

TOPIC 07: PROCESS

AS PART OF HIS 'TOUR DE BALKAN 2016' MITESH DIXIT HELD SEVERAL LECTURES BOLDLY TITLED 'FALIURE', 'PROCESS', 'DEATH OF MODERNITY', 'VIOLENCE' AND 'FREEDOM'. IN 'PROCESS' – A LECTURE AND DISCUSSION HELD AT THE FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE IN SKOPJE – MITESH PRESENTED THREE PROJECTS WITH VARYING ARCHITECTURAL TYPOLOGY, DENSITY AND LOCATION, WHILE FOCUSING ON THE PROCESS OF LEARNING AND PRACTICING ARCHITECTURE. THIS CONVERSATION IS A CONTINUATION ON THE SUBJECT. MANY THANKS TO PAVEL VELJANOSKI AND TIJANA MOJSOVSKA WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS ISSUE.

A: In a brief talk on 'Intellectual Crisis' you say that the rules of modernity no longer make any sense in today's complex, unnerving and ambiguous environment. Can we start from this position; Is there any knowledge or wisdom that we can extract from the modernity? And if yes how can we consider it, or build up on it?

MD: The enlightenment wants to free the human mind from superstition and from dogma, from the adherence to prejudice. This is the goal of the enlightenment. Beautifully stated by Kant in his essay 'What is Enlightenment?', when Kant says 'Dare to use your own reason'. Herbert Marcuse caught a certain contradiction – or crisis – that was always at the heart of modernity; of modern life, of the world after capitalism, of the world after rationalization, you know, after bureaucratization, after you have bureaucracies and rational decision procedures everywhere. Marcuse catches a certain contradiction here that I think is absolutely vital for us to understand.

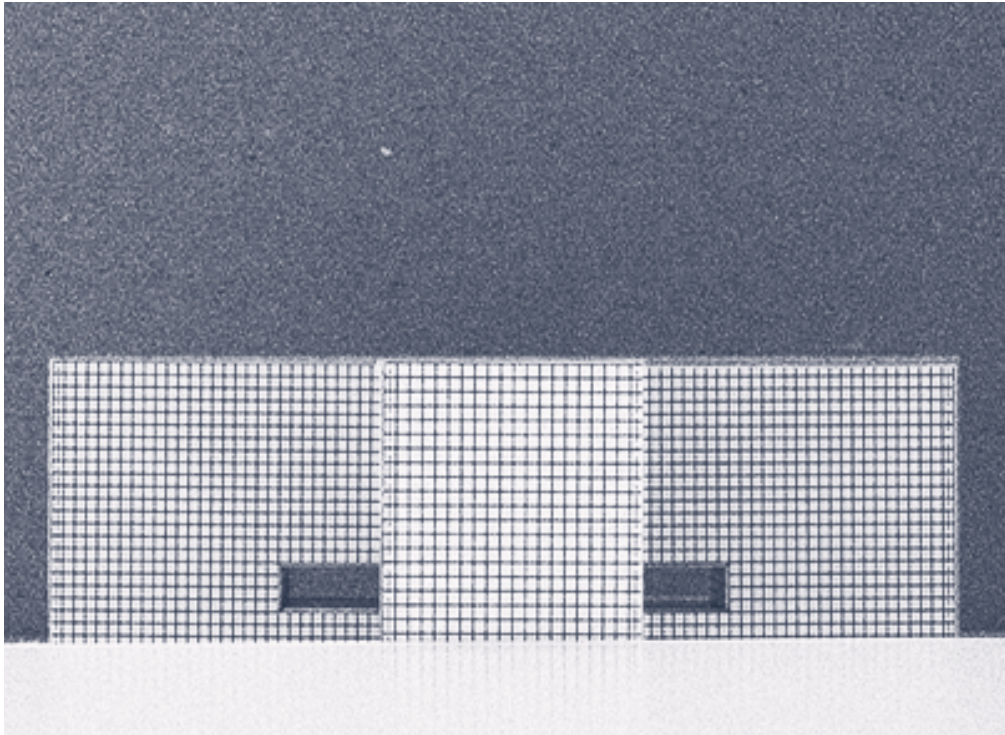
The attempt to demystify the world, the attempt to make the world, as it were, transparent to reason carried with it a strange dark side, always. The more that we became convinced that science progressed – and one term for that Marcuse uses is 'Instrumental reason'; reason used as an instrument for changing nature and human beings – it simply turned out not to be the case that we became less afraid in the face of the unknown. No, the unknown appeared more terrifying than ever, and it wasn't the case that we became less dogmatic, as a matter of fact, the sciences have now branched out into so many areas that the only way anyone could believe in any of them is dogmatically since none of us could study them because we don't have world enough or time.

