

the
question,
"What have
I done?"
is one that
we may
well ask
ourselves

to our readers...

We have witnessed a political agenda marked by consensus rather than conflict—a democracy more recognizable in stalemated than in action. Political subjectivity and difference has been stifled and “politics,” a set of practices and power relations that organize social order, has been relegated to the realm of mere management and administration. However, after the seemingly unchallenged triumph of neoliberalism, we find ourselves in the midst of global unrest and disillusionment. From Ferguson to Hong Kong, diffused systems of power and control that underpin the everyday have become glaringly obvious.

We prioritize “the political” over “politics.” For us “the political” (*le politique*) is inherently conflictual. It is the space where power is challenged and reordered. In this third volume of *the political*, we explore how architecture stands as a series of actions—how architecture itself acts politically. Architectural practice is a medium of dissent with the potential to occupy, resist, reject, topple, subvert, and criticize current hegemonic systems and ideologies. An alternative cannot exist

without an existing, opposing term, position, and possibility. As architects, we propose new forms and images, but also think about the tactics to achieve those ends. This volume is concerned with strategies that promote friction and provide space for the political.

Everything we do “as architects,” we do first as citizens. The figure of the architect is a social, legal, and economic construction—it is also a dangerous illusion. This figure is produced by the false separation between architect and citizen. Once divided, the figure is called on to formalize and secure meaning; interpellated into the larger patronage system that stabilizes normative power relations. This system asks the architect only to respond “on behalf of,” rather than “as.” Specifically as architects and citizens, we ask: how can one interrupt this process through understanding their historical position? What does one do when they hear the call from power? In this episode, we speak with Mary McLeod and Reinhold Martin about answering the call.

interrogate how we’re formed

Mary McCleod and Reinhold Martin in conversation with LW, IKL, W, G and C. Recorded May 8th, 2015.

LW: One characteristic that we have defined in our interpretation of the political is that in order for a situation to be political there must exist conflict or antagonism.

IKL: Our interest is also in the figure of the architect. How can the politics of that figure, professionally or personally, affect the agency of the architect? What are the tools or tactics that we can use as young architects as we are preparing to enter the professional field?

W: We have spoken to educators, practitioners, and artists, and we wanted to involve history in this conversation, specifically how architectural history itself is political. How, as historians, would you align yourself with a political approach or how does your research unearth the political in architecture?

MM: A deep historical understanding helps one understand politics. For me history involves causality, which not all historians deal with—especially since Foucault. One can begin to understand power relations through specific historical circumstances and conditions. What people, buildings, geographical areas have been included and excluded? Who has and hasn’t been served by architecture? Historians can help elucidate these issues. As a woman, I am especially committed to showing the ways in which architecture has excluded or included women. To what extent have women had a role, whether as designers, clients, or critics? To what extent have they contributed to transforming the profession and in ways that have not been fully acknowledged—for example, the inclusion of the domestic interior (especially the kitchen) as a subject of design consideration. But apart from work as a historian, there is also, of course, engagement with politics as a citizen.

RM: Before trying to say something about what historians may or may not contribute to this discussion, if it’s permissible, I will refer to this idea of the figure of the architect. I would start by discarding that concept. Not because it’s untrue that there are figures who are constructed in a certain way and enact a set of norms and so on, but because every step along the way there is politics in multiple senses. We could talk about three senses here: The first is politics as power or power-knowledge, the second is politics in the agonistic sense that you refer to, and the third is politics as the enactment of ideologies, both as beliefs and precisely the opposite—what you do when you don’t think that you’re doing it.

Real and imagined figures are central to all those activities, but if you’re thinking about what it means to be a professionally accredited practitioner of this thing that we call architecture, you might try to get underneath all of that. It seems to me that’s where this problem begins: in the production of a profession. There, you’ll find an opportunity to think historically about what it means to be a professional in a particular society or economic circumstance. Rather than presuppose as an *a priori* some kind of figure who behaves in certain ways, you could also just pretend for a minute that you’re not architects—this might be the best way to deal with it.

IKL: Yes. I think what we mean by the figure of the architect is only someone who has a specialized set of skills or tools—knowledge that can be used to enact certain politics.

MM: However, I don’t think one can see the figure of the architect or historian as someone who is defined simply by a preexisting set of skills or knowledge. Sometimes you can change, bend, or expand the profession and the boundaries of practice. This is why I would not totally dispense with the role of the figure or individual practitioner and historian. It is an issue of agency. It’s important to interrogate how we’re formed, and to what extent we contribute to that formation. And I believe we can act and help bring at times change. I am of the generation that still believes this is possible—and part of our responsibility.

