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Bernard Kormoss

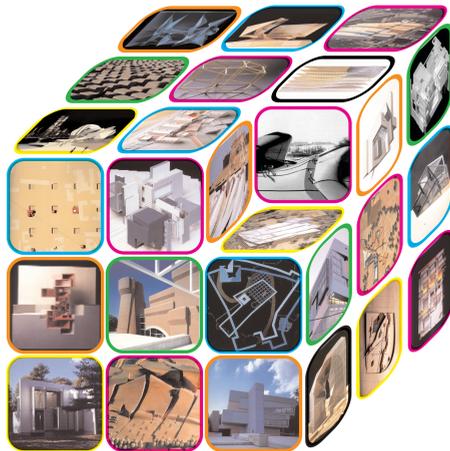
Peter Eisenman

Theories and Practices

/ faculteit bouwkunde

122

Peter Eisenman: Theories and Practices



to Sophie, Gil and Philippe

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Peter Eisenman: Theories and Practices

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Introduction

*“A theory is exactly like a box of tools...It must be useful.
It must function.”*

*“Theory does not express, translate, or serve to apply practice:
it is practice.”*

G. Deleuze

research topic

Within the spectrum of contemporary architecture, the work of the New York based architect Peter Eisenman (Newark, USA, 1932 -) is outstanding and exceptional. As one of the most innovative architects and theorists of the last decades, Eisenman has had a considerable impact in the field of architectural design and theory and has contributed to many architectural debates, mainly through his architectural experiments, critical writings and active academic and public involvement. Through his activities as director of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (1967-83), as editor of its journal 'Oppositions' (1973-1984), and later as instigator of the Any-conferences (1991-2000), he contributed in an important way to the architectural debate of the last decades.

Like other architects of his generation (Aldo Rossi, Robert Venturi, John Hejduk, and later, Rem Koolhaas), Eisenman succeeded to combine an active architectural practice with an intensive theoretical reflection, which he began with his doctoral thesis in the early sixties. Since then, Eisenman has never stopped to be intensively involved in both the making and writing of architecture. To take into account this intimate interaction between theory and praxis, the main focus of this research is on the theories and practices of Eisenman's work, and more particularly on his architectural and theoretical production between 1963 and 2000.

research framework

This research has been undertaken within the general framework of the “ABC of Density,” a research project on long-lasting architectural and urban strategies initiated and led by Prof. G.A.C. van Zeijl (T.U.E.). The research is thus not only focusing on short-lasting events (*‘événements de courte durée’*), but also on long-lasting strategies (or *‘structures de longue durée’*), so that the work and thinking of Peter Eisenman can be situated

within the broader context of architectural, historical, cultural and intellectual milieux. In the work of Peter Eisenman, this distinction between short-lasting events and long-lasting strategies can be related to the problem of the interiority and anteriority of architecture, and to the distinction between processes and strategies.

research object/objectives and methodological frame

The main objective of this research, is to make a vertical and critical analysis of the architectural and theoretical work of Peter Eisenman, starting from an in depth analysis of his writings and projects. The work is based on a fairly comprehensive and representative selection of Eisenman's oeuvre, based on a critical selection of texts and projects, written and developed in the period from 1963, the year of his doctoral thesis, to 2000.

Although our analytical scope is mainly oriented towards an internal and close reading of his work, we have also tried to situate the development of Eisenman's architectural and theoretical investigations within the larger historical, theoretical and critical framework of the architectural discipline, namely by examining and confronting the close interaction between his own architectural and theoretical constructions and the many disciplinary and cross-disciplinary references. In terms of interpretation, our main concern is to propose a factual, objective and pragmatic frame of interpretation, which stays as close as possible to the terminology of the author, without any interference of external frames of interpretation. In order to optimize this objective analytical frame, we have been trying to focus on changes and continuities, constants and variables, theories and practices. The intention is not to make a linear description of a succession of facts and data, but to focus on the multi-layered, multiple and transformative aspects of the processes of thoughts and to consider the act of theorizing as a continuous work-in-progress, with its own moments of crisis, shifts, bifurcations and loops.

Our intention is thus not only to engage in a recapitulative reflection on the major themes and concepts of Eisenman's work and to highlight the most critical themes, writings and projects, but also to reflect upon the underlying motivations, assets and construction of Eisenman's discourse and to outline the main lines of development, transformation and rupture. The main objective is to frame the most critical moments and lines of thought of the 'Project Eisenman' and to shed a light on the theoretical underpinnings and working methods, i.e. the '*modus operandi*' of Eisenman's discursive apparatus. Our attention primarily focuses on the question of the critical relationship between theory and praxis, i.e. between the discursive dimension of the written oeuvre and the pragmatic dimension of the architectural production. The main point of interest is to reflect on the respective role of theory (writings) and

praxis (projects) in the overall oeuvre of Peter Eisenman, and to analyze how these poles are related to and interacting with each other: what is the role of theory for the development of architectural design, and vice versa, how is the architectural production influencing and embodying the theoretical production of architectural thoughts. We further reflect on the underlying methodological framework of Eisenman's theory-at-work, or, in other words, on the inner mechanics of the architectural and theoretical production. This has been done by examining the reception of internal and external references (e.g. inputs from architecture, arts, linguistics, philosophy, science etc.), the link with contemporary frames of thought (such as structuralism and post-structuralism) and by situating the major lines of thought in a broader historical and cultural perspective.

historical context

Before analysing Eisenman's theoretical and architectural work, it is useful to first situate his work within the historical/contemporary context and to outline some of his most important achievements, as an architect, educator, theorist and public actor.

