Interview

Mary McLeod in conversation with Salomon Frausto and Léa-Catherine Szacka

In February 1989, architectural historian and theorist Mary McLeod published her now seminal essay entitled 'Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism' in *Assemblage* 8.[1] In the essay, she examined the relationship between architecture and politics in the 1980s, a time of unprecedented change. The following conversation discusses the circumstances under which the essay was originally written and offers her reflections thirty years later to think about the relationship between architecture and populism today.

Salomon Frausto: Thanks for taking time to have this conversation with us. Léa-Catherine and I are co-editing this issue of *Footprint* entitled *The Architecture of Populism: Media, Politics, and Aesthetics*. When we started conceptualising the call for papers, your seminal essay, 'Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism,' was a point of reference for us. Under ideal circumstances we would have actually asked you to write a companion piece or a sequel for *Footprint*, but in lieu of that we thought it would be nice to have this conversation, to understand a bit more about the context within which this essay was originally written and then to talk about some of the ideas that are still fertile today, and then talk about what would happen if we were to change the title to 'Architecture and Politics in the Trump Era'. What would the subtitle be to something like that? For example, would it be 'From Environmental Crisis to Social Inequity'? Not to put words in your mouth, but to see how this thinking relates to today's situation. The relationship between architecture and politics is an important part of your scholarly work, undoubtedly influenced by you involvement in the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies. It has been present in your teaching, from seminars to lecture courses, and even in your PhD. We would like to discuss some of these ideas with you today. We're interested in two things: what are the origins of the essay, and how does it relate to the early period of *Assemblage,* where you originally served as an editorial consultant? Where shall we start?

Mary McLeod: First, an explanation of how the article came to be. Originally, that issue of *Assemblage* (issue no. 8) was to be guest edited by Richard (Dick) Pommer, a wonderful architectural historian married to the feminist art historian Linda Nochlin. Pommer had originally worked on late Italian Baroque architecture, especially Piedmontese architecture, but by the 1970s had begun doing research on twentieth-century architecture, particularly housing; he wrote one of the seminal articles about public housing efforts in the United States during the '30s.[1] The overall theme of the *Assemblage* issue was to be architecture and politics, and knowing my work on Le Corbusier and interest in postmodernism, Dick asked me to write an essay on contemporary American architecture. Originally, all of the authors in the publication, except Mark Wigley, were invited by Pommer to contribute.[2] In fact, I think Wigley's essay on deconstruction is quite different in its content and

ideological orientation from the other texts in the issue. There was apparently some disagreement about my essay – and I was told that someone on the editorial board had strong objections to it, presumably due to my comments about MoMA's Deconstructivist Architecture show, and as a result Wigley's essay was added. However, I don't know any of this first-hand. What I'd like to emphasise is the fundamental role that Pommer played both in that issue of *Assemblage* and in the genesis of my piece.

I should also say a few words about my connection to *Assemblage*. As you may already know, in the first issue I'm listed as the consulting editor, a role I would continue to have through the third issue. When Michael Hays first had the idea for the journal, a couple of people – Stan Anderson and George Wagner, I think – suggested that he talk to me about the possible direction and content of the journal. Theory was central to it, but I probably wouldn't call it the 'first theory journal.' In the US, *Oppositions* undoubtedly played that role, although, like the early issues of *Assemblage, Oppositions* was a mixture of history, theory, and contemporary criticism. *Assemblage* was widely regarded as following self-consciously in *Oppositions*'s footsteps, if by another younger generation. After the third issue, I backed away from the journal because I sensed a change in its direction, a change, as Salomon mentions, that probably wasn't really apparent to many readers until around the tenth issue or so. I felt that the journal was becoming less political, less historical, and more influenced by poststructuralist theory, some of which I've been quite critical of. That doesn't mean I didn't continue to read it and remain engaged with many of the issues it raised, but I felt a greater sympathy with the journal's original orientation.

In terms of other influences, you're absolutely right, Salomon, that the essay was in part a product of the thinking – the discussions and debates – that emerged at the Institute, especially around the Revisions Group. But the interest in politics and architecture was not by any means unique to us – it was very much a part of my generation. I started college in 1968, a time when you couldn't escape politics. My doctoral thesis focused on Le Corbusier's architecture and politics, but again, this concern was not unique to me. Think of someone like Jean-Louis Cohen, a year older than me – he, too, looked at political issues, but through from a different lens. The fact that Dick Pommer was able to assemble a group of architectural historians who were addressing political issues is itself indicative. What was perhaps somewhat less typical is that I dealt with contemporary architecture in terms of politics. But as I said, political critique was in the air – for example, Michael Sorkin's groundbreaking exposé of Philip Johnson's flirtation with American fascism and Nazi Germany in the early '80s.

