

# Interviews | ISSUES?

Concerning the Project of Peter Eisenman

On Architectural Education

Edited by: Vladan Djokić & Petar Bojanić

EDITORS: Vladan Djokić & Petar Bojanić

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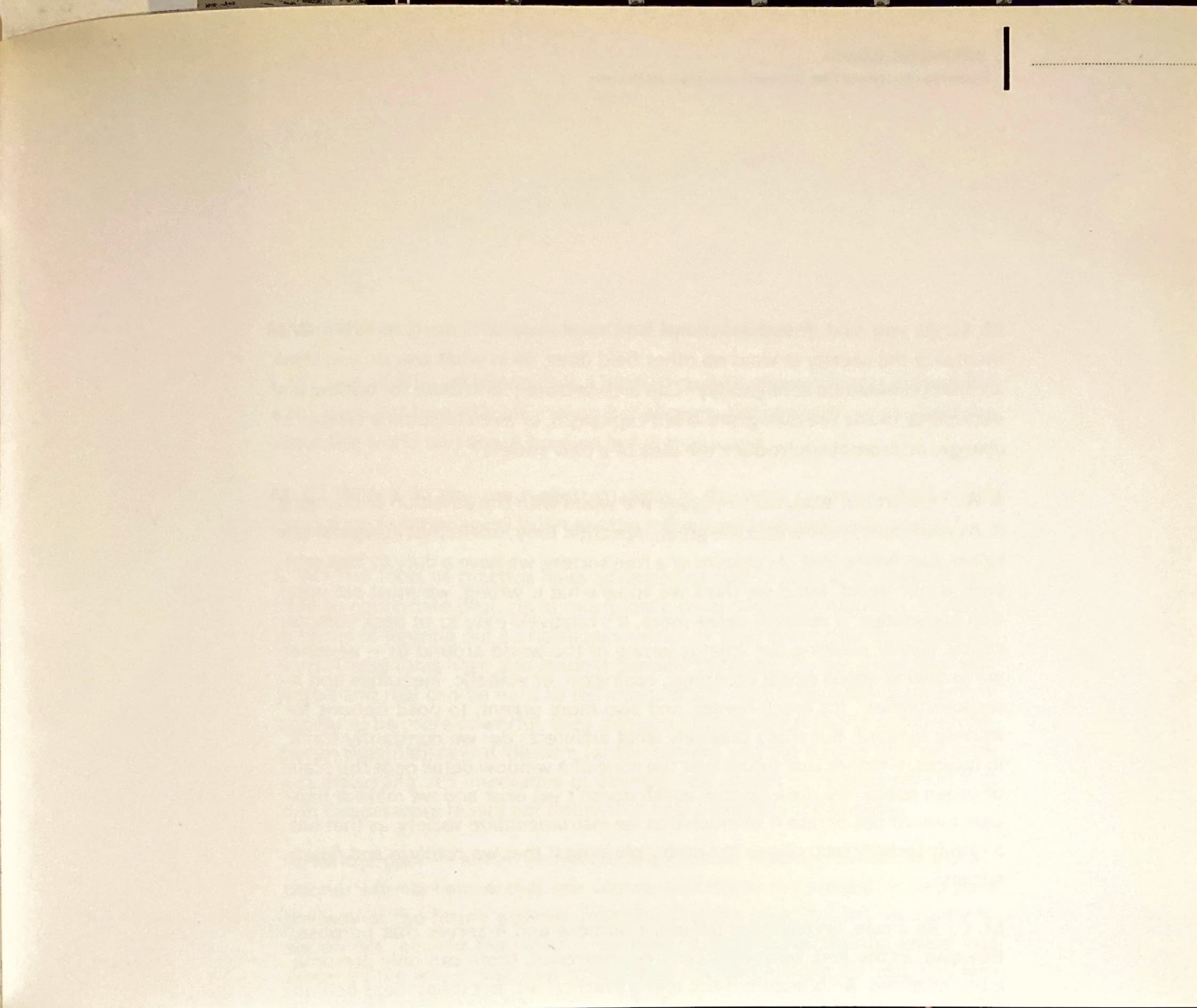