A: Many say the modernism we inherited was failed or unfinished; it never got to a point of solution after the war...

MD: I think this notion of failing and succeeding is just too simplistic. There is a term in Sanskrit which is called 'Sunnyata' and it means a continuous state of exfoliation. Western thought has always tried to fix something (like this is the object and I am the subject) and what we've learn is that maybe now the object informs me more of who I am than I it. Like the way you look at an iPhone determines almost who you are as human being, i.e. if you are a liberal or a radical. It is not that it doesn't make sense or it's not applicable, but it's not as linear and direct as we think it is. In 'Phenomenology of the Mind' Hegel writes that perhaps our consciousness is not as clear as we think it is. In that sense; modernity assumed that 'we' are the rational beings, that 'we' can see the world and measure it. But soon 'we' came to realize this is NOT true.

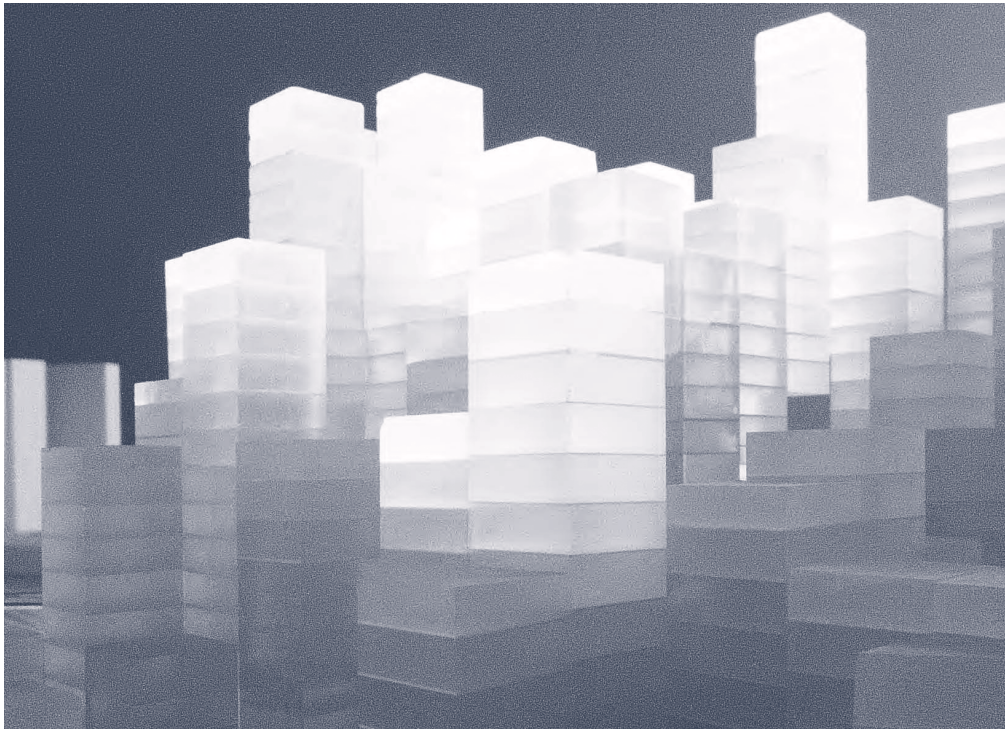
The big secret is I'm a hard core modernist, I 'believe' in its rationality and precision but I know it's not absolute. For example, when we talk about perspective, we

usually think about Brunelleschi and Alberti, but there were competing ideologies of perspective which were being developed in parallel to their theory. For example, Da Vinci believed in a spherical notion of perspective, in that there is no Centre. Instead, he argued for a spherical notion of space, i.e., a continuous volume with no edges...However the linear notion of perspective allows us to measure, control, stamp, and know the world: we can explain and rationalize the world according to our needs. Therein lies the critical flaw of Modernity / Enlightenment, and at the core of what the Frankfurt School was trying to expose: Modernity allowed, for genocide, Hiroshima, slavery, because you can measure, argue, and prove any belief. When I say modernity is dead I mean it is dead in a sense of its certainty. Meta belief means that I have to believe in the belief, and it does not allow for a failure. I think this is dangerous. And this is the paradox of Modernity. You have to allow yourself to be wrong.



