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Editorial conversation between Michael Meredith and **PRAXIS**

Amanda Reeser Lawrence, PRAXIS
Ashley Schafer, PRAXIS
Michael Meredith, MOS

April 14, 2010
Boston, Massachusetts

Michael Meredith: As one of the few non-commercially driven magazines in the US, PRAXIS is seemingly not concerned with the "profession." Yet by publishing thematic issues (program, technology, landscape), you're always framing a larger set of concerns. I think it's too soon to say if all of the issues together produce a cohesive disciplinary argument, but each issue succinctly brackets a different aspect of the architectural discipline. How does this issue fit into that trajectory?

Ashley Schafer: Having moved away from the theme model, I think that this issue *Eleven Architects/Twelve Conversations* might allow us to look at the field differently. If PRAXIS has previously cut though the discipline in one direction, say, horizontally with each issue…

Meredith: Like strata.

Schafer: Yes, we've cut a surface stratum and a technology stratum and a landscape stratum. But this issue aspires to slice vertically across multiple strata.

Meredith: That's a nice way to put it.

Schafer: Instead of using a topic or subject to frame the issue, we're using a moment in time to capture the multiple issues and anxieties facing a certain sector of practitioners in 2009-2010. In this respect, it is highly specific, and yet this specificity enables other trends and ideas to surface so that, at the level of discourse, this issue is perhaps broader than previous ones. The multiplicity of thought that comes from twelve different interviews transforms the trope of theme into a meta-theme.

Amanda Reeser Lawrence: I agree that it creates a different kind of cut than the thematic framework—although it's still a synchronic cut—and offers another way to analyze contemporary practice. It's like Walter Benjamin's "surgeon," who sees only fragments (unlike the totalizing view of the "magician") but who understands the whole nonetheless. With this issue we are letting the conversation fragments generate a kind of editorial position. Still, I think it's worth asking exactly what distinguishes this issue not just from what we've done before but from other publications that purport to give a cross-section of contemporary practice. How is this issue different, for example, than *40 Under 40*?

Meredith: There are obvious similarities, but we're foregrounding discussion over projects. *40 Under 40* is typically more about building than discourse.

Schafer: The fact that we chose eleven architects is significant because it allows for a depth that would be impossible with forty and also for real opportunities to tease out coherences—without becoming singular or reductive like *Five Architects*. E*leven Architects/Twelve Conversations* situates itself between those models; greater than *Five*, but less than *Forty*. Eleven as a quantity produces a different curatorial model.

Lawrence: But, unlike *Five Architects*, we're not trying to codify stylistic tendencies.

Schafer: True. What I appreciate about *Five* is that, rather than foregrounding personalities, it focused on the projects, that were then heralded as part of a new moment in architecture (autonomy) by Colin Rowe's introduction. The projects in *40 Under 40* are so thinly documented that their juxtaposition is completely superficial. We went through a number of iterations of how we would publish this material and ultimately decided that, for each firm, we would publish a single project in depth and include smaller illustrative images within the text of the conversation as reference. Since PRAXIS has always emphasized the reciprocity between thinking and making, we felt it was important that projects not only hold equal weight to the text but also manifest the ideas in the article.

Lawrence: Although the idea of featuring a single project for each firm came quite late in the editorial process, it was an important moment. As an editorial team we were very self-conscious to avoid acting as propaganda for the eleven firms by showcasing all of their work. We liked the combination of the 'deep' understanding of a firm's working methods and ideas provided by the feature project, and the sense of the range of their work that comes from the collection of smaller reference images.

Meredith: Compared to other magazines, PRAXIS forefronts and supports a continuing discourse, especially in this issue. The projects are footnotes to a conversation.

Lawrence: This issue feels like a lot of discourse. We've been slogging through thousands of words—actually over a hundred thousand. And then we combined every conversation in the journal into a single text and found the most commonly used words.

Schafer: The top 200 made it on the cover.

Meredith: Oh that's beautiful as an image. Is it scary how many words are the same?

Lawrence: Actually, we were surprised by the range of words that emerged. Many of them are strictly architectural but many are not.

Schafer: I find the second scale of words—words like "crisis," "opportunities," "techniques," "history," "agency," "environment,"

"complex," "system," "expertise," "responsibility," "agenda," "expression"—more interesting than the bigger ones, which were predictable, such as "architecture," "project," "work," "office," "design," "practice," "research." The second scale of words begins to create a more specific picture.

