

The Jerusalem Seminar in Architecture

Chair: Arad Sharon

Presentation: Wolf Prix

Mr. Sharon: It gives me great pleasure to introduce Mr. Prix, who I'm sure needs no introduction. In fact, I think that Mr. Prix does the job of introducing himself rather well through his work and ideas, so I would like to open with some of the things he said on another occasion.

Towards the end of a conference on theory and experimentation held at the Royal Academy in London, he said:

'At the beginning of the conference I was very desperate because we Himmelb(l)au have no theory. Now I start to be very proud of that fact, and I want to talk about a situation I'm very scared about -- the gap between theory and reality. From my point of view, it's a bad situation because it splits the head from the body.'

These words, said at the height of an intellectual extravaganza, reflect, to my mind, the general importance of Coop Himmelb(l)au, meaning Blue Sky Cooperative. The movement's founding members were Helmut Swiczinsky and Wolf Prix, and it was founded in 1968 in Vienna. Rather than focusing on theory, they concentrated -- and still do -- on creating experimental architecture with both sites and examples which inspire architects and students of architecture worldwide.

I don't just say that because it sounds nice, but because I speak from first-hand experience. As a student at the AA in London, I was profoundly influenced by the book *Architecture Is Now*, which compiled architectural projects, installations and works in progress created by members of the group. They became a strong voice of protest against post-modernism and the creative narrowness in architecture during the 1980s, and that appealed to me.

Concepts such as architectural aesthetics of damage and the poetry of desolation were at the core of projects such as the Open House, Red Danger and Hot Flat. The creative process which became a unique earmark for the group is manifested in these works, and I think I'm fairly accurate in describing the design process as a series of intense discussions which eventually led to an intuitional, perceptual sketch, which was in turn translated into a fully-formed model to become a working drawing. Aiming to maintain the spontaneity and freedom of the initial sketch, the group aspired to generate a symmetrical bird-like, insect-like structures. This was particularly evident in the way the buildings were integrated into the existing urban fabric. They did not blend in, but unsettled through dissonance and discontinuity.

So far I spoke in the past tense because I was trying to give a very quick overview of what I think of Coop Himmelb(l)au projects from the 1980s. What I find even more interesting is the fact that I could just as well speak in the present tense and describe their current projects which manage to convey a similar spirit.

The cinema building in Dresden, for example, succeeds in generating urban narratives which, as the critic (?) put it, metamorphose the madness of life into the magic of architecture. (?) and Keith Richards in music: 'Coop Himmelb(l)au facilitates a process in which the building does not merely serve its prescribed function, but becomes a cinematic experience in itself.'

In a way, the building invites those who visit it to shift from the position of spectator to one of participant in a temporarily unfolding cinematic event. To be able to hold to this spirit, to maintain the freedom, energy and spontaneity of earlier days, while developing and changing over the years, is truly admirable

Over the years, when confronted with the daily constraints imposed by clients, budgets and so on, I find buildings such as the Dresden Cinema truly refreshing. It seems that the title *Architecture Is Now* still applies. Some 20 years later, the now of Coop Himmelb(l)au is still current, vibrant and relevant.

I want to conclude with a very short story. When Wolf Prix prepared his slides just before the lecture, he asked me to teach him Hebrew so he could say a sentence that summarizes his lifetime manifesto. Well, I didn't have time to teach him

Hebrew, so I will translate it for you. (Hebrew) Ladies and gentlemen, Wolf Prix.

Mr. Prix: Thank you very much. It's really good to be here, my third time in Israel, first time in Jerusalem. I saw the Shrine of the Book of Frederick Keisler, and that made my year. It's smashing. It's really great. You know, Keisler is an Austin architect.

So I decided to talk, not about Keisler, but about *gestalt* tonight. But before I start the lecture, I have to add something to the introduction which I liked very much because it gives me the feeling of forever young. The sentence of Che Guevara: 'Let's be realistic. Let's make the impossible,' of course was the point of the departure when we were really young. In 1968, educated at the technical university, I heard so many times that my and Helmut's designs were impossible to build. They are utopian. We are utopians. Then a man far away from Austria came into the light of the stage and said, 'Let's be realistic. Let's try. Let's do the impossible.'

