Maybe We Should Just Stop Using the Word "Architecture"

An interview with Jeremy Till by Daniela Calciu and Ilinca Pop

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Over the past year, within the COVID pandemic, the manifold crises which the world was already facing have deepened their political, social and ecological impact, and with this, a sense of urgency arises within all disciplines. In architecture, and specifically in the Western architectural culture and tradition, such crises have historically determined either utopian or heroic responses, driven by the belief that architecture can and will fix the problems of the world. Architecture educator Jeremy Till is one of the most prominent critics of this specific discourse manifested within the field of architecture. Currently Head of Central Saint Martins and Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of the Arts London, he has previously taught at the Bartlett School of Architecture, the University of Sheffield, and the University of Westminster, where he was appointed Dean of Architecture and the Built Environment between 2008 and 2012. Together with architect Sarah Wigglesworth, he has designed the project 9 Stock Orchard Street, the recipient of the 2004 RIBA National Award and the 2004 RIBA Sustainability Award. His books, *Flexible Housing,* co-authored by Tatjana Schneider, *Spatial Agency,* written with Tatjana Schneider and Nishat Awan, and *Architecture Depends* have received RIBA President's Award for Research in 2007, 2009 and 2011, respectively. Arguing against the perpetuation of the myth of the genius-architect and that of architectural autonomy, his writing focuses on ways in which architecture engages with the political, the social, and with broader notions of contingency.

We had the great joy to navigate, together with Jeremy Till, architecture's possibilities as a field to address current challenges, its obligation to shift its value systems and beliefs, and its foundational issues of aesthetics in light of the topic of our current issue. Moreover, by tackling the understanding of what the limitations of the field are, in a time of crisis, we believe that architecture can both learn from previous mistakes and better its means to act as an agent of systemic change.

Daniela Calciu: *As our Planet and our neighboring species are urging us to shift the paradigm of our existence as a society and as occupiers of the Earth, our current issue of sITA revisits one of the pillars of architectural theory in Europe, subject of many treatises, foundation of many schools, and topic of constant debate and reflection. The motivation behind the topic of aesthetics is twofold: first, to retrieve the original, broader sense of the term coined by the Ancient Greeks, which involved the perception with all senses, thus bringing forth the topic of materiality alongside space and form in contemporary architecture; and second, to probe into the possibilities of this concept to stir reflections on what kind of habitat we are building for ourselves and for the planet. So please allow me to start by asking you what is, in your opinion, the biggest challenge that our world is facing, what needs to be done and what we, as architects, are able to do about it. Are we doing it? Are we starting to do it?*

Jeremy Till: The obvious big challenge is the intersection of climate emergency, with social inequality, with rising populism, with issues of racial inequality. What we are living through, with the pandemic, and Trump, and Brexit, are manifestations of these broader emergencies. COVID is clearly an ecological crisis, but it is also a crisis of global capitalism. However, for

me the most important one, because it brings so many of them together, is climate emergency. Climate emergency is a crisis of global capitalism, it demands systemic change, it is a crisis of inequality as the Global South is most affected, and it is a crisis of humanity, because if we don't deal with it, then humanity is under threat. I don't see the climate emergency as a purely environmental issue, but as an intersecting condition of the social, environmental, and the ecological crisis. In answer to your question – is architecture doing anything about it? – my answer is quite simple, and it is *no*. We don't have the tools in our present language to deal with the climate emergency. Therefore, the only way that it is presently addressed is through the idea of technical fixes. Clearly, we should be designing buildings that are carbon neutral as much as possible, but that doesn't deal with the wider situation. Dealing with the wider situation under the climate emergency demands systemic changes in economic, social, and political systems — and this takes us beyond the notion of technical fixes.

What I'm interested in and what I'm working on with Tatjana Schneider at the moment questions precisely *what does that mean* to architecture. The project is called *Architecture after Architecture.* The argument for it is that architecture has been bound to the Modern Project. And the Modern Project – of progress and growth, of order and reason – has used architecture as both its symbol and its handmaiden. Climate emergency makes these tenets of the Modern Project, its founding principles – order, reason, progress and growth – impossible. *What is next?* is our question.