Lawrence: We put a lot of thought into the format and structure of how all of those words would be produced; we debated the value of interview versus conversation and even interrogation—in other words, something that would provoke more disagreement. And we agonized over the pairings of the architects, trying to find firms that seemed to share interests or ideas. We gave them a set of questions (which some followed them quite literally) but we were explicit that the questions should serve as a guide. We encouraged them to improvise, to be more open-ended. Still, we all thought it would be a quick, straightforward issue. We would just have to transcribe it!

Meredith: Part of my pitch at the time, was, "Oh, this will be so easy!" It came out of a conversation we had at Ohio.

Schafer: Yes, I recall you proposing that an issue of PRAXIS focus on a generation of emerging practices, and we were intrigued by the possibility of breaking with the model we've used in the past. At the time, Amanda and I were perhaps less enthusiastic about the generational frame, but you made a strong argument that it was a natural proposition, since the journal already had a history of publishing younger practitioners.

Meredith: I was obsessed with an idea that we needed that useful contrivance of generational structures, like the art production in the 70s (i.e. Avalanche magazine) or, frankly, any avant-garde movement. They are never completely natural. When we spoke, I was wondering why we don't have more discussion amongst a group of peers outside the confines of institutional boundaries of schools, which is generally how conversations are framed. But nowadays, it's become in vogue—conversations are taking the place of lectures in formal academic settings! Informality has already become institutionalized.

Lawrence: In their conversation, Tim Hyde and Lucia Allais talk a bit about conversation as a historical form, but I think it's worth exploring that a bit. Why does it seem relevant now?

Meredith: Informality can be productive. The conversations amongst peers are usually more political and less policed. Architects talking to architects can also be more challenging than someone else writing about architecture; each of us has something at stake in the conversation. We're impassioned participants.

Lawrence: The fact that all of the participants are architects allows the conversation to begin at a certain level because there is a common language, but it also fosters a fair amount of apparent agreement. When we met with our project editors after the interviews were transcribed, we debated at length whether the architects were saying similar things or not. Certainly there are interesting shared moments and concerns, things that came up repeatedly, such as the role of form, digital practice, sustainability, and also the question of style, which I thought was particularly interesting—who talks about style anymore?

Schafer: Amanda and I disagreed about whether (and how) the eleven firms are different—especially in light of their insistence

on distinguishing themselves from each other. I took the position that, while within this eleven there is difference, compared to the majority of practices in the States today, especially those practices without a particular East or West coast academic affiliation, these represent a very narrow band of the spectrum. There is much more similarity than difference.

Lawrence: I guess it's a question of the scale of difference. Yes, compared to most practices in this country, they are similar to one another. But let's be frank that we're interested in a relatively small subset of firms, all of whom are teaching, and so, within that small subset, there are significant differences.

Meredith: There's something strange in saying, "Oh it's so amazingly boring and frictionless now." And yet we always get the same people from the same places and that is maybe problematic. No one argues much anymore. Everybody happily coexists with difference.

The way I frame our generation is around the idea of practice and an engagement in the real world, usually through fabrication, construction, performance, or program. What's interesting now is how to bracket that and think of what happens after the practice generation, if anything. Who knows, it may be the same.

Schafer: One consistency between the eleven firms is a preoccupation with the justification of form. Their differences lie in the way they deal with this anxiety and come to terms with form, but they all feel the need to talk about it. For example, Aranda\Lasch starts with an intensive study of natural structures, particularly quasi-crystals and crystal forms and the rules behind their formation. Marc Frohn also works with rule sets, but his are based on building codes which happen to produce crystalline form. They share a common language in discussing their work, but if you listen carefully, their motivations, intentions and results are radically different.

Lawrence: But hasn't this anxiety over form been a defining aspect of the architectural avant-garde since the twenties?

Schafer: Do you think Mies struggled over form?

Meredith: Absolutely.

Lawrence: Oh absolutely.

Meredith: Even in the way Mies draws his little, blurry figures in his perspectives, which are almost barely there, there is a sense of erasing form. Form gets undermined by the material quality of the plane and the flatness of collaged imagery.

Schafer: I'd argue that his obsession was with composition rather than form.

Lawrence: Mies's quest for a universalizing language, specifically later in his career, was precisely to alleviate the anxiety over form. Is that what this generational moment is about, trying to eliminate anxiety over form?

Schafer: Maybe it's using rule sets as the answer to form.

Meredith: As a positivist approach, rule sets work well because you don't have to argue for them. They're logical. They argue for themselves.

Lawrence: Rule sets today take the form of scripting and parametric modeling. Many of the firms talked about the desire to hide the traces of the digital. Maybe all of that positivist logic is automatically embedded in the work through the use of the computer, but there still needs to be a discourse just as there

was in the moment after functionalism. There are still decisions to be made.

