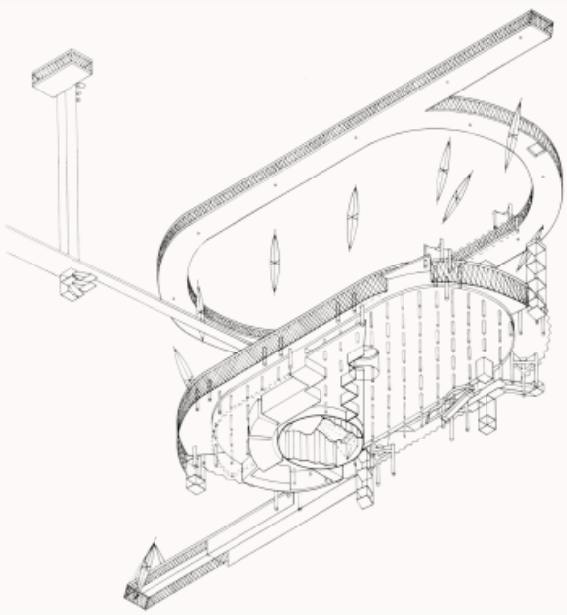
Alexander Eisenschmidt

Importing the City into Architecture

An Interview with Bernard Tschumi

The influential group of individuals that taught at the Architectural Association (AA) in London in the 1970s changed forever the way that we think about the city. The group included among its number Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid and Nigel Coates, and perhaps most significantly Bernard Tschumi, who was to become one of the most influential designers and educators of the next few decades. Guest-editor **Alexander Eisenschmidt** interviews Tschumi to give him the final word on the question of architecture and the city.

Trained as an architect in the professional realms of the ETH in Zurich, Bernard Tschumi devoted his career to questioning the confines and limits of architecture and its relationship to the city. Working in Paris in the office of Candilis-Josic-Woods during the influential events of 1968 was as formative for Tschumi as his first teaching job at London's Architectural Association (AA) in 1970. Projects such as Do-it-Yourself-City (1970) would tap the realities of the city, a fascination that continued to occupy his thinking and provoked works such as *The Manhattan Transcripts* (1976–81). By 1976, he had settled in New York, wrote for art journals, acted in performances, taught at different schools of architecture (Princeton University and Cooper Union) and exhibited in galleries. Winning the influential competition of the Parc de la Villette in 1982 enabled him to test his ideas in built form. While the project was delayed for nearly five years, in 1988 Tschumi was not only able to restart La Villette, but was also invited to become the Dean of Columbia University's architecture school – a position he held for 15 years. Tschumi reflects on the relationship between architecture and the city, calls for intentionality, and declares that the city has a lot to offer.



Bernard Tschumi, *The Manhattan Transcripts*, drawing from 'Episode 3: The Tower (The Fall)', 1976–81
opposite: Reoccurring throughout the story of the tower is the elevator shaft that connects all parts of the building. But rather than celebrating the utility of the elevator, the shaft as vertical corridor becomes the only escape route from the isolated cells of the tower.

Bernard Tschumi Architects, National Library of France competition entry, Paris, 1989
The Library is conceived as a multiplicity of circuits and movement for scholars, books and visitors on the inside as well as expanding these circuits to open onto the existing city.

I want to begin our conversation by focusing on the relationship between city and architecture – a relationship that is in my mind of particular importance in today's age of radical urbanisation. How do you see this relationship positioned in today's discourse?

Surprisingly enough, relatively little work and research is being done today on the relationship between architecture and the city. There seems to be a split between the two; the architect all too often designs singular objects, without taking urban circumstances into account. This is an unfortunate situation because it's an opportunity that is missed. The city provides constraints that architects can take advantage of. Whether they are physical, geographical, legal or social, those constraints ought to force you to be inventive. The challenge is to find ways to transform these negative factors and to use them productively, turning them into positive forces for the evolution of the city. For me this is crucial. While today there is rather good work done by architects who are also analysing cities, their built work is often quite separate from their research on the city.

