual in a mass society. Producing identity is a part of the human condition. We think that cities to a certain extent have the same tendency – to produce a kind of cultural USP (unique selling point) that makes them an identifiable player within the global concert. It's true what you say – Basel is a about specificity.

SP: And the position is, somehow to explain that globalisation is marginal?

MM: No, there is globalisation but it's not so interesting to justify your project within the context of globalisation. We think that the project is in fact a kind of digging into the specificity of conditions – to work them out. This is definitely a position and this is also the position of the four teachers (Roger Diener, Jacques Herzog, Marcel Meili, Pierre de Meuron). Our architectural work is always about local culture or a specific historic situation.

SP: Can we go back to the operative use of history forms in certain design studios. Why do you think this tendency developed?

MM: I only know it in the case of Miroslav Sik. In this case it was also a political position. Miroslav had the target that he wanted to make architecture that was part of a specific culture, and where people, like his grandmother, would still have the chance to understand it – to somehow link it to the everyday experience. Therefore he takes elements of common architecture to nobelise them but in a recognisable form. He wants his architecture to be a language that talks to society in a non elitarian way, at least this is his aim. For him it was always very important to somehow end the functional, progressive aspects of modernity which no normal subject had the chance to understand.

SP: Is it not a very conservative position?

MM: Yes it is. definitely. I think Miroslav wouldn't deny it. I think it would be much more interesting to talk about this with Caruso St.John. That would be interesting.

SP: We have tried in the past. It's kind of the reason I wanted to ask this because of course this trend also developed in Britain in London, with Sergison Bates as well. Before architects were the makers, the doers, the pragmatists to some extent – and academics delivered lecture courses based on a received 'art history' canon. And now this anathema has evolved, perhaps unwittingly, where some have even started to talk about their 'personal canon'...

MM: Yes this is definitely the case with Caruso St.John...

SP: Re-writing the canon of architecture for themselves. Personally I think this is dangerous, but I'm also curious to understand why it has become the default position. Has it become an easy method for the production of architecture?

MM: I don't know if it's easy but it is a method. It's definitely a procedure which you can handle.

SP: We find in the UK schools that there is more and more talk about integrating history teaching in to the design studios. Then it becomes something that can be used instrumentally – and the danger is that the teachers may not have a great knowledge or even understand why they are doing what they're doing – it's just their personal tastes. So, do you think it's still important to teach history formally and if so, what does it provide the student? Also do you think we can still talk of a received architectural canon?

MM: To have a historic survey is of course important, just to have a rough understanding about how things changed. I mean even in technology I'm not so much in favour of including technology into the project at school – because it always remains very conceptual and theoretical. Because today technology in design is a question of the dialogue with the engineers, with the firms, with the builders, and everything else is a fairytale. You can draw anything, whatever you want. What I just want to say is that architecture as a media is also true for technology – you know, if you have a large span over a hole, you can imagine fifteen ways to manage this. And then you decide on one and start to investigate, and there it starts to become interesting, then you have to have a scientific and a historic interest. Because these fifteen ways to solve the problem are all inherited from history. They are part of an intellectual history of a profession – the profession of the engineer. I think this is what I would like to teach the students – that they should understand the enormous strength of the design to discover things, through thinking consequently, not just by adding form to form, but to use it as a trigger for research into reality. The student can't start to understand this if there are limitless aspects to deal with, but maybe with two or three he will be able to make steps into the field – to begin to understand history. For example, if somebody has a glass façade, and as a teacher you go there and say – well this is not an edge that work, this is just technology not architecture, you should study how modern architecture manages edges. Then, sooner or later he will end up with Mies van der Rohe or with Corbusier, or with Gropius, to understand what it means to draw an edge – the most simple thing – architectural design is basically or theoretically the moment when you draw a line and at a certain moment you decide to make an edge. It's an extremely simple position which is in fact, in reality extremely complicated and loaded with the history of mankind, and you have to be able to find it a problem to go around the edge, or to have a span of thirty meters. It's not a record breaking problem, it's easy, there are thousands of examples, but there are reasons why you choose a certain concept of managing this span.

SP: Is this not the history of tectonics?

MM: Yes, this is true. This is one of the most interesting aspects. I think here I also agree with Adam Caruso. There are a couple of aspects which are historically interesting. I would say that structural engineering also has an enormously interesting history. It's a lot about the scientific history. But for example, in terms of function, I mean we've been living in houses since before the seventeenth century, so the concept of 'use' for example is in reality an enormously interesting aspect of the history of architecture.

SP: I read a book by Peter Collins called Architectural Judgement which cites the possible similarities between how architects and lawyers are taught. They learn by 'case study' or 'case history' – they never study the history of law itself...

MM: Yes of course, enormous volumes of cases.

SP: Could architecture be the same?