DC: *I, for one, would say that we are also witnessing the end of Modernity as it was founded. And, of course, one of the questions is – what comes next? Do you see an answer arising? In either discipline? Or is architecture just as bad as all the other disciplines?*

JT: If the Modern Project is coming to its end, then so is the idea that architecture as a symbol and servant of the Modern Project is a solution. So, clearly, architecture doesn't have the solution. And, therefore, it is not a determinist thing that suddenly architects are going to come and solve the problems of the world, which is part of the Modern Project's belief that architecture has the solution. Clearly, we don't, which means we also need to change the terms of reference by which architecture presents itself, which is as a pure form of expertise. Instead, it has to present itself as part of a collaborative network of knowledge in which everybody is working together. I think there are particular ways of thinking that have to do with spatial imagination, with spatial relationships, to which architects can contribute. But that is way beyond the scope of the issue you're talking about. Materiality, for example, in aesthetics, even in an expanded version of aesthetics, is still bound up in a very limited sense of definition of what architecture might be involved in.

DC: *But do you think it should not be discussed?*

JT: I think it's a distraction. Of course, issues of materiality and aesthetics come along in the discussion, but I would say they come along as secondary partners rather than foregrounded preoccupations, which is what they are in most of the architectural discourse. In that, they distract from the wider social purposes which architecture can contribute to. I just have been looking, for example, at the Italian journal Domus. They have got guest editors once a year and just this year Tadao Ando has released his new manifesto. And it is all about eternity, for God's sake. Eternity? In the face of the most disruptive set of social and environmental catastrophes that we have ever witnessed, architecture is holding on to the eternity of human spirit! And then showing pictures of light.

Ilinca Pop: *In your lecture at 100 Day Studio, "Architecture after Architecture," you talked about resilience in architecture, as a fitter response to the current challenges that we are facing. You suggested that where sustainability fails to resolve the problems it addresses, a resilient approach to architecture would be more pertinent.*

JT: First of all, I am increasingly concerned about the use of the term "sustainability," because it suggests that we can sustain. And we can't sustain as we currently are. There is a suggestion in the founding definition of sustainability that all we need to do is ensure that our future

generations are not conflicted while meeting the needs of the current generation. But I think we cannot sustain as we are, as COVID is showing it, and the climate emergency is showing it, and Black Lives Matter is showing it. We need to have a systemic shift in the way that society is organized. That is my first point. The second thing is that I don't think I ever said that architecture can fix it. Architecture can contribute to a set of discussions around what we should be doing next, because what we should be doing next will have a spatial resonance and a set of spatial implications. And architects, or what Tatjana Schneider and I call spatial agents, are good at understanding how social relationships are played out in space. That understanding is one which spatial agents are equipped to engage with.

IP: *If it cannot fix things, in which way would a kind of resilient architecture work and, for the more obvious question, what does it look like, so to approach the subject of aesthetics? Because, in the process of moving away from capitalist modes of producing architecture, it is aesthetics that are being hijacked by the same mechanisms that the logic underlying the project actually opposes.*

JT: I am not even sure I used the phrase "resilient architecture." You could use that word, but it suggests a sort of almost technocratic approach, and I am not sure that we should be thinking about the notion that there is a technocratic fix. Maybe we should just stop using the word "architecture," frankly. That is why our project is called *Architecture after Architecture.* It is a provocative title for that very reason, because architecture is still bound to a certain definition. Even the Ancient Greeks' definition of aesthetics that you have mentioned bounds architecture to the Parthenon. It wipes out the whole non-European tradition of architecture, doesn't it? Architecture is still so much bound to a certain tradition of Eurocentric eternity. And so, I worry about even using the word "architecture," unless it is in reference to the challenges that architecture should be dealing with.

And the question – "what would it look like?" – I am afraid that I will absolutely not answer that question, because the second I answer that question, the aesthetic is prioritized. Spatial intelligence, and its production, will bring along form with it, and that form is going to assume an aesthetic, and that aesthetic will be judged by the way that that form has been manifested. But what we argue in *Spatial Agency*, and what we argue continuously elsewhere, is that spatial intelligence has not just to deal with the production of form, but with the production of infrastructure, with the production of communication devices, it has to deal with our cities, which are complex spatial organizations and organisms, and most of all it has to deal with the production of social relations. And that is where we should be engaged, rather than with a limited discussion about what things look like. Sarah Wigglesworth, my partner, when she was doing the *Desiring Practices* project, which was an early feminist engagement with issues of gender in architecture, was continually asked by journalists – and still is – what does feminist architecture look like? And she always responds, "I will not answer that question." The soon as you answer it, you fall in the same set of limitations that the question wants you to, of stereotyping issues of gender into the way things look.