Meredith: Currently there is a crisis at both extremes, after the nineties and the noughties. We're in a really interesting moment. The nineties killed formalism through positivist form and the process-driven methodology of "technique" without history or referent. It's strange because the brilliance of Eisenman at the moment of writing "Post-functionalism" was his attack on Alexander and the sustainable positivist functionalism, or pseudoscience, of architecture. Eisenman was looking for architecture to re-engage cultural discourse. Ironically, the lineage of his work (his pedagogy) produced positivist form-making through scripting and the parametric. Formalism became everything he was fighting against—tasteful aesthetic expressionism. Formalism became positivist, removed from cultural discourse.

This brings us back to the seventies model as the formalism counterpoint, which is sustainability and the pseudoscience of architecture. Can you imagine how many studios are currently being taught that use sun angles to produce architecture? It's ridiculous, again because it avoids the self-consciousness of history or architecture itself as a referent. We're caught in a double-bind. Formalism and functionalism are both proven to be dead ends, so we need to find some other way forward.

Lawrence: Many of the firms spoke about the importance of social concerns at this juncture. Do you see that as positivist?

Meredith: I see that as part of the pseudoscience of judging buildings with the greatest good argument. This building's better because it helps more people than another building. I hope this doesn't become our primary role as architects.

Our role is to produce an architecture, a music, that feels and sounds right, enfranchising those who enjoy it. The avant-garde produces music that to one group (usually a younger generation) sounds right and to others is noise. Once we've entered into this conception of architecture, then it is inevitably a temporal project, one that eventually becomes institutionalized and supplanted with another. It is historical, it is generational. In this moment, where we are flooded with information—polling data, statistics, quantifiable data—what is at stake is architecture's political dimension, not its ecological one, which is an obvious mandate like ADA. And when we discuss the political in architecture, we are talking about the aesthetic dimension of architecture.

Schafer: I don't think that anyone was suggesting that their work should or could be measured in such objective ways. However, most of the firms shared both an angst about the environmental issues we face today and an extreme antipathy toward mainstream adoption of so-called sustainable practices such as LEED. Maybe there's the hope that in projects like WORKac's PF1, its very presence creates a cultural awareness of the problem rather than a measure of its value based on how many people the garden fed.

Meredith: PF1 is the architectural equivalent of the Prius, in that it's not really that much better for the environment but it produces new symbols, aesthetics and politics.

Schafer: New desires.

Meredith: Yes. New desires, like those that have been created around food.

Schafer: I'm continually surprised that creating a similar transformation seems so elusive for architecture. If anyone should be able to design desire, it should be architects, no? Why can't environmentally conscious work also be sexy?

Meredith: I agree. I'm interested in people taking on sustainability as an aesthetic problem as well as an environmental one.

Schafer: Why does what we know as sustainable architecture have such a particular (and I don't mean that positively) aesthetic? When a Prius looks like a Ferrari, then everybody would want one.

Lawrence: The fact that Prius looks different means that it produces contituencies—people who argue for it and against it. So this clunky, frankly ugly shape makes people think, "Oh look, there's an environmentally friendly person over there." It's identified with certain politics. Architecture already does that to some degree, but the discussion needs to be more public. Somehow the Prius is much better at it than we are.

Lawrence: The other common thread throughout these conversations was a resistance to being part of a generation. Michael, what did "generation" mean for you when we started this project and how has it changed?

Meredith: Most people don't want to think they're part of a generation. We've been too caught up in the celebrity model of architecture, but I tend to think in generational narratives. Hilary and I recently lectured in Chicago and we made a list of ideas from the nineties versus the noughties. The nineties were the end of history. Architecture became a representational project, a process-driven methodology to avoid postmodern semiotics. It was internal and disciplinary; it was avant-garde; it was critical and theoretical; it was geometric; it was formal. And then in the noughties the discipline shifted towards realism, towards practice. Instead of representational drawings and abstract, complex imagery, we represented architecture through photography, construction documents and photorealistic renderings. Of course, these are very broad strokes but they allow you to find a narrative to operate within. In order to work, you have to produce an artificial reading, perhaps a caricature of a moment. The idea of generations is similarly an artifice. I suppose that nobody wants to be part of an artifice.