For the Revisions Group, postmodernism was a major subject of concern, as it was for so many architects in the US at the time. In my case, it was something I experienced first-hand. Michael Graves was one of my teachers, both my second-year master's studio critic and an advisor on my master's design thesis, and I saw his evolution from the formal explorations of Five Architects to an interest in historical forms and decoration. And, of course, Columbia (where I began teaching in 1978) was a hotbed for these debates. There were serious battles – not personal, but intellectual – between Ken Frampton and Bob Stern; and then later, when Bernard Tschumi joined the faculty as dean, there were other debates.

SEF: Would you tell us more about the Revisions group and how that might have influenced your ideas in the article?

MM: Most of us in the Revisions group were quite left – and vehemently opposed to what we saw as the conservative swing in American politics and culture during the '80s. We also reacted against the Institute's emphasis on self-publicity and its links to a male power scene, which we believed was at

odds with some of the fellows' own theoretical and political positions. But I would stress that the fellows were quite a diverse group: for example, Ken Frampton allied himself with the Frankfurt school and was sympathetic to phenomenology, whereas Eisenman was interested in Chomsky's linguistics and then Derrida.

In the Revisions Group, we read a number of texts by Marxist theorists and critics, such as Manfredo Tafuri and Fredric Jameson, and undoubtedly these writings influenced my thinking about architecture. We also organised a couple of public events at the Institute, two conferences: one was on postmodern art, including David Salle and Sherrie Levine, and the other was *Architecture, Criticism and Ideology*, where Jameson gave his first paper on architecture; it resulted in the first Revisions publication.[3] In both conferences, the political implications of postmodernism were really the central concern.

I might also add that the only person, besides Dick Pommer, who read and criticised in depth a draft of my article was Joan Ockman, whom I became close friends with through Revisions; and I remain grateful for her sharp comments and advice.

SEF: In hindsight, what do you think you introduced to the discussion of postmodernism at the time?

MM: I had hoped, as I said, to elucidate the relationship between contemporary political and social transformations with contemporary developments in architecture. Certainly, art historians such as Tim Clark and Michael Baxendall had explored the social and political context of art in the past; and more recently, Andreas Huyssen had considered the political implications of postmodern culture in his essay 'Mapping the Postmodern.' That essay was fundamental to my own thinking and prompted me to think about how his argument might relate to architecture.

Perhaps what was new to my essay, at least in a journal such as *Assemblage* – and please correct me if I'm wrong – was my introduction of popular culture to architectural criticism. The frontispiece of my essay was a cover of *Time* magazine showing Philip Johnson holding a model of the AT&T building. Today, this image is well known, but I don't remember it being used in a scholarly context before then. I was very conscious of the commodification of architecture that was occurring at that moment: Michael Graves selling shoes; Bob Stern appearing in house ads; Helmut Jahn being featured in inflight magazines. It seemed like something new – quite different from how architecture was portrayed in the popular press only a decade earlier. Architects had become media stars. I don't remember photos of architects being used in ads before then.

Léa-Catherine Szacka: In the article, you mention the polemic between Denise Scott-Brown and Kenneth Frampton. This polemic went on for a while beginning in *Casabella*. I was wondering if you could comment on this and also on the afterlife of the debate? The specific polemic is over, but this elitist versus mainstream debate still goes on, or how would you situate it in a longer historical perspective?

MM: Lest I forget, Léa-Catherine, I wanted to mention something related to Salomon's earlier comment about the idea of an essay titled 'Architecture and Politics in the Trump Era.' Are you by chance familiar with the article that Michael Sorkin wrote in *The Nation* in the midst of Trump's presidential campaign?[4] He used the marvelous phrase 'gilt by association.'