I would like to talk about the *gestalt* or to form or to shape the *gestalt*. I would rather give this lecture in German because *gestalt* is a German word with a powerful meaning, and I'm not sure I can translate it the right way. But *gestalt* and *gestaltforme* means shape, maybe shaping the *gestalt*, and that leads me immediately to the comparison of making men out of clay, like the *golem* which was found in historical Prague which is very related to Vienna, or to the story of the bellmaker in Tchaikovsky's Andre Rubintoff, which is a great story and goes right to the point of how to create *gestalt*. And later on I will try to explain what we mean when we talk about the Tower of Babel.

I would like to entitle this lecture *Gestalt Starts when Space Ends* and to deliver it between two quotes. The first is from St. Exupery: 'If you want to build a ship, don't send a man into the forest to collect wood. Rather awaken the desire for the sea.'

When space ends, *gestalt* starts to show up. Architecture starts where space ends would be the conventional expression, and it's related to Gideon's title, *Space*,

Time and Architecture. I think he was the first one who divided architecture from space and time by setting a comma in between.

If you would ask me what architecture is, I would immediately feel like Bob Dylan on a stage singing: 'The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind.' and the wind reminds me of another quote which could be a perfect description of architecture. This is out of the 36th chapter of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* when he expressed the desire: 'Would now the wind have but a body.' The wind has a body. What a great comparison to architecture.

I don't know what architecture is, but since two weeks ago I know what space is because I read a study which located where in our brain space is indicated. The study says that our brain indicates space as an area we have to move through. Otherwise it's not a space. Architecture cannot force people to do something, but it can prohibit a lot. Let me give you an example.

If you are doing a studio for a painter, you do it the best you can and it's fabulous architecture, the painter in this studio will not become more talented because of your architecture. But if you don't give him light, then he cannot paint. Therefore, to do architecture is a lot of responsibility and is a lot about the way we do it, and this is what the lecture is about today.

Contemporary architecture, the architecture of today, could easily be compared with playing chess on a horizontal TV screen. As you can see, the Cartesian grid has disappeared and is replaced by a fuzzy field and no codes, no rules, except that the figures which you can see there still have meaning, the meaning of how to move the figures. That means it's differentiated by the shape of the figures. The abstract meanings of how to move could create space, and we are concerned with that.

Nowadays, society could be described in many ways. Compare a nomad looking for a track in the desert with just the stars for a guide, to a contemporary man in an airport looking for the right plane to bring him to the right place at the right time. Our society now could be described as an express-yourself society dancing on a

digital stage.

But digitalized images don't go to the long-term memory. They stay in the short-term memory which will change our visual world dramatically in the coming future.

There are many concepts about how to do architecture today. Our concept is finishing the Tower of Babel. As you know, this is a very anti-authoritarian act, and we like to do it this way because we don't believe in constraints. Constraints are always created by man. Finishing the Tower of Babel means that we have to confuse the language of architecture again, which could mean that the variety of discrepancy is the expression of our world in architecture. Or in other words, everybody is right but nothing is correct. It takes a long time to finish this tower. We started in 1968 with the detail of the cloud.

This was the first project we did as Coop Himmelb(l)au, and it explains our name -- sky blue. The point is not the colour, but the idea of having architecture that changes like clouds.

Since we were educated as architects who have to create shelter in order to control the body's temperature, and at that time the space suit was invented -- itself the perfect shelter -- we thought this, and being in outer space which has no gravity, liberates the ground plan and liberates architecture in order to create other spaces which are concerned in the development of, let's say our brain. Moveable platforms, inflatable spaces, air as a construction tool were in the foreground of this work.

Times are changing, and we found that we couldn't change architecture as radically as we would have liked in 1968, because we underestimated the intelligence of the clients and overestimated the capability of the construction industry. But we tried hard, and after many years, in 1975, we found out that there is a weak point in architecture, and this is the point when we create this upcoming building. It's not weak in the sense of weak. It's the most sensitive moment, and the German word is very precise in this case. It describes a subconscious, very consciousness procedure, and refers to a subconscious word. It's the prefix for all

subconscious procedures, and *Werf* (?) comes from 'to throw away', 'to give birth'. So both together are a very complex procedure.

Our theory was -- and still is. You know, I come from the city of Freud -- that if you can get rid of cliché, formalism, economics, constraints in the moment of designing, then architecture could be free. Space is liberating.

The comparison with the leaping whale goes like that. The whale changes the paradigm of the medium of water and the medium of air. In this moment, 30 tons are able to fly.