Yes, this might also have something to do with the lack of intention in much of today's urban research. In *Event City #1* [1994, the first in a series of books that discusses architectural projects], you note that there is no architecture without the city and no city without architecture.

Well, the statement is both qualitative and quantitative. It's both cultural and political. It has to do with what is happening today, namely an unprecedented acceleration of the city phenomena. Which, of course, comes with a transformation of the definition of the city, which is today very different from, let's say, only 20 years ago. So, today more than ever, the city becomes the inevitable reference point of any architectural conversation. Any attempt to look at architecture outside the realm of the city is questionable.

But it's not questionable solely for reasons of urban surplus. After all, one could potentially miss out on a lot by neglecting the city. It seems that your work often looks at the urban realm because of what it possesses and architecture lacks.

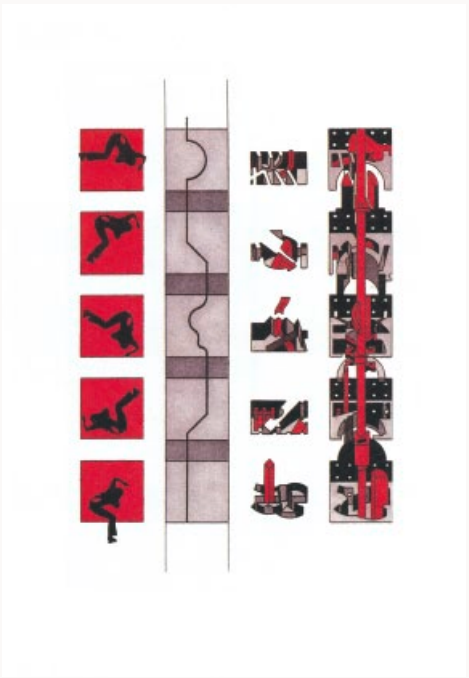
You could say that. Cities are a precondition. In other words, cities exist regardless of what we do or build. A city could potentially exist without architecture, but I don't think architecture could do without the city. For me, it's a conundrum to look at architecture as unique, homogeneous and coherent while the city is something which is multiple, heterogeneous and conflictual. The city, better than anything else, highlights the impossibility of homogeneity. Today, the city is no longer one single coherent whole, but instead a series of fragments that can be, you know, fine tuned and again diverted into something else. That's when architecture comes in; any piece of architecture is always establishing a dialogue with the city. It's very rarely a single object that exists on its own; instead, it should always try to accelerate or transform certain urban phenomena. That's how I look at it.

This approach is visible relatively early in your work. You and the younger generation that met at the AA in the 1970s seemed to look at the city very differently from groups that were fascinated with the historic city as a model (Leon Krier or Aldo Rossi) or protagonists such as Archigram and Archizoom with their radical and borderline apocalyptic proposals. In retrospect it seems your generation tried to give the contemporary city a chance.

It was no accident that London in the post-1968 period attracted a number of really interesting architects that include Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, Nigel Coates, Colin Fournier, Daniel Libeskind, Steven Holl, etc. And, I guess, we were doubtful of the ideas of Maurice Culot and Leon Krier and the notion of the renaissance of the European city and the idea that you needed traditional streets and squares and plazas and colonnades and all this sort of thing. We knew perfectly well that there are many cities that have none of those characteristics and they do well without them.

When you came to New York in 1976, your relationship to the established architectural forces in the city was again somewhat conflicted. Hardly anyone was interested in the urban conditions that you championed or, for that matter, in programme or event. During your involvement with the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, was that a problem for you, or was it rather liberating?