Returning to your question, I remember reading that issue of *Casabella* when I was in architecture school. As the only woman in my first-year architecture class at Princeton, I was delighted by Denise's acerbic retort – and even though Kenneth Frampton is now one of my dear friends, I confess I still enjoy her wonderful parody of his prose. It was for many of us then an important debate, one that reflected

strains in American politics at the time, particularly on the left. How much of popular taste was an authentic reflection of middle-class and working-class values, and how much was imposed by what Adorno and Horkheimer called the culture industry? Although Denise and Ken had both studied at the Architectural Association in London and shared an appreciation for contemporary architects such as the Smithsons, I think for Ken, her embrace of Las Vegas and Levittown – and more generally, American mass culture – was just too alien to his own political position. He was deeply influenced by the Frankfurt school at that time, and in the late '60s, when he was still teaching at Princeton, he was also in close contact with Tomás Maldonado, who was a visiting professor there; Maldonado was, of course, one of the most vehement critics of Scott-Brown and Venturi's analysis of Las Vegas.[5]

Perhaps, as an American, I was, and still am, more sympathetic to the populist strain in Scott-Brown and Venturi's work. I recognised the elitism that Denise identified in American academia, but I also identified with the New Left, which didn't share Adorno's – and Ken's – fear of popular culture. In fact, for many of us, it was, or could be, a positive, even radical, force. Think, for example, of Bob Dylan and folk music and the role that it played in anti-Vietnam protests; or *Ms.* magazine and movies like *Thelma and Louise,* how they helped broaden support for the women's movement, even if some of us were initially scornful of Gloria Steinem when she founded *Ms*. For me, one of the most telling examples of how mass culture can help bring about or at least reinforce change is the stage persona of some rock musicians, such as David Bowie and Village People, who challenged gender conventions and attitudes about sexuality. But I think for Ken, who came to the US in the midst of the Civil Rights movement and antiwar protests, everything to do with American capitalism was (and still is) horrific. When I interviewed him for an article that I wrote about the influence of the Frankfurt School on his thinking, he said it was coming to the States that radicalised him, and he quoted a remark that Michael Glickman had made to him: 'You have to understand, in England the claws [of capitalism] are hidden but in the States they are visible.' He was appalled by Las Vegas, which represented for him all that was wrong with consumer society and capitalism. This relates as well to his aversion to scenography. He has always had a preference (and this might be seen as his continuing allegiance to certain values of the Modern Movement) for what he calls the 'tectonic' – those elements of architecture that reveal, speak of, a building's construction. This is apparent in his essay 'Towards a Critical Regionalism' and also, of course, in his book *Studies in Tectonic Culture* (1995).

So, what I was trying to argue in the *Assemblage* piece is that there was a progressive dimension to postmodernism's populism in its early phase. I thought that architects such as Charles Moore and Venturi and Scott Brown in the '70s were seeking to address a genuine shortcoming of modern architecture, at least as it evolved in the US – its failure to communicate to a broad range of people. They recognised the widespread disillusionment with post-war corporate modernism – its banal 1950s office blocks, empty concrete plazas, and desolate public housing projects. I'm speaking, of course, from an American perspective. I think the situation in Europe was quite different, even if there, too, many were unhappy with post-war modern architecture, especially large-scale housing blocks (the *grands ensembles*) and urban reconstruction. But this initial progressive impulse in postmodern architecture had largely dissipated by the early '80s; and like so many avant-garde artistic movements, it seemed that the architecture of Moore, Graves, and Stern had itself become commodified.

L-CS: Do you see things the same way now? Because obviously this was written almost on the battlefield, in 1989; so now, thirty-two years later, do you still see things the same way or would you have a different view?

MM: I see much of it the same way now. In fact, re-reading the essay before this interview, I was surprised how little I disagreed with myself, with one big caveat, and that concerns the popularity of Decon – or rather, the popularity of the architecture by the designers labeled 'Deconstructivist' in MoMA's exhibition. When I wrote the essay, I was very sceptical that Deconstructivism would last long or have much of an audience. That was certainly true of its theoretical justifications. Almost as soon as the show was over, the movement fizzled. Instead of Derrida, there was an infatuation with Deleuze, at least in schools like Columbia. I'm not sure if the same thing happened in Europe, where I sense the interest in poststructuralism in architecture circles was never as strong. But, by about the mid-'90s, and certainly by the late '90s, architectural theory seemed moribund in the US. Digital design, new technologies, and most of all, the post-recession building boom had made it largely irrelevant for a generation eager to build. But what I did not anticipate in 1989, when I was writing the essay, was the success that many of the architects in the Decon show would have, or how popular their buildings would be – the most obvious example being Gehry's Bilbao. It's a populist work. Despite its radical forms – or perhaps, more accurately, because of them – it seems to appeal to everyone. Yes, it's become highly commodified – the epitome of architectural branding – but for me (and I think for a lot of people including the residents of Bilbao), it's an incredibly powerful, meaningful, exuberant work that helped generate life in the city. Many of the designs by Hadid, Koolhaas, Tschumi, and even Eisenman have also had surprising public success – all over the world. But few today would see their work as 'Deconstructivist'; rather, their designs are known by their names – a Zaha, a Gehry, and so forth. Nor would many relate their designs to Derridean philosophy or any particular theoretical claims.