DC: *By going back to the original definition of aesthetics our aim was precisely to rephrase the question and shift the focus from how things look like to how things feel like. And once you say, "feel" and ask, "what does a place feel like?" it opens up a broader field of questions.*

JT: I would agree to that. But there is a potentially dangerous side to that as well. Which is the way that conservative phenomenologists, and there are many of them, will talk about authenticity. In that, they will continue a certain line of thinking about architecture, which, again, detaches it from the political, the social, the environmental, and economic realms that we should be operating within.

IP: *Design proposals are often appraised for their "authenticity," "sincerity" or "truthfulness." Such terms suggesting aesthetic merits are deployed in architecture schools and academia, magazines and even in competition juries, and they often suggest that architecture is able to express moral virtues. How does this association work in evaluating architecture?*

JT: It is a distraction. But also, the terms on which those values are set is where it gets dangerous. This is because what happens within a competition jury, for example, is that the judges are perpetuating their own value system and then playing that out onto the next generation. They are using terms which are self-fulfilling: the "sincerity" of the project is, in fact, the sincerity of their own work. The "authenticity" of the solution is their own authenticity, and in doing that, they are completely uncritical of wider concepts, of wider societal formations. This is how it is a very distracting condition, which is still being played out within architecture schools and within architecture institutions, such as the competition system. How can one possibly judge, on the basis on a competition entry, whether a scheme has any social relevance at all? All you're looking at is pictures! Therefore, inevitably the competition system perpetuates a kind of canon of aesthetics, a canon of supposed sincerity, a canon of authenticity, as opposed to actually opening up to broader forms of criticality.

DC: *However, what I chose to keep from phenomenology was around the term "engaged" and "situated." But with a twist, in the sense of being critically engaged and critically situated. And these are two very important words in our current practices, I would say. Because we must be aware of our global challenges, but we are bound to act locally. So how do we engage, as architects, as spatial agents, and how do we construct the tools to navigate between the situated and the global?*

JT: I agree with you – the situated is really interesting, particularly in a kind of a post-pandemic context, in which we have seen the rise of local networks, we have seen the rise of distributed economies rather than centralized economies. We have seen an orientation towards more situated forms of organization, and with that, towards more situated forms of design. The term *situated* is indeed very useful, particularly in Donna Haraway's notion of *situated knowledge*. However, not that many of the phenomenologists in architecture would necessarily agree with this use. Because, inevitably, *the situated* brings with it *the particular*, and *the particular* brings in *the political* as well. What you cannot avoid in being situated is the political. Not the left-right political, but the political in the sense of how things are played out in human life. *Being situated* doesn't set up a potential challenge between the notion of the local and the notion of the global. The two are clearly connected. In dealing with the local, you have to understand the global. The global is where the climate emergency is situated. It is manifested locally, but it is situated at a global level. Therefore, you have to understand the various forces of the economy, of capitalism, of politics, the Paris Accord, COP, and so on. You have to understand all those things, and you have to deal with them. The climate emergency will not be resolved by building straw houses like this one that I am sitting in![1] It is going to be addressed by dealing with high-level policies and legal frameworks, but these will then be played out a local level, and those local levels can also reinforce and reinterpret some of the higher-level strategies. It is a two-way conversation. Architecture is situated and therefore, it has to understand both the global conversation, but also the local particularities. That is why notions of the vernacular become now incredibly interesting. Not a kind of a nostalgic vernacular, but a notion of vernacular as a form of shared knowledge.

DC: *And even the urban vernacular. Or an understanding of dwelling as a form of critique, which involves changes in the aesthetics of the building, as well. It is a phenomenon that is constantly changing the architecture project into something else.*

JT: I agree that the vernacular is interesting in that. However, what the superficial examples of the vernacular do is to appropriate its aesthetic, so for example Asian skyscrapers being crowned with the shape of an Asian temple. That is a straightforward superficial appropriation of a vernacular aesthetic. But what is clearly interesting with the vernacular is that it doesn't start with an aesthetic; it is not motivated by the aesthetics. The aesthetic comes out of a consideration of the situated effects of social ritual, of anthropological

1 Jeremy Till and his partner architect Sarah Wigglesworth designed their live/work space, "9 Stock Orchard Street," from which Jeremy Till joined us during our Zoom interview. Along with many other distinctions, the project received the RIBA National Award and the RIBA Sustainability Award in 2004.

matters, of environmental matters, of materials to hand, of available expertise, and many other aspects. A consideration of vernacular as a condition can maybe become increasingly relevant.