▲ Building Z, Antwerp, Belgium. DOMAIN, 2012

▼ Paco park, São Bernardo do Campo, Brazil. DOMAIN, 2014



A: When describing your office you say that you don't have a particular manifesto or agenda in your practice, but still, do you have some abiding principles which you follow within the design process, or that you aim at in a project? If not consciously then maybe unconsciously, have you found any common ground between the projects looking back?

MY OFFICE IS CALLED DOMAIN BECAUSE I DO NOT WANT IT TO BE ABOUT ME. I DON'T WANT A CLIENT TO HIRE ME, IN THAT, I WANT US TO BE HIRED DUE TO OUR WORK, METHOD, AND EXPERIENCE. THIS I BELIEVE WILL PROTECT ME AND NOT REDUCE THE STUDIO TO A 'BRAND'; I DON'T HAVE TO BECOME THIS CARICATURE OF MYSELF TO SATISFY A CLIENT'S DESIRE.

MD: It's a good question because it's almost impossible not to have a manifesto. When we say we don't have a manifesto it means we're not trying to prove anything. This comes back to the two dominant methods of scientific inquiry, the Aristotelian Method where you propose a thesis which you try to disapprove it, in order to prove it correct; and the Baconian Method that derives its conclusions from observed facts rather than from previous conclusions or theories. So, perhaps this is our 'manifesto': the accumulation of information, which allows for discovery. In every project no matter the scale, we begin without a position or 'theory'. We discover the project by collecting and examining the data. For many

people this method is rather unsettling when beginning; we've always found that once we discover the project we can argue it, defend it, and most importantly find a method to develop it. So I would say that our manifesto would be about discovery and not imposition.

A: You work on different scales but mostly on large scale; do you think that complexity comes with the scale? Is the assumed division between urbanism and architecture still relevant or maybe it is imposed by academia?

MD: Let's start with the education component. What happens now in academia, in my opinion, people want to protect their little piece of the pie. I've been in enough schools around the world and this might be a broad generalization, but faculties are typically run by weak people. Their whole function is to maintain this little piece of the pie that they have. So you have: urbanism, landscape, landscape urbanism and there's architecture, building technology, public buildings, etc. There is simply not this much division in the profession, it's all one thing... it is all Architecture. You cannot be an architect if you don't understand urban planning, landscape, etc., so separating them especially, in the younger generation, is extremely problematic. In terms of our practice, when you have your own office the scale of the projects

depend on the people that you’ve met in the development of your carrier. So I would love to do smaller scale projects but there’s no competition for a boutique coffee house in the Lower East Side, you just have to know those people. The larger scale work is typically institutional, I deal with mayors and corporations and somehow I have a better time with these clients, because it is more professional and objective: I don’t have to be their friend. The large scale work is a result of my experience and perhaps due to the way we have positioned ourselves in the profession, but I would be very interested in smaller scale works as well. In terms of complexity and responsibility, in the larger scale projects the complexity is in the systems, hierarchy, and organization, but perhaps there is not as much complexity within the design process. The larger the project the less you do, unfortunately.

A: *There is a saying that ‘architects should know everything’. Yet it seems like our profession is becoming more and more dependent on the exchange of knowledge with other professionals (structural and mechanical engineers, designers, programmers...). In the lecture you stated that ‘you can only fight for few things in a project’. Do you think this makes things easier or we’re just losing control over the process?*

MD: Prior to Hegel everyone [philosophers] had these absolute arguments on the notion of freedom. John Stuart Mill said ‘society has to allow for offensiveness, but not harm’; the utilitarians claimed ‘freedom is what is good for the many’, and Kant had his Categorical Imperative, etc. But then Hegel said ‘Freedom is the thing that makes you a human being; without freedom, one cannot be a human.’ Every generation has to define freedom for themselves. This is important for architecture as well. Each generation will have to define what architecture is for them. Our generation needs its own definition.

I belong to the generation which is situated between the ‘old school’ and the millennials, this is a rather fortunate position. I grew up without internet but I know how to use social media; I like to think of myself as a link or conduit between the two generations. So as a generation I think we should withdraw for a moment and redefine what will be ‘architecture’ going forward. For me, as an architect you have to have a very solid education about humanities and the arts and sciences, you have to understand the basics of physics, the different methods of scientific inquiry, different methods of research etc. At the same time you have to know about policy, urbanism, ecology... and this is what’s beautiful about the profession. You cannot learn it at once, but you learn it with each project. And this is why it’s important when you’re young to chase projects and not necessarily a carrier. So I think what I’m trying to do in education is to expand the role of the architect, because I think we’re quite good at organizing information, unpacking it and showing the different agents within a project. I also believe education should eliminate this hierarchy between professor and student and allow for a flat discourse. Jürgen Habermas is the last living member of the Frankfurt School and his famous quote is: ‘in the process of enlightenment there can only be participants’ and I think this is important. Architecture should get away from this top down approach to teaching.