Marcel Meili: Yes, there is somehow a similarity. I learned this through the studio of Rossi and through people like Martin Steinman, or Bruno Reichlin – that whatever modernity tells you, you are never inventing anything. Everything has a precedent and either you know it or not – and maybe you don't have to handle it like a lawyer, but it is important to be aware that you are in a flow of human development in everything that you do.

SP: Are you not denying the possibility of determinism? There is very little agency left otherwise.

MM: No this is not true. Language for example has a given structure over decades but you can formulate extremely revolutionary things with the same language that was used by Heinrich Heine. This is what architecture is about. Knowing about the history of your decisions doesn't mean you have to reproduce them in a certain manner. But you can also explore the potential to rearrange new solutions or produce new answers to new conditions. For me, the development of architecture is always an answer to the more general development of the society. Otherwise I'm not so interested. I think progress itself is a very weird idea...

SP: But it's also held a lot of sway since the enlightenment. It's a very strong idea!

MM: Yes, it's a very strong idea, but today I think we have to be very critical about it because it tends to be a value in itself – just progress...

SP: What do you think the most important question for architecture is today?

MM: Maybe this is a bit general, but I think architecture has to regain its ability to have a real dialogue with its society – with the development of its society – not be separated, and not only to be obsessed with their own topics within their own academic spheres. I think it's a big issue to be able to react to contemporary conditions, to give answers to society's unsolved questions – questions of the built environment. I would say that for me this would be the major challenge. I would be very happy if I could contribute a little bit toward that goal.

SP: Where and when do you think this separation of the architectural discipline and society took place?

MM: This is a bit of a polemical, but I think it started the moment when the modern architect discovered that their propaganda about their dialogue with society was not true – that they didn't succeed to do what they intended at the level of technology or sociology. Therefore I would say the phase where it got really obvious was in the early sixties.

SP: So, after Rayner Banham and so on...

MM: Yes, and after all the humanism of the Scandinavian or Italian architecture. After certain Team X efforts.

Samuel Penn: After what were seen as several social failures?

MM: Yes, but it was still important to try. For instance if Candilis Josic Woods did propaganda for his growing structures and of course they thought they were dealing with real life. But in fact it was an interesting discovery that was purely autonomous in reality. It solved a problem of architecture, not of the society.

SP: And then people like Rossi in the fifties and sixties – do they fill the void left over by the perceived failure of modernism with history?

MM: Yes. Rossi referred to a society where it still worked but from about 120 years ago! What nobody really understood was that Rossi was a completely Lombardian architect. He was like an anthropologist of Lombardian early post-enlightenment society. And at that level he was of course very poetic. The idea of 'type' for example is not so far removed from the efforts of Miroslav Sik, to regain certain elements which are stable and understood within a society. You root your project on this archaic language where you really meet the essence of a certain society.

SP: In my investigation of the new Swiss schools of thought – perhaps this is to be expected – but even the ones that seem to have very different positions, all essentially come from the same base. When you look at it dispassionately they are all arguing for the specificity and autonomy of architecture and that it should be general enough to be understood by society. They are all arguing the same point. They, whether they like it or not, are all children of Aldo Rossi.

MM: I think the major contribution of Aldo Rossi and neo-rationalism was that they initiated a break with the late modern schools at the beginning of the seventies. There were still a couple of teachers that had been in the atelier of Le Corbusier or with Colin Rowe. They interrupted an intellectual automatism of late modern reproduction of knowledge. The topos of the role of technology or the

topos of the value of methodology – that you somehow have to frame your thoughts with a method that leads you to the project were all part of the modernist education at the ETH. Rossi and his followers interrupted that with an enormous violence and we were all overwhelmed by it. Because it suddenly opened a field of enormous freedom. It linked back the project to yourself as a person, but maybe more biographically rather than the expression of feelings or originality.

SP: So what should we teach to students of architecture? To a degree the heterogeneous nature of the discipline makes it very hard to decipher the core subject from the biographical.

MM: For me the important idea is the idea of continuity. Feeling that things have a source. In fact there wasn't a real break – not even postmodernism was a real break. It was like an essay that tried to rearrange the intellectual topography of the discipline but within modernity. Today it is still necessary to teach a theoretical understanding of what modernity is, because it's the base of our existence, as far as I'm concerned. I would start with that. I would start with models of definition in what modernity is - and that modernity is still our contemporary condition.

SP: Where you would locate the beginning of modernity – not architecturally but culturally?

MM: That's quite difficult. Maybe with the first discussions of what we now call democracy. When it starts to become part of the engine of society. After the French revolution.

SP: With the democratic establishing of nations – and in Germany, in this area, that would have been in the mid-nineteenth century. Could you imagine an architectural education without this kind of historic programme?

MM: No, not at all. You know I always said to make a good architectural school you only need six teachers – four very gifted design teachers in every year, an engineer and a historian – and the rest you can invite. The historian is an essential part of the set for me.