DC: *Are you putting the vernacular together with informality? Or do you think that they are somewhat similar?*

JT: The informality, and, in particular, the informality of slums, is not something that should be celebrated. The slum is a spatial condition of social inequality. But, at the same time, one can see in the favelas, for example, a certain set of situated intelligences, which go way beyond that of an expert. How does the informal cope with spatial situations? They often do that in a much more intelligent manner than an expert coming in and designing a kind of an ordered dwelling. I think you are right to talk about dwelling as a form of resistance, in its broader social and anthropological sense.

IP: *The same appropriation that takes place when the resulting aesthetic of the vernacular is separated from the processes that produced it also happens with community design, and even with Brutalist aesthetics, for example. I am thinking about Norra Tornen, the latest project of OMA, led by Reinier de Graaf. The project has been called a "pedagogical embarrassment" for putting brutalist aesthetics to use in a luxury housing complex. And it seems that, in all situations, aesthetic means facilitate the process of appropriation, being the dimension of a project that is most easily separated from the processes it resulted from. In your essay, "Architectural Research: Three Myths and One Model"[2] you identify three moments in the production of architecture: process, product and performance. Perhaps poor architecture education leads to this widespread phenomenon of appropriation, because the easiest way of teaching architecture is through representations of architectural products. What the students understand is that form is very important. How do we begin moving away from this kind of instrumentalization of aesthetics and how do we teach otherwise?*

JT: That is a really good question. For me, it is the most important question, actually, because so many of the preoccupations of architecture are found in its education; a value system is embedded in architecture education. This is exaggerated by the fact that the only way that architecture education is validated and assessed is through the picture – and the picture, therefore, too often needs to be spectacular. The students cannot draw "boring" work, because "that looks boring." So, if it "looks boring," it is judged as boring. Therefore, a very fundamental change is needed within the value system of architecture education, in order to shift it beyond the picture. This is an incredibly difficult thing to do. When we tried to do it at Sheffield, by introducing the Live Project as a fundamental part of the course, we got into trouble with the RIBA, because the students were not drawing nice pictures. They were working in groups, they were working collaboratively, the projects often failed because projects do fail, and you learn much more from failure than you learn through forced success. A portfolio as a collection of pictures is, I would argue, a phony success. It is not real success; these things are not going to be built. Whereas with a Live Project, if it fails, you learn much more than from the phony success of a beautiful portfolio. So, in a way, you have answered your own question, which I think is very important, and which I cannot really answer. Because the answer lies in a fundamental shift in the way that one may value the outcome of architecture education, and that valuing has to take into account process over product. It cannot genuinely take into account performance, because we are not genuinely building things, but it can certainly look at process. It can also look at product in terms of an ethical dimension. But ethics are very rarely brought into architecture education as a value system.

IP: *If Live Projects were a solution, now, with countries maintaining restrictions due to the COVID pandemic, perhaps understanding spatial and social dynamics and working collaboratively is more difficult. Understanding public space and the relationships that are played out within public spaces becomes impossible at times, or it happens remotely, mainly through the interpretation of pictures. I*

2 Available online at https://jeremytill.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/post/attachment/34/2007_Three_Myths_and_One_Model.pdf, last accessed November 30, 2020.

think this issue will be very challenging for students in their first year at school, when traveling and experiencing spaces plays an important part in understanding built environments. How do you see the development of this issue and what could be done in order to avoid yet another situation in which architecture representations are foreground?

JT: I think you are right, that is a problem, but is it really such a problem? Let's start with idea that traveling is important for architecture students. Is it really?

IP: *Perhaps it is not an essential matter, as even without traveling, students possess particular resources within the local in which their knowledge is situated. But that makes the relationship between the local and the global more difficult to grasp.*

JT: But why is it necessary, if you're running a studio in a university, to propose where your field trip is? That seems to me very strange indeed, a situation where each studio says, "we are going to X for two weeks, in order to set up our project." Generally, the most spectacular places are chosen as sites for travel, because then spectacular work comes out. So, firstly, I would challenge some of the systems of architectural education which have to do with a form of superficial tourism. Second, in the past nine months we have all become incredibly agile in the ways in which we interrogate information. We can find out so much more, because we had to, from other processes beyond the physical. I am not sure they can replace it, but I think that through the notion of situated knowledge, through engagement – and yes, some physical engagement is important – the physical that can be supplemented in multiple other ways. Therefore, I think it is a good question, but I do not think that the situation is completely despairing.