Many years have passed since then, and we are still trying to find methods which could enrich our architectural will and the will for architectural gestalt. Two methods I would like to describe have been in the forefront the last couple of years.

The first I would like to call 'to freeze the space'. Imagine this space as a block of ice and there are a lot of enclosures. By changing this paradigm so the ice block will be in the space and the enclosure will be space-designing objects brings me to not figure and ground anymore, but figures in space.

When we decided the inner space of the UFA Cinema Centre in Dresden, we were thinking about this, trying to define space without skin. Sooner or later, the skin will be replaced. The skin in architecture will be replaced by an energy field. Then we have to ask how to define space in another way. Medium-wise or object-wise or -- I don't know. This is one trial, and we succeeded with this procedure on many, many other projects.

The other one is bandage, the skin as the expression of the suppression of architecture. Look at this model. It's a diagram model of -- actually, I forgot to tell you the story about Rem and the diagrams. I promised Bob Stern I would, so I'll do it now.

I'm talking about gestalt because I think diagrams are over, and Rem pushed it over the edge in the lecture he gave at the (?) conference. It took him 20 minutes

and about 100 diagrams to prove that it's impossible to build a bridal (?) shop on the North Pole. So I think it's time to rethink the diagram.

This is a diagram model, a diagram proving nothing, but showing that if the bandage is the skin of the building and the skin is the expression of the constraints of architecture, the structure, the facility inside the building -- and even the shape gestalt -- will change immediately.

One of our projects that we did using this method is the Science Centre in Germany. It was a competition entry. We lost to Zaha [Hadid],

but nevertheless this was our first trial in doing what we wanted to do, taking the skin as an expression of constraints, urban-wise, economic-wise, functionality-wise.

We never disconnect the designing process from the building process. And talking about shaping the gestalt, we cannot separate the gestalt from the process of becoming the gestalt. Strategies to get through against all odds -- against economics, against time, against budgets, whatever the architectural constraints are -- is one of our goals.

Building the pavilion in Groningen on top of another building -- a kind of *kunstaller* - 13 years ago, we found that we could do the model one to one, with all the mistakes, with all the errors which make this model so lively. And we found out that the computer industry in LA was much more advanced than in Europe, so we moved part of our office to LA and Space Arm allowed us to digitalize every point of the model into a 3-D frame.

This computer was connected to a shipyard in Groningen, and we built this *kunstaller* like a ship. We had a very tight budget and a very tight time frame. We could handle the time frame by doing the whole thing I have described just on the computer. We kept to the budget by using the shipyard. At this time shipyards had no work, so they weren't building ships, but they could build this *kunstaller*. So it was done like a ship in a shipyard. Rooms or spaces were delivered with the

ship to the site and mounted, and you can see it here.

It was supposed to be a *kunstaller* or a museum, but the curators hated it a lot because they thought they could not place art pieces there. They were afraid that the architecture could be stronger than the paintings they would hang. So I explained to them that they have to have a lot of rehearsals because our spaces are like organs, and you need to practice a lot in order to be able to play an organ.

Here you can see one example where they were allowed to hang a painting, but there are a lot of spaces which are not usable and where only the space itself could be exhibited. So the space exhibits itself.

I think they have now started to love it because it's similar to -- not at the same level -- but similar to Danny's museum. People like to go there and have a look at the space, and they are not asking for things to be exhibited there.

This is the place where we originally planned to have a Richard Long sculpture, but we wanted to make it visible from beneath as well. So we created a staircase where you can look up, and this could be the first time you can see a Richard Long plastic from beneath, or from many points of views I would like to say.

When the Queen opened this museum, she stood here surrounded by ministers. She was very nice. She just said (which in German is a very female question): 'How do you clean this glass?' The ministers and all the officials immediately went pale. But I gave a very nice answer I think. I'm very proud of it. I said: 'Your Majesty, pyramids you don't have to clean.'

I would like to go through three projects in different conditions. One is built, one is under construction, one is in the planning stage.

The built one is the cinema in Dresden coming from a competition where we replaced axial thinking by diagonals or tangent thinking. That allowed us to create the connection point between two important areas in Dresden making the cinema

not only a cinema, but an urban place which connects two major areas.