‘FREEDOM IS THE THING THAT MAKES YOU A HUMAN BEING; WITHOUT FREEDOM, ONE CANNOT BE A HUMAN.’ EVERY GENERATION HAS TO DEFINE FREEDOM FOR THEMSELVES. THIS IS IMPORTANT FOR ARCHITECTURE AS WELL. EACH GENERATION WE WILL HAVE TO DEFINE WHAT ARCHITECTURE IS FOR THEM.

A: *You’re coming from the USA and you’re working and teaching between the States and Europe. Could you make a parallel between the two continents in terms of teaching and practising architecture?*

MD: I have only taught in The Netherland at TU Delft, but I did study in The US and Europe; I studied in the UK, Spain and Finland. I have lived as an architect in The Netherlands, UK, Spain, France, Denmark, Hong Kong, USA and China. I would

say that the UK is closer to America; within Europe it’s radically different between the countries. For example in Barcelona it is quite a traditional format, but in Delft every time you walk into a different room it’s a different kind of education. In America the schools are quite focused on their exclusivity and to some extent have reduced themselves to businesses. They became extremely focused on marketing and ranking in order to attract foreign students because that is a significant source of financing. In the USA there is a substantial difference between the way in which architectural schools function and the way in which other schools function. Business, Law or Medical schools don’t really need the tuition from students, tuition only contributes to 5-10% of their operational cost. That means they have other resources, they have smaller class sizes, more professors. Architecture schools in America - 80% of the operational cost comes from tuitions. And because of this the schools are very instrumental and have to function much more like a business, i.e. commodify the education in order to sell it as a product.

A: *Does this have to do with the big problem of student debt in America?*

MD: Yes, that’s exactly what it is...So going back to the Hegel’s notion of freedom, the freedom for the millennial generation in America will be overcoming student debt, this will be the next stage of freedom.



▲ *Planta, Lleida, Spain. DOMAIN, 2013*

A: *In your Complex Projects Border studio, you’ve worked on a rather hot political issue regarding the US / Mexican border. This question became even more popular with Trump’s candidacy and his rhetoric but also in Europe with the refugee crisis...What were your conclusions from the studio?*

MD: I think this Border idea might be even more applicable here where it’s almost less clear what these borders are especially given the tumultuous history of The Balkans; this region has been ‘redrawn’ countless times and so to visualize that would be beautiful. What attracted us to the US / Mexican border was the absence of information: we loved the complexity of the area and the seemingly vast amount of information which did NOT exist, let alone mapped in a very rigorous, and architectural way. We saw the region as an opportunity to ‘create’ language: geopolitical, economic and architectural language. It was the absence of information and the lack of precision, paradoxically combined with these supposedly ‘clear ideas / opinions’ about the Border, which lead us to this topic. When you say ‘border’ everyone has an idea or notion of it, but most people do not have a real, tangible, or empirically understanding of one. The first thing we addressed with our students was the notion of perception versus reality. It had nothing to do with borders, we were much more interested in understanding the structures which create a systematic order that allows for such a border to exist. Specifically, the systematic violence as a result of the failed leadership of both the United States and Mexico governments and how unintelligent

policy, planning and architecture have created this easily avoidable situation. The students travelled the entire length of the border, discovering that the border is not simply a line, but an enormous region crucial for both countries, where economic and social symbiosis exists in spite of the militarized security regime and divisive political rhetoric. After the fieldwork, the studio worked as one team to develop an Atlas for the border region, in which we mapped the border as a ‘thick,’ shared region with overlapping interests – a large bi-national area, rather than a thin, hard line.

Mitesh Dixit founded DOMAIN Office in 2012. After completing undergraduate and graduate work in Politics & Philosophy, Dixit completed the Master of Architecture from the Washington University in St. Louis. Prior to DOMAIN, Dixit worked with Rem Koolhaas’ Office for Metropolitan Architecture as a Project Leader. Dixit joined the faculty of TU Delft in the Netherlands as a Visiting Professor of Architecture & Urbanism in 2011, and served as Editor of the Chair for Complex Projects at TU Delft from 2013- 2016. He lead the Architecture of Violence studio, focusing on the region defined within the USA Mexican Border, and the In Chicago Graduate research studio.