DC: *Could we, as educators, come up with new mechanisms to replace that direct, engaged experience of a phenomenon, of a certain place or a certain thing that takes place in a certain space? I have always talked to students about notions of public space and the very complex relationships that are played out there. We were traveling around Europe and, at some point, in Copenhagen, a student came to me and said, "So this is what you were trying to tell us… now I see it, now I understand it!" I myself felt like I truly understood Borromini when I was in Rome gazing at the lantern of Sant' Ivo alla Sapienza; or grasped what a slum is upon visiting one in Dakar, or what an urban space accessible only to cars was upon walking in an American suburb which had no sidewalks. Is there a way in which we can explain such occurrences or phenomena better than what we are already doing it?*

JT: I agree that those examples you gave are very compelling, that actually being somewhere and experiencing – "feeling it" – in its full set of spatial phenomenological dimensions is a very profound way of experiencing the world. I would not challenge that. But also, if you take the three examples you have given, Borromini, slums and suburbs, where does one stop? What examples do you need to show people in order to understand the full richness of the world? You could go on, and on, and on. Therefore, I am not sure whether a permanent sense of physical engagement is practical or appropriate. Of course, actually going somewhere is important, but that is different from what I see often, which is a kind of tourism, and with it, cultural appropriation.

DC: *I think the broader question would be how do we muster or how do we create tools which can foster our students' awareness of the global?*

JT: It is a very difficult question because of its broadness, but I would say that it is essential to understand always the relationship between spatial phenomena and social and political phenomena. One needs to understand a spatial phenomenon always within a wider context of social and political consequences, as opposed to analyzing it through standard architectural terms: the typology, or the form, or aesthetics, or even materiality – things which detach and abstract architecture from the lived world of the social and the political. And it is such an abstraction that tends to go on within architectural discourse, which I am critical of. In abstracting a spatial phenomenon, you lift it out of the world, and it becomes a thing onto itself. It becomes its own set of references, its own set of values, and so on.

DC: *Ilinca and I both just finished a project in which Tatjana Schneider also participated, the Urban Education Live Project. It was about the new role of the university in building partnerships and collaborations with local communities. I think that this is another important path to be explored. We talked a little bit about educators and students, but what about the institution of architecture schools, or all other schools? Are they also something to be reinvented? And also, the academia, as an institution, and as a place of knowledge?*

JT: That is a really good question and something which, in my position as Head of Central Saint Martins in London, I am thinking about the whole time, particularly since art schools have historically been inward looking and very concerned with themselves and their own identities. Central Saint Martins has recently become turned inside out instead, and thus much more engaged with the civic realm. Universities are in the position, and we are doing that quite a lot at Central Saint Martins, to act as a broker between civic society, commercial society, and local communities. Because, if you do that well, then academic institutions become these sorts of platforms which people can congregate on in a way which does not necessarily bring in conflict. I am really interested in academic institutions opening up in exactly that way, in the notion of the public intellectual, in the notion of accessibility – both in terms of language and ideas. One has seen this happening to some extent within COVID. Some of the most intelligent reactions have been from academics who said, "stop it, I am not interested anymore in my next peer review article, I need to engage." I am deeply critical of some of the internalization of our academic discourse, because it seems to be just speaking to one another, and that is why I think that opening up to broader levels of engagement is incredibly important. I think it could also revitalize intellectual life. Because, if intellectual life is all wrapped up in circles, then it is going to circle around itself endlessly. It is necessary to also engage with other forms of knowledge – of what Giddens calls "mutual knowledge." Then, it is continually refreshed. I think the engagement of academic institutions with civic society, with politicians, with local communities, in a collaborative and generous spirit of sharing of knowledge is incredibly important.

DC: *You used the word "mutual," and I think mutuality is something that could work as a fundamental of building knowledge. What we have noticed in our school in Bucharest is the importance of both taking our students out of the university and bringing other actors in.*

JT: One thing that COVID has done is to democratize knowledge as much as it has given a much broader range of voices a platform. So, if you take 100 Day Studio, the project which the Architectural Foundation did – it was remarkable that the team gave space to an amazing range of voices – young people, black people, gendered people, non-gendered people. Platforms like Zoom are so much more accessible, and, when curated properly, they become much more democratic spaces, and that gave me hope. And then I look at Domus, and I get depressed.

DC: *Well, it seems to be inevitable.*

JT: It has to be resisted.