After his studies at Cornell University (Bachelor of Architecture) and Columbia University (Master of Architecture) in the late fifties, Eisenman received a PhD degree from the University of Cambridge (Cambridge, U.K., 1963), for his thesis on 'The Formal Basis of Modern Architecture.' In his doctorate, Eisenman developed an alternative theory of Modern Architecture, based on the reception of the formalist tradition of R. Wittkower and C. Rowe, his mentor at the time. Although his thesis never gained the public recognition that it deserves, because it has not been officially published until recently (Lars Müller Publishers, 2006), it can certainly be compared with a series of contemporary publications—such as C. Alexander's *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* (1964), A. Rossi's book on *The Architecture of the City* (1966), R. Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) and C. Norberg-Schulz's *Intentions in Architecture* (1965). All these publications, including Eisenman's thesis, have in common that they are challenging and questioning the orthodoxy of the Modern Movement, namely by formulating, in their own manner, an architectural alternative for the waning principles of modernism and functionalism. Eisenman's critique of modern functionalism is particular, in that it emphasises the importance of architectural form (as opposed to function, technique or structure), thereby reversing the well-known modernist adagio of 'form follows function.'

Back in the United States, Eisenman started teaching at Princeton University, and got involved in the creation of the 'Institute for

Architecture and Urban Studies' (IAUS, 1967-85), an international think-tank for architectural criticism based in New York, which he directed for more than 16 years (1967-1983). Together with the 'Architectural Association' (AA, London, founded in 1847) and the Italian 'Institute of Architectural History' (an independent institute founded by M. Tafuri at the University of Venice (IUAV) in 1962), the IAUS was one of the key-players in the institutionalization and internationalization of architectural theory in the seventies. Besides its program of lectures, conferences and exhibitions, the IAUS was also publishing a newsletter ('Skyline'), two magazines ('*Oppositions*' and '*October*') and a book series ('*Oppositions books*'). Till today, the journal '*Oppositions*' (1973-1984) is recognized as one of the most influential journals on architectural critique, theory and history of its time, and it has inspired many architectural magazines such as '*Assemblage*' (USA) and '*Archis*' (NL). The IAUS created an international and pluralist platform for architectural debate and contributed to the introduction of European and American architects and theorists to an international public. Many European theorists (like M. Gandelonas, K. Frampton, K. Foster, A. Vidler, M. Tafuri, F. Dal Co, G. Ciucci, A. Colquhoun *et al.*) or architects (like A. Rossi, R. Koolhaas, B. Tschumi, L. and R. Krier, R. Moneo *et al.*) were introduced to an American audience, and some of them (like K. Frampton, M. Gandelonas, A. Vidler or A. Colquhoun) pursued their academic career in the United States. Particular to the 'philosophy' of the journal '*Oppositions*', is its oppositional and pluralistic attitude, which is reflected by the conflicting character of its multi-headed editorial board, and its, now famous, contradictory editorials. As a result of this pluralistic intake, the columns of '*Oppositions*' have been the favourite platform for the oppositional debates between the *Grays* and *Whites*, the modernists and the post-modernists or history vs. theory. Through its close relationship with the 'School of Venice' (M. Tafuri, F. Dal Co, G. Teyssot, A. Rossi etc.) and other representatives of the European intelligentsia, the IAUS has not only contributed to the mediatization of the work of European theorists and architects, but, more generally, to open the field of architectural theory to European frames of thought like French Structuralism, Linguistics or Philosophy. Many of the leading theorists and architects in American and European universities today, have, in one way or another, been affiliated with the IAUS (from the former editorialists K. Foster, K. Frampton or A. Vidler to the younger generation of J. Ockman or M. McLeod).

Through his activities as a director of the IAUS and as co-editor of the '*Oppositions*' and '*Oppositions Books*' series, Eisenman has not only been a key figure in the development of the IAUS, but he has also personally benefited from the multicultural intellectual milieu, which had a strong influence on his own theoretical and architectural work (especially in relation to his reception of European linguistic, structuralist and philosophical references, and, more generally, through his affiliation

with M. Tafuri, who Eisenman considers as his second mentor).