## Interview with Sarah Whiting |

Mariela Cvetić

University of Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture  
November 2013 | Belgrade

Sarah Whiting | when the interview took place |  
Sarah Whiting has been Dean of the School of Architecture at Rice University since January 2010. Prior to Rice, Whiting taught at Princeton, Harvard, RIT, University of Kentucky, and University of Florida. She cofounded WW with her partner, Ron Witte, in 1999. She has served as design partner for numerous projects, including the Golden House at Princeton and Drama Division renovation for the Julliard School in New York. Whiting's writing and editing has been published in numerous magazines and anthologies, from *ANY* to *Wired*. Currently, she is completing a manuscript on scale and urbanism called *Superblock City*, and she also edits a book series with Princeton University Press called *POINT*.





M. C.: As you said in your inaugural lecture at Rice, architecture can instrumentalize the society in ways no other field does, so in what way do you think architects should be acting today? Can architecture (contribute to) outline any alternative to the prevailing/prevalent capitalism, or even become a symbol of change, or promote/introduce the idea of a new society?

S. W.: I exhort our students to engage the world with the ambition of changing it. As you know, I referenced the great, late critic Tony Judt in that inaugural talk I gave. Judt wrote that "As citizens of a free society, we have a duty to look critically at our world. But if we think we know what is wrong, we must act upon that knowledge." I couldn't agree more. It's relatively easy to sit back complacently, simply pointing out what is wrong in the world around us – whether we're talking about global economic, ecological, or esthetic inequities and irresponsibilities. It's much harder, and also more urgent, to posit options for moving forward. But that's precisely what architects do: we constantly traffic in futures, whether that future is at the scale of a window detail or at the scale of urban policy. We draw up that which doesn't yet exist and we make it happen. I would not phrase it so much that we *instrumentalize* society, as that has a rather technocratic ring to it; I prefer phrasing it that we *catalyze* and *figure* society.

M. C.: As a rule, architecture defines a purpose and it serves that purpose. However, in the end, outcomes can't be controlled, there can only presume interpretations. Architecture is not only a practical art, but it has ideas behind it. What are those ideas?

S. W.: Yes, architecture consistently oscillates between more pragmatic and more idealistic motives. Our challenge is constantly ensuring that neither end of this spectrum is compromised. Architecture should not, cannot, be reduced to a service industry, simply solving problems in the most efficient and cost-effective manner. At the same time, if we refuse any engagement with pragmatic concerns such as communication with the trades or issues of budget and schedule, we similarly render ourselves irrelevant. Given capital's dominance in our decision making environment, particularly in the American context of practice, it's ever more challenging to maintain architecture's idealist aims. It's critical to teach our students that they will constantly be operating across this whole breadth and that that challenge has to be met head on in order to move architecture forward.



M. C.: When is the architecture seen as a form of culture?

S. W.: Like all arts, architecture is a form of culture when it moves culture forward, even just by a little bit – when it challenges and changes our assumptions about the world and about how we live in that world.

M. C.: Where do you see biggest changes in the work of an architect today, comparing to other ages? What are the influences past has made on you?

S. W.: The tools of practice have advanced in such a way as to make it possible to coordinate projects in much more comprehensive manners, whether in terms of figuring out complex geometries or testing out new structural options. These tools have also made it possible to render in such a way that projected and real can be hard to tell apart. While such tools make architecture appear to be more powerful, they also potentially imbalance the spectrum between pragmatism and idealism (or the present and the future) that we were just discussing. It's imperative to develop new modes of representation that don't underscore reality but rather that help to identify the possible.

As for the past – I am an architectural and urban historian as well as a practitioner. I firmly believe that one cannot understand the present or help pave the way of the future without understanding the past. As I tell my students, we do not reinvent the wheel – we have to understand *why* the wheel was designed the way it was, *how* others have changed it along the way, and *why* one would want to change it now. In short, every *architectural project* (versus a mere *building solution*) inserts itself into a lineage that is at once historical and projective.

M. C.: In the end, what do you like best about architecture and/or being an architect?

S. W.: That's easy: architecture is a generalist, synthetic discipline and practice. That means that everything affects and is affected by architecture. It's therefore simply impossible to get bored!



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