G: Something that came up in our conversation with Ai Weiwei was that his historical project is specifically about unveiling certain histories that have been ignored or

intentionally not revealed.¹ History is not static. Are there new histories in your own practice that you are actively trying to inject into the discussion?

MM: I do think that there’s a way that historians can bring to the fore new histories—understudied subjects—whether for critical purposes or to suggest constructive possibilities. History can help open up new avenues for exploration.

RM: We could say that there are also certain ‘yes’ or ‘no’ moments in history. But they are very difficult to identify. If we study a figure like Le Corbusier as Mary has, somebody might say in his defense that he had no choice but to work in his political climate. Others would say that of course he had a choice. The fact is that at some level there is always going to be some kind of a choice. Maybe we can say that there are moments of truth in which the choices really reveal the truth of the situation.

One moment that’s much closer to us was a choice made in the early 2000s here in New York in terms of what, strictly as a professional culture, architects were going to do either collectively or individually to address, not specifically 9/11, but the broader context that became visibly authoritarian before our eyes.

MM: If you remember, right after 9/11 we had a big conference at GSAPP, a kind of workshop, in which we hoped to assess critically the implications of the World Trade Center’s destruction and to think constructively about options for the site. The question remains how effective these discussions were. Lots of things were put on the table, but that didn’t stop what has happened downtown. I don’t want to be too black and white, but the last thing I thought we’d get was the Freedom Tower.

C: I want to go back to the question of agency. In the quote that we used on the poster for our conversation with Peggy Deamer and Paul Segal, Le Corbusier writes, “I am an architect; no one is going to make a politician of me.”² There is the notion that the architect can choose to ‘disengage’ from the political dimension in the designing and building space. Reinhold, you criticize this in your essay, “Critical of What?,” specifically the United Artists’ proposal as a purely formal gesture—something that does not respond to the political situation in the face of an act of terrorism.³

RM: My position was that this proposal was a political gesture—that in enacting a kind of artistic formalism, one is participating in a certain kind of politics. It is not just simply that one wears a political affiliation on their sleeve, or waves a flag at a march. To expand on this just a bit... The formalism was what was being asked for, a symbol, a work of art. This was not just the United Artists proposal. It was what almost everyone did. To offer what was politically necessary, this is what collectively architecture had decided it was going to do. This is a slightly different argument—it modifies the historical critique that we would associate with someone like Tafuri vis-à-vis relations of power, but that’s a more esoteric conversation.

C: Yes, the United Artists proposal was political, but was it political because of the context in which it was put forth or because of the architects’ design decisions? This goes back to Vichy’s Le Corbusier, if everything is political when in a context, that seems to dissuade an engagement with it—no one feels like they have agency.

RM: Here is a reductive but accurate summary: If the police call and you turn, you’re interpellated. In this way, architects have long been interpellated into the patronage system associated with formal politics—from presidential power all the way down to cultural politics. The call in this case was to produce meaning, to produce a thing that could be used symbolically to figure triumph, along with all the usual clichés that are part of that. The problem was not that a series of clichés were produced in response. The problem was that the professional project of producing meaning in response to an over determined political situation was not interrogated.

the political

MM: Of course the issue of meaning in architecture gets complicated because it can change over time. In my “Politics of Space” seminar, one of the subjects we consider is monuments, and to what extent their meanings depend on a particular historical context, even if the monuments were intended, almost by definition, to be static, permanent. I don’t think we can freeze or fix meaning. For me, from a political perspective, Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial was about as good a solution as was possible. It really challenged many assumptions and values, while also allowing people to grieve, but its meaning too will change over time.

RM: I chose the example of the rebuilding after 9/11 specifically because it addresses an aspect of the professional practice of architecture—which is the call to produce meaning. Those contracts you study in your professional practice class are ultimately contracts to produce meaning. Whether or not meaning is stable or unstable is another question.

MM: For me, historians can explore both—the original intentions and implications of a project and its changing meanings. I am somebody who believes that culture has deep political implications and that meanings are part of that. How are meanings produced? What meaning is produced? For whom is it intended? How is it received? I say all of this with the very strong caveat: meaning does not operate in architecture the same way it does in a journalistic text or in most prose. There is never pure transparency, but I think there is much less transparency in architecture than in many other fields.

IKL: The role of the historian is not just to describe how meaning is produced or why it is produced, but is to produce a new set of meanings from this. I have in mind Benjamin’s writings on the card index.⁴ In the context of writing, he describes that what matters most is the researcher who writes material in the card index, and the scholar who appropriates or assimilates it into their own index. The figure of the historian is one that writes a different set of narratives and meanings from existing ones.