L-CS: Yeah, by then, these labels certainly weren't working anymore. It had simply become individualism. So whatever label you're trying to apply doesn't really work.

MM: Yes, it soon became more about personal style, or to repeat myself, a kind of branding, which is not to diminish the considerable creative originality and popular success of many of these works. It was a strange moment, in which, as I said earlier, Deconstructivism seemed to disappear as quickly as it had began, not that Tschumi or Eisenman ever renounced their own theoretical ambitions. Theory continued to persist throughout the '90s in the pages of *Assemblage*, although it seemed increasingly detached from architectural practice. This trajectory comes out clearly in some of the statements in the last issue of *Assemblage* (no. 41) published in April 2000.

SEF: Returning to this issue of *Footprint*, what we see here, or at least within this particular Delft context, is that the idea of architectural theory is still very much based… well, if we think about the understanding of what it meant to do architectural theory in that particular moment in the US, let's say applied philosophy, I don't know how else to call it… but here, we still have people applying philosophy and claiming that it's architectural theory, which I find a kind of antiquated rhetorical technique. I wonder if you could reflect on how this rhetorical technique, at least in the US, has faded, given the real urgencies of our time, like environmental crises and expanding social inequity? I wonder, in your own thinking, how you see the evolution of architectural theory – well, today architectural thinking – and also in relation, given there's never really a schism between history and theory. What are your reflections on applied philosophy considered as architectural theory, and where do you see architectural theory going today, or architectural thinking in terms of embedding discourse into the world of ideas?

MM: Those are good questions. In fact, one of my own hesitations about the evolution of *Assemblage* was that I thought that philosophy and theoretical approaches from other disciplines (such as from linguistics, literature, and psychoanalysis) seemed to be applied to architecture a priori – that is, often trying to make architecture fit into a specific theoretical paradigm. I'm someone who has long been interested in theory, and sees it as essential in helping me think harder about architecture and architectural history, as well as history and politics more generally. But I don't think theory should ever be used formulaically, as was too often the case with efforts to use semiology to analyse architecture or, to cite another example, attempts to apply Peter Bürger's distinction between the avant-garde and modernism to explain different movements in modern architecture in the post-World War I period (this was something we discussed in the Revisions group). For me, it's critical to keep assessing what's relevant in theory and what's not – and how architecture is similar or different from other fields. It's a back-and-forth process. Perhaps, too, this continual critical scrutiny is a means to refine, or even help generate, richer theoretical ideas.

In terms of the situation today, I agree completely that other issues – ecology, social justice, economic inequities, gender, and race – have supplanted theory, at least as it was understood in the '80s and early '90s. These subjects, of course, have their own theoretical dimensions – for example, theories of the 'anthropocene' and 'capitalocene' – but, for the most part, the urgent need for practical action has taken precedence in architecture, as it has in other fields. This is evident in Black Lives Matter, the Me Too movement, and organisations such as ArchiteXX, as well as activist groups dealing with queer and trans issues in architecture. In this regard, recent activism reminds me more of the 1970s than the late '80s and '90s, although activism concerning queer and, especially, trans identity is certainly new in architecture. However, I think the progressive role of theory in foreshadowing and even inspiring these movements should also be acknowledged. Henry Urbach's essay on the closet in *Assemblage* in 1996 and Joel Sanders's book *Stud*, published that same year, helped open up discussion of male gender identity and gay issues in architecture. But I think it's also become clear in the past decade or so that theory wasn't sufficient in addressing cultural, social, economic, and, above all, racial and gender inequities in architecture and society at large. And the new wave of activism has achieved results: almost all the Ivy League schools of architecture now have women deans; numerous women faculty are tenured; and women are finally receiving prestigious professional awards, if still too rarely. I sense that the same thing is also happening in Europe. And yet – and here I sound like I'm equivocating – I think there's a risk of one without the other, that is, activism without theory or vice versa. For me, inclusion is not enough without more fundamental change, whether reforming studio culture, eliminating the star system, instituting flexible work schedules, dealing with conditions of architectural labour, or addressing even larger social and political structures. I still very much believe that theory – critical reflection – can help elucidate less visible and persistent inequities and structural problems.