The other concept I would like to call 'the art of cantilevering'. The concept, as I said, was not only to create a cinema but also an urban space, an urban balcony. We conceived of it by overlaying many functions and constraints and created a space which is defined by objects, by the space itself and by light.

The art of cantilevering, if you come to a client and ask him if he would like to have his building cantilevered, if he's clever he would say, I cannot pay for it because it's much too expensive. In this case, we convinced the client of this cantilevering building. The concept was to open up the building. Not to close the space, but to open it. So we needed to have it cantilevered. We convinced the client that the costs of the cantilevering were less than building a block because he only had to buy this piece of land. For this he only has to pay air rights.

This is another strategy for accomplishing things which seem impossible. You can read it here very clearly.

This is what the cinema looks like. The cinemas are packed into the concrete slab and the vertical urban space is described with this slanting crystal inside. It looks different from every side, so we compared it to the Roman god Janus who has many faces, not only two. The cantilevering part and

Light plays an enormous role. We have a light concert for the wintertime and summertime, for evening and late evening, and it constantly changes the situation of the space.

Inside, this vertical urban place is designed as a three-dimensional video clip. We think that since man is leaving the earth and living in space where there is no gravity, central-perspective space is obsolete. That means that, from every point of view in this case, you can have a different image of the space. And it becomes a three-dimensional video clip by running through this space very quickly.

There is a floating space as well. It has the shape of the double cone. By making

these things floating, we discovered there are more facades than we thought because we added a sixth facade beneath this cone.

Shading the whole area allows us to do without air conditioning which is very important in terms of the budget and the building costs.

Using rough materials refers not to the budget but to city materials -- concrete, but not Swiss concrete. Zinc and asphalt are the main materials.

Of course, glass.

And the video clip you can see if you run through very quickly.

We are now in Vienna, a little bit of a strange city. I would not compare it with Jerusalem, of course. But we have a similar problem in that Vienna is a monocentric city. The historical centre is the meta map of Vienna, and prohibits the forthcoming or the development of contemporary architecture.

The other thing is that the spine of the urban development in Vienna has not been controlled building in the last century, but social housing. But the social housing concept in Vienna is a little different from everywhere else in the world because it's not built for the poor. We have no poor and homeless people in Vienna, of course. Rather, it's meant to support people to buy property in their own city.

The third, which refers to the first problem, is that we have a very, very strong preservation society which thinks that every building built 100 years ago is worth preserving.

It took us a long time to overcome all these problems, but now we are ready, and we took on three major social housing projects. One is a tower which is finished; a block -- which is of course not a block -- which is almost finished; and this cupola that is under construction.

Referring to the cupola, on the way from the airport to the city there are four big infrastructure support buildings which were built in the 19th century. On this map

you can see what I meant by the meta map. This is our historic centre which overpowers, until today, the development of the other districts. What we tried to force, and what we proposed for many years, was the establishment of new centres in order to create a tension field between the old one and the new one. So this is the almost finished new city centre across the river, and this is the project I will show you.

We now have three city centres, and we can already see that there will be tension fields between the old and the new, creating places and possibilities for new contemporary architectural projects.

These buildings were built in the industrial style of the 19th century -- namely, camouflage on the outside, very technical on the inside -- supporting the infrastructure of Vienna. They have been out of use for 20 years, but are heavily protected landmarks, so the City wanted to know how we and other architects could remodel these buildings in order to preserve them and to make it pay to preserve them.

We introduced a plan for this city centre and introduced a social housing project to the City, and they agreed. Now four architects are working on these four buildings; Jean Nouvel is doing one, we are doing one and two other Viennese architects. Everybody is doing a different scheme, but there is a convention between all four - a shopping mall, a cinema centre, and all the necessary infrastructure so that the centre will not be mono-functional centre. It will have a very powerful infrastructure. Our concept was to create a building out of the void. Since we have to place functions inside the cupola, we created a very distinguished shape or gestalt, then took this gestalt, this gestalt void, out of this building and created a building next to the landmark.

You can see it here. We planned that about a thousand apartments should be built in all the four buildings, and we add to our part this shield which houses another 300 apartments.

Thus we could overfill the programme, and that gave us money to create a kind of

multi-functional music hall in this basement. It's eggshelled because of the structure. You need less material if you construct it in the shape of an egg. It's not connected to the existing building so as to avoid the transmittance of sound to the living areas.

It's a multi-functional building which consists not only of housing, but also of restaurants, a hotel, and many other facilities.