Ha! I think strangely enough neither nor. The very reason I came to New York was because of the city itself – I came to New York first, and as a consequence was invited to spend a bit of time at the Institute. But I was much more involved with the art scene and primarily focusing on the cultures that the city generated. For sure I was aware of the prevalent architectural conversations of the time (it was the beginning of Postmodernism), but I was really functioning on a parallel track – two lines that did not meet. Neither in opposition



nor in agreement. It was as simple as that and perfectly fine. I felt an intense negation of most of the images that architecture entailed at the time. So, when I started *The Manhattan Transcripts* [1976], I had already passed the point of attacking the architecture that was produced then by the architectural establishment. It was simply not there anymore. And therefore, I was not going to get into a conflict with the New York Five or Robert Venturi or the Greys – it was just not the issue. The issue was elsewhere.

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If not in reaction to the discourse on autonomy or the historical city, were the *Transcripts* an attempt to discover projects in the city rather than to propose them – a vehicle to mine the city for new and unexpected architectures?

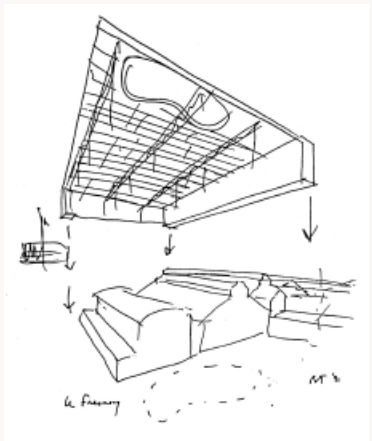
In retrospect you can say that. But at the time they were not. The first motivation for *The Manhattan Transcripts* was trying to find another way to look at architecture. And the city, intensely fresh and intensely new, and deeply influenced by space, event and movement, was making it possible. The *Transcripts* reorganised those components in a way that would lead to another way of thinking about architecture. You know, I didn't even think about buildings at the time. It was more about how you act and relate in space – in urban space.

Did the particularities of the city matter?

In the early work there was a clear intent on my part to try not to look at the contextual dimension – I was looking towards a certain abstraction, the abstraction of movement, of event, of space – those were almost like philosophical categories, and they did not have to comply with where it was. I could have done the *Transcripts* in Mexico City or in São Paolo or in Tokyo. It would have been different in the sense that I would have no longer dealt with the typology of New York (the block, the streets, the tower and so on), but it would still have focused on the same key issues; the exploration would have still pointed towards the city of events. Only slightly later, I realised that the work had yet another dimension. In many projects, different parts were layered, juxtaposed and collided, establishing a dialogue between different moments in the city that were physical, historical and functional. I am thinking here of the design for Le Fresnoy National Studio for the Contemporary Arts [1991–7], for example, where the big roof hovers over the old buildings of the existing city, establishing an in-between space that is about movement and about a dialogue between different moments in the city. So, by superimposing a new element it is again making the point that the city is about layering, about different moments of history.

In a way, this layering and superimposition was already happening in your work for the Parc de la Villette [1982–97].

Yes. La Villette started with a set of small diagrams where I looked at different ways a city can be organised. I wanted to argue that at La Villette we are not in nature, we are part of the city. That's how it started. But it also acted against the prevalent argument on context at the time, when many architects wanted to recapture the feeling of the traditional city, the city of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries as opposed to the modern city of Hilberseimer or Le Corbusier. Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, for example, wrote *Collage City* [1978] and made that extraordinary juxtaposition between Vittoria's Plaza Mayor and Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin [1925], saying 'this is good' and 'this is bad'. I felt very critical of those people who wanted to return to the



Bernard Tschumi, *The Manhattan Transcripts*, drawing from 'Episode 1: The Park', 1976–81
Mining the city of events for architectural effects, often prompted by cinematic explorations of photographs, drawings and notations of movement.

Bernard Tschumi Architects, Le Fresnoy National Studio for the Contemporary Arts, Tourcoing, France, 1991–7
A large roof encloses an old part of the city. But unlike megastructures, the roof stands not for itself, but creates an in-between zone in which new and unexpected events can occur.