Lawrence: When you frame a set of issues as historically specific to the nineties or the noughties, do you then see architects as engaging and shifting through those sets of questions, or are you saying that these architects are simply coming of age at a certain moment? In other words, is a generation of architects somehow determined by their specific historical issues or by a more neutral, temporal commonality? I guess we're back to the autonomy question…

Meredith: We have operating systems. Some people have Windows 95, some people have Windows 7. If you started with Windows 95, you started with a representational project; you read a lot of Robin Evans who was super cool and of the moment. You were turned on to geometry, ruled surfaces, etc. A few years later, you started building and you might have incorporated ideas of materials, construction, and techniques, etc. Of course we evolve, but certain moments have a greater influence on us. Hilary and I come out of a moment of anti-

aesthetic realism. A lot of us were turning towards the real again as a project. This is true for other fields as well; photography became more important in art, the memoir and non-fiction became important in writing.... In the nineties, architects weren't concerned about professional licensing. It wasn't necessary or important. And now, all of our friends and colleagues decided to get licensed.

Schafer: Including Amanda and me. It seemed important.

Lawrence: That comes back to the question of the role of historical circumstances. The strong economy meant there was work. So you needed a license.

Schafer: I don't think the push towards licensure was entirely a matter of need. It was as much a shift in attitude or the desire to create a different relationship to practice. The non-licensed architects you mention, Michael, work with local architects who stamp the plans. They're comfortable with that solution.

Meredith: Well, I believe it helps to have a license. External pressures affect architecture and each of us personally. People use their cultural predicament to construct their identity and they say, "Listen. What makes us different is we're out there building." And it frames you even if you didn't think of it consciously.

Schafer: We're avoiding the question, though, of what, if anything, defines a generation. I'd say that it has very little to do with age. If anything binds a group of architects together in terms of their design approach, it's the way they were educated. Events occur at a time when you're in school—a time when you're absorbing information— that leave indelible marks or at least inform your intellectual or design psyche. For example, Rem published *S, M, L, XL* when we were in school.

Meredith: Yeah, sure.

Schafer: That book had a huge influence on all of us. Students today see it as past history, but for us, it was THE book of the moment. Similarly, at any given time, certain people are making the lecture circuits, so even students at different schools hear the same talk with the same ideas and projects. These events informed the way we think. Not to say that we haven't grown beyond our education but as you said, Michael, it is your operating system. I'm not trying to make a zeitgeist argument, but the presence of these ideas at a time when we were young and impressionable ties us as a group.

Lawrence: We'd resist claiming that this issue of PRAXIS represents a systematic catalog or a framing of a generation. It's a very specific and relatively insular group of architects. Frankly, it's also our generation. We trained and teach at the same schools as many of them. As the graph at the end of the issue shows, many of them overlapped in the same offices and have often taught at the same schools, particularly Harvard and Columbia. Of course we're drawn to the people that share our sets of interests.

Schafer: Another important distinction between this issue and *Five Architects* or *40 under 40* is that we self-consciously rejected any editorial framing that would imply we were trying to define a generation…

Meredith: …or be curators of the generation.

Schafer: Or that we were giving these firms an imprimatur. We had two simple criteria: architects who had work and who could talk about their work.

Lawrence: But again, that criterion was to talk about it in a way that we find interesting.

Meredith: So it's already institutional. It's already academic, you're saying, at a certain level.

Lawrence: Yes, of course. Because that's our editorial interest: writing + building, bringing together the academy and practice.

Meredith: We're in a weird and interesting moment in the discipline where we're still searching for something. I'm interested in this moment of the "post-real." I wonder how we rethink an avant-garde after the noughties, which was a reaction against complexity for its own sake and a search for architectural agency.

Lawrence: Many of the eleven talk about their desire for agency. If there is a dearth of critical voices, does the onus fall on the architect somehow?

Meredith: I think so. I believe that architecture is a fiction that requires us to restate it and riff off of it and change it, but we repeat and reference the core fiction. And that's a great thing. Otherwise what do we have? We would just be a bunch of builders. Our discourse would be relegated to construction.

Lawrence: I'm interested in the idea that we should be creating a generational narrative and addressing what you see as the fragmentary nature of the discourse. While your desire clearly isn't to capture the zeitgeist, what then is your motivation? Do you want to give architecture more power? Is it about synthesizing?

Meredith: As a generation, we need to find ways to make a case for ourselves or to transform or produce narratives for architecture. All the different narratives of architecture are so fragmented. Everyone has small conversations with close friends and there's nothing cohesive. My desire was to find moments where we could produce a cohesion again. In the end this experiment may fail and only serve to exacerbate the condition that everyone retreats into their little rabbit holes, or… or not. I just look back with amazement and interest at some previous architectural generations, for example, the Oppositions generation. It seems people came together, even though they were so different, and in so doing they made a case for architecture.