Journalism, too, might play a fundamental role in elucidating these issues – and in overcoming the gap between theoretical discourse, which can often be arcane (and as a result have few readers), and the profession and public at large. I miss a voice like Michael Sorkin's; his articles in the *Village Voice* and later *The Nation* were sharp, witty, searing critiques of the blatant failings in the profession and society at large. Are there similar critics in Europe? I enjoy reading the architectural criticism in *The Guardian*, although it's not nearly as politically engaged (or amusing) as Sorkin's was.

SEF: Going back to this 1980s moment and shifting slightly to the commodification or commercialisation of people like Michael Graves et al., I wonder if access to 'quality' design would not be affordable

otherwise. Thinking through the lens of populism, that accessibility of quality design and working within mass production also relates to a modernist idea, even if the formalism or style was something else. Is this thinking attached to the integration of mass production and design into society?

MM: Your questions remind me of a comment Charlotte Perriand made when she came to New York in 1996 and gave a talk at the age of 93, and someone asked her what she would like to do now? She said, Design for IKEA'; she admired that IKEA has made decent quality design available to more people. That's the positive side of mass-market design. However, it's also important – and for me, this is one of the responsibilities of criticism, or perhaps, more accurately, investigative journalism – to look beyond that and consider how those inexpensive goods are made. What are the environmental costs, the labour conditions, workers' salaries? These are some of the issues that The Architectural Lobby has been addressing, but that should also be addressed by the media.

Another fashionable word these days at Columbia, one that frustrates me, is 'entrepreneurship.' It's used as if it's always a good thing. We all love Apple gadgets and Steve Jobs, etcetera, but for me, the way the word is used ignores the question of who's benefiting from these new inventions or enterprises, and what their role is in a capitalist economy with ever-escalating profits and income inequality. At least in Europe there are more safety nets.

SEF: Yes, but that's the interesting thing. Maybe, as you say, that's obviously where the politics is at the moment: what happens to your IKEA packaging, or what happens with the dismantling, the deforestation of of what are still primary forests in Scandinavia and other places? That's truly the political question related to design and politics as separate entities.

L-CS: Should we come back to this idea of replacing the Reagan era by the Trump era? I think that's probably the most general question of this conversation. If you had to write this text today but reflecting on the relationship between architecture and politics – maybe we can even say in the post-Trump era because, hopefully, we're in the post-Trump era – what would be the subtitle?

MM: I'm not so sure. We're in a moment of rampant eclecticism in architecture – neo-Brutalism, neo-po-mo, neo-avant-garde, and so on – a culture of 'anything goes'. I'm not sure you can associate any particular stylistic movement or theoretical current in architecture with Trump's presidency, although it did seem to coincide with ever more extravagant forms (for example, West 57th, Bjarke Ingels's pyramidal apartment block) and strange new building types targeted to the very rich, such as the super-tall, super-skinny towers springing up in midtown Manhattan. It's as if the commodification of the '80s had escalated exponentially. In hindsight, what was happening during the Reagan era looks almost benign compared to now, but when I wrote the essay, I couldn't imagine it getting worse.

Notes

1. Mary McLeod, 'Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism', *Assemblage* 8 (February 1989): 22–59.
2. Richard Pommer, 'The Architecture of Urban Housing in the United States during the Early 1930s', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (*JSAH*) 37, no. 4 (December 1978): 235–64.
3. The other contributors were Dennis P. Doordan, Geogio Ciucci, Michael Rustin, K. Michael Hays, and Richard Pommer himself.
4. Fredric Jameson, 'Architecture and the Critique of Ideology', *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985), 51–87.
5. Michael Sorkin, 'The Donald Trump Blueprint,' *The Nation*, 26 July 2016.
6. See Tomás Maldonado, 'Las Vegas', in *La Speranza progettuale, ambiente e società* (Turin: Einaudi, 1970), translated by Mario Domandi as *Design, Nature, and Revolution: Towards a Critical Ecology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972). Maldonado was responding to Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's essay 'A Significance for A & P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas,' *Architectural Forum* 12, no. 2 (March 1968): 37–43.

Biography

Mary McLeod is a Professor of Architecture at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservations, where she teaches architecture history and theory. Her research and publications have focused on the history of the modern movement and on contemporary architecture theory, examining issues concerning the connections between architecture and ideology. She is the editor and contributor to *Charlotte Perriand* and the Art of Living (Abrams, 2003) and co-edits the website *Pioneering Women of American Architecture*.