Besides his activities at the Institute, Eisenman also managed to pursue his career as an experimental architect of 'cardboard houses', which, on an international level, was boosted by the publication of 'Five Architects' (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1972), a publication that presented the abstract and modern work of 'The New York Five' (Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, Charles Gwathmey, John Hejduk and Richard Meier). Due to his involvement in the Institute, Eisenman only managed to design a series of small-scale experimental houses, some of which were effectively built (House I, House II, House III, House VI), while others remained at the stage of project (House IV, House VIII, House X, House 11a, House El Even Odd, Fin d'Ou T Hou S). Unfortunately, Eisenman did not succeed to build his masterwork House X, since the client dropped out after more than 15 preparatory designs. Most of these house-projects were conceived as autonomous self-referential objects and were designed without any consideration of the site. The Cannaregio project (Venice, 1978), which is the first project of a larger scale with real site and urban contingencies, pushed Eisenman to come up with a different design approach, called 'artificial excavation.' From a historical point of view, one can note that this project is the result of a selective competition which was organized as a reaction against the upcoming conservative tendency (later coined as post-modernism), already prefigured by the controversial exhibitions on 'Rational Architecture' (Milan Triennale, 1973) and 'The Architecture of the *Beaux-Arts*' (MoMA, 1975).

In 1980, Eisenman decided to fully concentrate on his architectural production, by establishing his professional practice (Eisenman Robertson Architects). Consequently, he quitted his position as director of the IAUS in 1983, leaving the Institute in a state of confusion. The Institute was closed in 1985, and, till today, no serious academic research has been done on the historical importance of the IAUS, partly because the archives are still not open to the public. From the eighties onwards, Eisenman primarily concentrated his architectural activities on the participation in international competitions, beginning with the I.B.A. competition (Berlin, 1983) and the Wexner Center Competition (Ohio, 1983). The latter will lead to the acquisition of his first major building commissions, namely the social housing for the I.B.A. (1981-1985) and the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts and Fine Arts Library' (Ohio, USA, 1983-1989). The Wexner Center has become a symbol of the architectural movement of 'Deconstruction,' in which Eisenman played a crucial role, and has confirmed his international status. Although Eisenman didn't manage to build much of his projects, one can also mention the building of the Greater Columbus Convention Center in Columbus (Ohio, USA, 1989-1993), two office buildings in Japan [the Koizumi Sangyo Office Building (Tokyo, 1988-1990) and the Nunotani Office

Building (Tokyo, 1990-1992)] and the Aronoff Center for Design and Art (1988-1996). His most recent buildings are the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin (1998-2005), the Cultural Centre for Santiago de Compostella (Spain, 1999-, still under construction), and the TSA/Cardinals Multipurpose Stadium (Arizona, 1997-, still under construction). The Memorial has become a national, yet controversial symbol of how Germany has tried to come to grips with its past.

Besides his professional activity as a practicing architect, Eisenman has continued to pursue, during his entire career, an intensive academic involvement (at Princeton University, Yale University, Cambridge University, Cooper Union Institute, Ohio State University *et al.*). As an internationally recognized architect, he is regularly participating in international exhibitions (f.i. at the International Architectural Biennale in Venice in 1985 and 1991), exhibiting his work at musea and galleries worldwide and he has also been rewarded at various occasions (a.o. *Stone Lion* at the Third International Architectural Biennale in Venice (1985), Pratt Institute Doctor of Fine Arts (1997), and more recently the *Golden Lion* for his career at the Venice International Architectural Biennale in Venice in 2004). Besides his academic and public commitments, Eisenman is also actively involved in the mediatization of his own architectural and theoretical work, primarily through the publication of books and monographs on his architectural production (cf. *bibliography*).

He has also been the instigator and *éminence grise* of the Any-Conferences (1991-2000), a series of international annual multi-disciplinary conferences which were alternatively organized in different world cities (Tokyo, Rotterdam, Paris, New York etc.) and which were heavily mediatized, mainly through the publication of the proceedings of the conferences (cf. bibliography) and through the publication of the bi-monthly magazine 'Any.' The Any-Project is also a private initiative, like the former institute IAUS, but, contrary to the former which was directed by a board of architects, the Any-Project is run by a private corporation (Any Corporation) which is directed by Eisenman's wife, C. Davidson, and located within the office of 'Eisenman Architects' (New York). Although the Any-Project is conceived as an international and cross-disciplinary platform (including architects, theorists, writers and philosophers etc.), its scope is much less pluralistic and diversified than the former IAUS conferences and symposia, since the activities and choices are entirely controlled by the Any Corporation.

analytical scope

We begin our analysis by presenting an overview of the most critical moments of Eisenman's architectural and theoretical work, and by highlighting the most critical themes and concepts of Eisenman's writings and projects. We address the problem of the praxis-theory relationships by confronting, for each moment, the design related issues (of the architectural production/analysis) with the more theoretical and discursive issues (of the theoretical production.) The idea, behind this overview of critical moments, is not to make a linear and historical description of the different successive 'periods' of Eisenman's work, but, on the contrary, to show how the multiple thematic lines of Eisenman's apparatus are constantly interacting and intersecting with each other, as if they were caught in a constant movement of overlap, slipping, feed backs and bifurcations.¹ Our intention is thus to propose a general frame of reference in which the different lines of investigation of the Eisenman Project are again reintegrated, in an attempt to reassemble the different pieces of the jig-saw puzzle.²