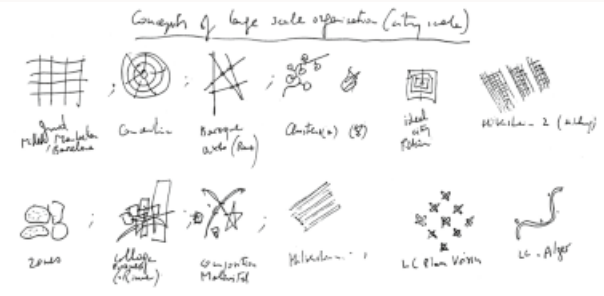
past since I thought there was absolutely no way to do so. La Villette, therefore, recaptured the point grid of Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin, but on a completely different scale. It purposefully tried to explore one of the most challenging explorations of the early 20th-century avant-gardes, namely proposing a distinction between defining space and activating space. For La Villette, I wanted objects that activated space and generated energy – almost creating fields of magnetism. That's how La Villette started, but the idea was really about establishing an opposition to what existed around the site, while at the same time the point-grid instituted a common denominator to all the diversity around it. Of course, there were also other issues I was interested in: juxtaposition, superimposition, the fragmentation of different systems. And 'space/event/movement' came directly from *The Manhattan Transcripts*.

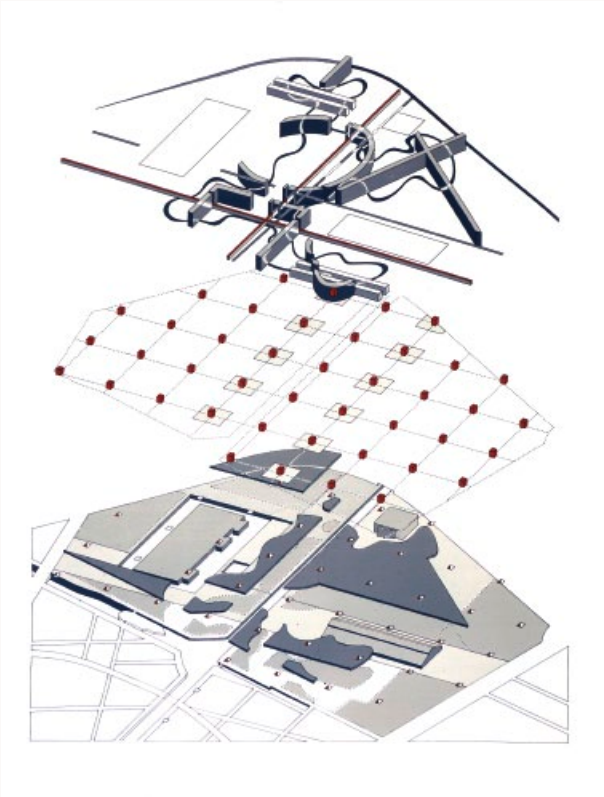
From here, it only seems to be a small leap to your fascination with programme. The layers of the city, the superimposition of architectural elements, and the resulting conflicts in space and activity are what many projects are about.

Obviously, the layering and the superimposition is not only about physical spaces; it's also always about what happens in these spaces – it is by definition programmatic. Projects such as our National Library competition entry in 1989 used the intersection and collision of two programmes that have nothing to do with one another in order to contribute to a different reading – in this case the library. I wanted to challenge the sort of homogeneity of the library by adding another programme element. It was of course driven by the fact that the project brief highlighted circuits: circuits of people, of information, of exhibitions etc. And that's what we wanted to take one step further. So we introduced the idea of the running track intersecting the library, but in my opinion we did not take it far enough.

For me the Library is a very productive example, not only for the conceptual clarity of trans-programming, but also in the way it relates to the city. Couldn't one say that its most sacred element, the reading room, is somewhat exported into the city, and that the running track, usually associated with outdoor space, is imported into the library? So there seems to be this exchange between city and architecture that helps accelerate each programme.