MM: Yes, it is important to be self-conscious about this. One makes choices as a historian. In constructing a historical narrative or account, I believe one has two responsibilities: The first is to be as honest about your own values and presuppositions as possible and the second is to be as accurate as possible about the historical material at hand. In this regard, I’ve been influenced by Tafuri—history is a large puzzle, an incomplete one, and as a historian, you’re trying to make as good a construction as you can to reveal whatever you feel is important or necessary that hasn’t been brought up before.

RM: On the card index, we all choose our objects differently. In my case the choice has essentially been the organization of the index. It’s not so much what’s written on those cards, but the fact that they are cards, and that they assemble in a particular order. If it’s possible to extrapolate, then that might lead to certain kinds of objects. When I was writing about Saarinen, I was always being asked, “Why are you writing about this guy? He’s not that good.” That was the whole idea. The point was that his work gave access to a set of important historical processes, while at the same time bearing many of the burdens that architects bear to make it a useful archive.

To extrapolate further, drawings are also very interesting to me for the same reasons. They raise questions that we have been talking about in other ways—questions of authorship, production, audience, circulation, intermediations of various kinds, etc. in a manner that seems to challenge the assumptions of those who want to attribute to architects some kind of heroic agency. At the same time, they inherently inscribe their authors—they both bear the marks of an architect’s thought and they help construct that thought. Drawings are often also legal and technical documents. They have different levels of operation. I am therefore happy to refer to a drawing as an agent. Drawings are the documents, the card indexes, with which architects do what they do. I see them as political instruments.

mary mcleod

reinhold martin

G: Through what tools or means of representation can someone trained as an architect take and apply beyond what many may strictly define as the role of the architect?

MM: As an architect there are certainly times when you can use the knowledge and training of your field to make others aware of certain issues that they might not be so conscious of—and their political implications. One example I might give is the role that the architecture students at Columbia had in 1968 in blocking the construction of the university gym in Morningside Park. Their protest concerned the use of public land, who owned it, and how Columbia was taking over property that residents in Harlem used and enjoyed. This is a case of students acting politically as architects—and effectively. As a historian, I believe I can help make people conscious of the role these students played.

IKL: What makes these students protesting architects rather than individuals?

MM: They criticized the actual plan.

RM: They are deploying specialized knowledge. They have a greater professional authority. This is something that Foucault refers to as a specific intellectual, rather than a public intellectual. Probably the most prominent public intellectual in the United States, on the Left, is Noam Chomsky. Chomsky is a very interesting figure because he does not speak politically as a linguist. He differentiates quite emphatically. I don’t see any Noam Chomsky’s floating around architecture. Here you get the intellectual as a dissenter who uses the authority of thought itself as a form of dissent. Another figure around Columbia who really fit that role was Edward Said. Some of what he did publically was related to his scholarship, some wasn’t. But we might be a bit more specific or strategic about what’s at stake in any of these situations. Were we to speak about architects in general, I would substitute some other term for intellectual, since architects are not usually in a position to fulfill the traditional role of the Enlightenment intellectual, to speak truth to power.

Pre-tape recorder you mentioned the demonstrations in the streets today, happening in places like Baltimore and Ferguson. It seems to me that this is also a repetition, and each repetition does bring with it a difference. There are specifics in any given situation that can be explained by precedent or some linear sequence. Then there are others that cannot. In this case I would venture that the intersection between historical racism, dispossession, and militarism is being made manifest. I think it expresses itself in the fraught and over determined body armor of the police. I mean that both literally and figuratively. The relationship between the police, gentrification, and oppression should be looked at. Architecture and urbanism are right there in that space.

MM: And as architects, I believe it’s also important to consider the implications of how you allocate space? Are you putting maintenance staff in the basement or shoving workers in small cubicles without windows? It may not be politics with a big capital “P” but these are decisions that affect people’s lives, and have to do with power.

RM: That might be something that we could offer to you: at least the recognition that—not in some superficial sense that ‘politics is everywhere and therefore it’s nowhere’—very specifically and concretely, every line that you draw is going to be a political one as much as it is a technical one or an artistic one.

1. Ai Weiwei, “A Status of Life.”; *The Political*: episode 4, volume 3. April 20th, 2015.

2. Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme*. (Paris: Editions Cres, 1925) reprinted in Paris, Vincent, Freal, 1966.

3. Reinhold Martin, “Critical of What? Toward a Utopian Realism.” *Harvard Design Magazine*, Spring/Summer 2005, Number 22.

4. Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*. Volume 2, 1927-1934. Ed. Michael Jennings (Belknap Press), p456.