You can read the complexity of the programme on the ground plan on this section. It's a very dense situation, which I like.

This is the materialized void we created out of this idea, taking the inside to the outside.

It's a very high-tech programme, very complicated structurally, acoustically and with regard to light.

In order to prove that it could be built we took it to the wind tunnel where we studied all these issues.

This is how the existing building looks. What I meant when I said 'camouflage' was the irritation of or the destroying of the scale. No one knows how big that is. No one could realize how big it was. Therefore, the City didn't want to build things inside because the officials couldn't imagine that this is 60 meters, and that is because of the window. The window irritates the scale. We are used to a window being much smaller. These are four-story-high windows, for instance, so it's confusing, and it's a real 19th-century camouflage.

What I would like to show is the building process. The cupola came away in order to get into this area, which is enormous as you can see. A very fascinating space is coming up.

We are halfway done. We'll be finished next year. This is the shield on the outside.

It's leaning against the old building -- partly leaning -- because two more stories and then it would lean to the outside which refers to the cone-shaped void of the inside.

All four together will give immense power to this district, and the district will grow enormously because of the new 6,000 people who will live there.

The last project I would like to show is an urban project in Guadalajara, and I will leave the description of the situation and how we got there to my Mexican friend, Enrique Norten. Guadalajara I think is the second biggest city in Mexico. This is the building site, and several architects are involved in it. Enrique will go into more details.

This is the site. Since we are more than one architect there, this is the head of one of the architects. I'm sure you can guess who it is: it's Jean Nouvel looking very intensely at the area where he will build office buildings.

Our project is called a commercial and entertainment centre, but it's much more because we are trying to redefine commercial and entertainment by replacing spaces of products with spaces of knowledge. Neighbouring the museum -- this is just a diagram because we don't know how it will look -- neighbouring Toyo Ito's project, and by Enrique Norten's Congress Hall Convention Centre, which I heard recently will move a little, so on this side we have no neighbour right now.

The idea was to make it osmotic, to create an osmotic space which fulfils not only the requirements of selling products and selling cinema tickets, but also fulfils the requirement for space. You could call it a little Las Vegas because there are 16 cinemas with 16,000 seats, and a shopping mall as well. But there are other spaces which are not programmed yet.

You can see in this section that the whole area is shaded by a roof. Our level is 12 meters below zero, so you have to step down and climb up again which gives you the possibility

to walk around in space sequences which could lead you to many functions. It's a 24-hour centre. That means that there will be attractions all night long, not only cinemas, but also restaurants and other facilities.

This is a size comparison, a pyramid. A pyramid of the moon is, of course, double the size. I'm not going into the local context thing, but I really found out, when I was designing it, that I was heavily influenced by the Mexican culture.

Mexico is a very exciting country. You can see the roof, the cinemas, the figures in space which will house the music clubs, and at the very end, a cloud-shaped building arises.

This is what we will call Media Cloud. It's not concerned with the media, it's concerned with having no programme.

So the space sequence is walking through this area. It's like the Cinema Centre in Dresden, every point gives a different point of view. Two waterfalls will support the microclimate. It's concerned with water and fire as well. This is the area of the shopping mall which is actually not a shopping mall, but rather a marketplace where you can buy a taco next to (??) next to an Apple computer.

Fire, water, light and sound will be the event issue there.

The cloud arising from the shopping mall has no programme yet, but it's a shape without being shaped. It's a gestalt which symbolizes that there is a new concept behind it, the concept of exchanging or transforming the spaces of product into the spaces of knowledge which we don't describe as schools, but rather as spaces of knowledge, spaces of experience, of new experience.

Maybe we will give them a programme if the cloud asks us, but the programme does not depend nor is it concerned with the shape of the building

because we want to separate the gestalt from the requirements from the facilities.

I think when we have built it -- and hopefully we will, and it looks like we could very soon -- then maybe *gestalt* will take on a new meaning because -- and now I close the parentheses and come to my second quote from the famous Bob Dylan song, *Desolation Row*. And maybe this quote describes better than I can what architecture could be in the future. Bob Dylan says:

'Yes. I received your letter yesterday. The time of dawn had broke. You asked me how I was doing. I said is that a kind of joke. Yes. The people that you mentioned, I know them. They are quite lame. I have to rearrange their faces and give them all another name.'

Thank you.