Yes, the importing and exporting of programme is a very useful terminology. Though it's not really how I saw it. I generally used 'import' and 'export' in terms of various disciplines between architecture, literature, philosophy and mathematics, and then looked at the cultural dialogue among those. But to look at the Library reading room and running track in those terms can also be productive. One could say that by looking at what happens in a city in terms of its multiplicity and contradictions, the conventionally assumed architectural homogeneity of programmes becomes even more apparent. In this case, the focus became how to challenge the uniformity of the Library in order to find new potentials within its programme and within the city.





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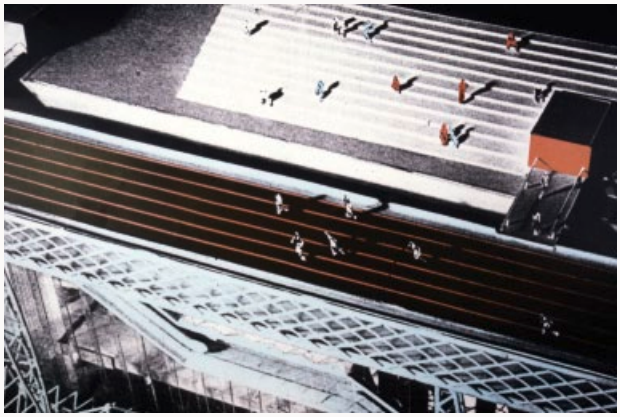
Bernard Tschumi Architects, Parc de la Villette, Paris, 1985
top: Sketching different city organisations that could be implemented at La Villette (from Baroque axes to Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin), the park is no longer an escape from the city, but is understood as an urban construct.

above: The superimposition of three systems of points, lines and surfaces construct an urban park in which different cities are superimposed onto one another. Baroque urbanism meets Le Corbusier's open city.



In many of your projects, the city is invited into the building, establishing something like an urbanism of the interior.

What you say reminds me of the statement that buildings can be a small city and the city a piece of architecture.

And the part-to-whole relationship.

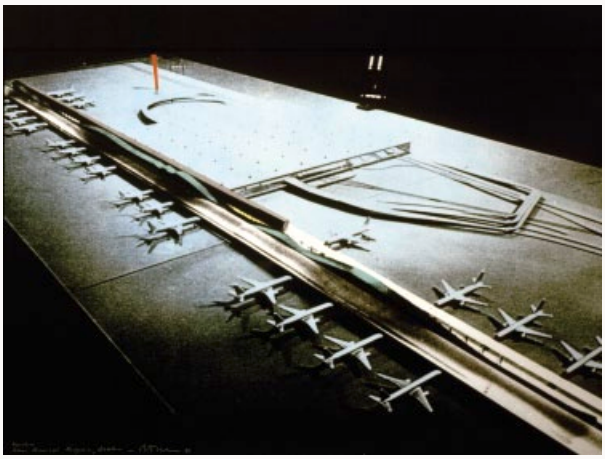
Right. But the difference for me comes with the intention to bring the multiplicity inherent in the city into architecture, 'importing' it, as you would call it. The city is in constant transformation and there is never a moment when it becomes static; that's a fascinating dimension that I want architecture to possess so that it becomes generative.

Rather than working against the urban condition, your work often embraces and even accelerates what is found in order to discover possibilities within it and arrive at something new. In this regard, your project for the Kansai International Airport [1988] raises for me some very interesting questions. I am particularly interested in your observations on the lifestyle of the airport.

Around the time of the Kansai competition, airports had already changed dramatically in nature. They were no longer places where you got on a plane as quickly as possible. They started to integrate the dimension of shopping, the dimension of information, of travel on a global scale. Airports had become a major meeting point, with their hotels, shopping arcades, conference and convention centres, exhibition halls, and all the business and activity that can take place there. All of that in addition to the traffic that makes up an airport (the massive amount of circulation, transport and places to congregate); airports had become natural microcosms of cities, just as once upon a time the harbour was. Now the airport plays the same role. So at Kansai we simply tried to accelerate that phenomenon, foreseeing almost intuitively what would happen to the airport as a mini-city.

And one that could grow linearly?

Yes, it became clear to me that the concept of the airport had to expand, and the characteristic of this artificial island



Bernard Tschumi Architects, National Library of France competition entry, Paris, 1989
top left: The running track is brought in close proximity to the library with the ambition of creating not only a new spatial paradigm, but also a new species of user: the intellectual athlete.

Bernard Tschumi Architects, Kansai International Airport competition entry, Kansai, Japan, 1988
above: The project extrapolates existing trends of travel and shopping, and extends the airport to become an all-encompassing linear metropolis.

off the coast of Osaka combined with the inescapable fact of the landing strip meant that it inevitably had to have a linear organisation. In addition, of course, there is an architectural fascination with the linear cities of Arturo Soria y Mata and Ivan Ilich Leonidov that we tapped into when thinking of the way that housing, offices and entertainment would relate to this piece of infrastructure. So we took existing conditions, combined them, and tried to take them one step further – pushing and accelerating them beyond the capabilities of each individual component. Not slowing them down, but accelerating them in a direction that makes a productive contribution.

While most of your arguments point towards diversity and multiplicity as an outcome, you are rarely working with many designated functions. There is an economy of programme selection rather than a large amount of functional drivers. Could you talk about this tension between the seemingly inclusive and the hyper-specific?

One of the things that is universally attacked today is the idea of zoning. Zoning is considered bad; we are supposed to mix functions and combine offices, playgrounds, recreation and housing all at the same time. But we also all know that's not the way it works. Zoning or not is an ideological discussion. Therefore, I am interested in the possibility of zoning as something productive. At an architectural level, I am trying to understand how far you can push the specialisation of functions and how this specialisation may bring more diversity and more richness than trying to have the same generic mix of predictable functions everywhere. So, for our project in the Dominican Republic (which began in 2005), many of the elliptical forms are highly specialised, they become concentrations of particular programmes for education, healthcare or finance while only a few of those ellipses are about mixing.

Those highly specific ellipses, stars and ribbons that you implement here are very invested in form. At least since Piranesi's *Campo Marzio* [1762] we know of the struggle between the city and architecture, between form and formlessness. Your previous work seemed to hold form at bay as long as possible and is less interested in a formal language. Has this attitude changed through the notion of 'Concept-Form' elaborated in the recent publication of *Event Cities #4* [2010] that seems to drive several current projects?

No, it has not; it has simply added a component. I still think that most of my work has to do with a very mistrustful attitude towards form. Architectural form is a result; it's never a starting point. However, the period of the projects that are discussed under 'Concept-Form' are dealing with circumstances where you cannot solely rely on the dialogue with what already exists for reasons of a very limited set of conditions to work from (projects for relatively deserted areas in the Caribbean or the Emirates or China). We therefore developed the idea of concept-forms, which can respond to particular conditions by being abstract diagrams without history. In the Dominican Republic, the nature, the climate and the lack of orientation are common denominators. While the ellipses relate and are shaped by those conditions, they are first and foremost places of programmatic intensity. Here, the nature as a low forest between the ellipses is meant to remain. The inside of the abstract forms houses what relates to global economy while the outside of the ellipses belongs to local conditions. It's always about ideas, concepts or concept-forms before it is about architectural forms.

And that's where intentionality becomes crucial?

Probably. Whether we are talking about cities or about architecture, the intended strategy is crucial since one always has to see it in its multiplicity. Architecture and urbanism are always an array of very different issues: from daylight, gravity and waterproofing at the small scale, to infrastructure at the large scale. So, there is never a single entity. Therefore, the intent is critical. It can channel that multiplicity. ⍙

This conversation between Alexander Eisenschmidt and Bernard Tschumi took place in New York on 13 July 2011.

Bernard Tschumi Architects, Elliptic City IFCA Masterplan, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, 2005
In a context of almost nothing, architectural form is one concept to start with. Each building is an island, in the midst of an archipelago.