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Playing with norms

Seven questions to Bernard Tschumi

Dieses Interview entstand anlässlich eines Vortrages von Bernard Tschumi an der ETH Zürich am 7.6.1999. Die Fragen für **trans** stellten Hendrik Tieben und Christoph Wieser. Bernard Tschumi wurde in Lausanne geboren und absolvierte sein Architekturstudium an der ETH Zürich.

trans: *Although your architecture is very different from today's minimalistic works in Switzerland, you also aspire a "Zero Degree of Design" in your projects. Where's the difference?*

BT: I have nothing against minimal or minimalist architecture. At the same time, when it's formal minimalism, then I'm certainly not too comfortable because it requires a high degree of design. The work that I like – Herzog & de Meuron – is almost over designed. What interests me, is to arrive at architecture without resorting to the tools of design; to avoid the clichés of composition, to avoid resorting to thousand years of architectural form-making. On the contrary what interests me is the possibility of creating certain effects through a strategy of movement in space which will result in form, at form as a result and not as a starting point. So here's the difference: Zero degree of design means that it's always a conceptual strategy which is aimed at.

trans: *Do you see in the accentuation of the term "Swiss Architecture" in the media a reaction to the globalisation? Because of the emphasis of "national" schools?*

BT: I would say there are no regional styles, I'm sorry, I hate regional style. There are only local conditions. And certainly - occasionally - local conditions in form. But basically to have an architecture which is stylistically coherent is always ideological. I do not say however that we should have a global architecture. I'm talking about taking advantage of local conditions. To connect to your first question, what interests me is not to condition a design so it will look this way or that way but it's to design the conditions so that architecture is generated out of them.

trans: *In your projects, for example in the Fresnoy National Studio for the Contemporary Arts, you often use elevated passages or bridges which almost don't even touch the ground. Is that a reflection to your biography?*

BT: What biography? (laughing)

trans: *Your personal biography.*



BT: What do you mean? (laughing)

trans: *We thought as you've grown up in permanent movement between different places like Lausanne, Paris...*

BT: No no. I think again I don't believe in regional style anymore than I believe in biographical style. No. There is none of that. There's simply the notion of movement. Movement is a vector in space. You can express that vector in a number of different ways. At Le Fresnoy, movement is vectorized through those ramps and walkways. So it has more to do with an idea of an architecture as a dynamic proposition rather than architecture as a static one. So indeed if I was to talk about architecture I would say is that I want to see architecture not as a static object but architecture as a dynamic one.

trans: *Rem Koolhaas once pointed out, that today's city-development in Switzerland has the tendency to disappear under the ground. Is it what's also happening to your bridges in Lausanne?*

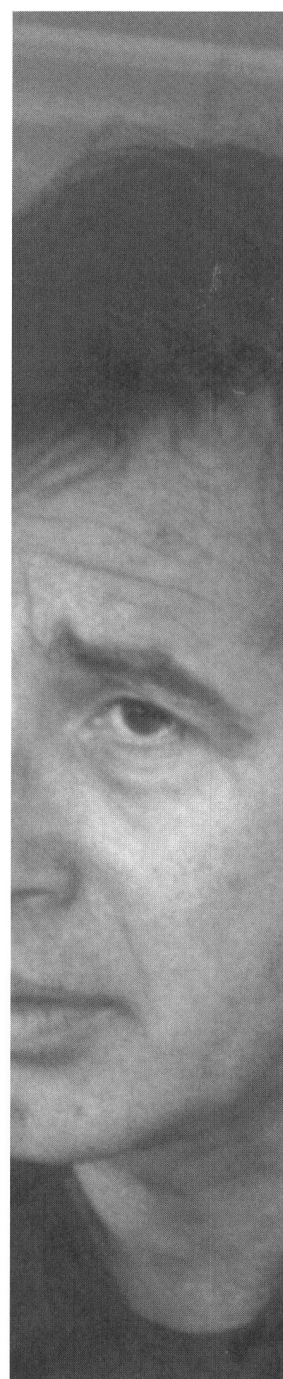
BT (laughing): Yes and no. What has happened: The inhabited bridges of the masterplan didn't go under the ground but they simply went "in limbo". In other words the city of Lausanne after a change of government voted not to vote. At the same time we are building one of the bridges with an underground railway station and the circulation infrastructure. This time it is purely infrastructure - there is no program anymore - there are no restaurant, no shops, no whatever, it's purely movement and infrastructure. So this is what happened.

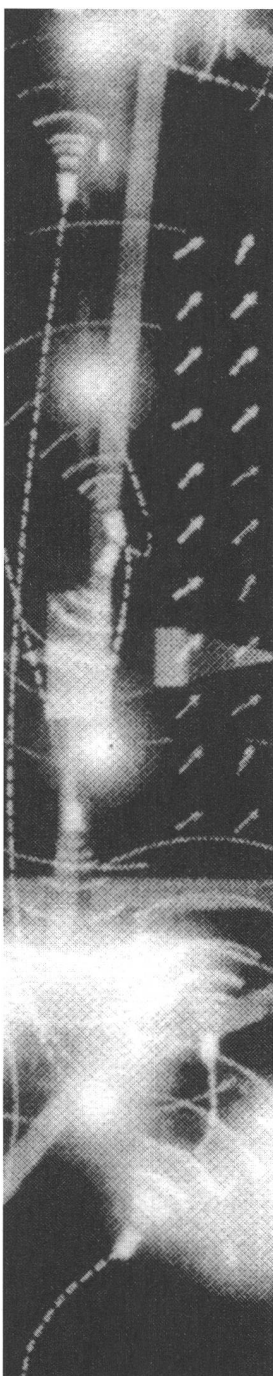
trans: *Is it already under construction?*

BT: Oh yes, it's very much under construction. The actual space of the railway station with all the structure is done. And at the moment we are actually completing the construction drawings for the glass parts. In two years from now the first phase will be complete.

trans: *In Switzerland "context" is still an important term in the architectural discussion. You replace it by the term "normative". Where do you see the difference?*

BT: Yes I replace it by normative because I don't know what "context" is. I have no idea. Context means so many things, it means everything. And I think it's the most overused and abused word in architecture. And I would propose a suppression of the word. But you have certain cases where you can identify very





clearly norms. And these norms you may - or may not - want to work with them - right? I'm not interested in an architecture of norms. I'm interested in an architecture that plays with and against the norms. Norms are always there. When you drive on the road, you have a norm. You drive on the right side of the road. If you race the car than you'll drive both on the right and the left because the norms have changed. So you play with norms. But at the same time you should not be a victim of the norms and be restricted by the norms. Worse even if you impose norms to yourself and all your architecture. Contextual architecture is a sort of self imposed norm, which I do not think has very much fun, as if you would impose to yourself to eat only one type of vegetable for the rest of your life! I don't think that it advances the state of the discipline or the culture.

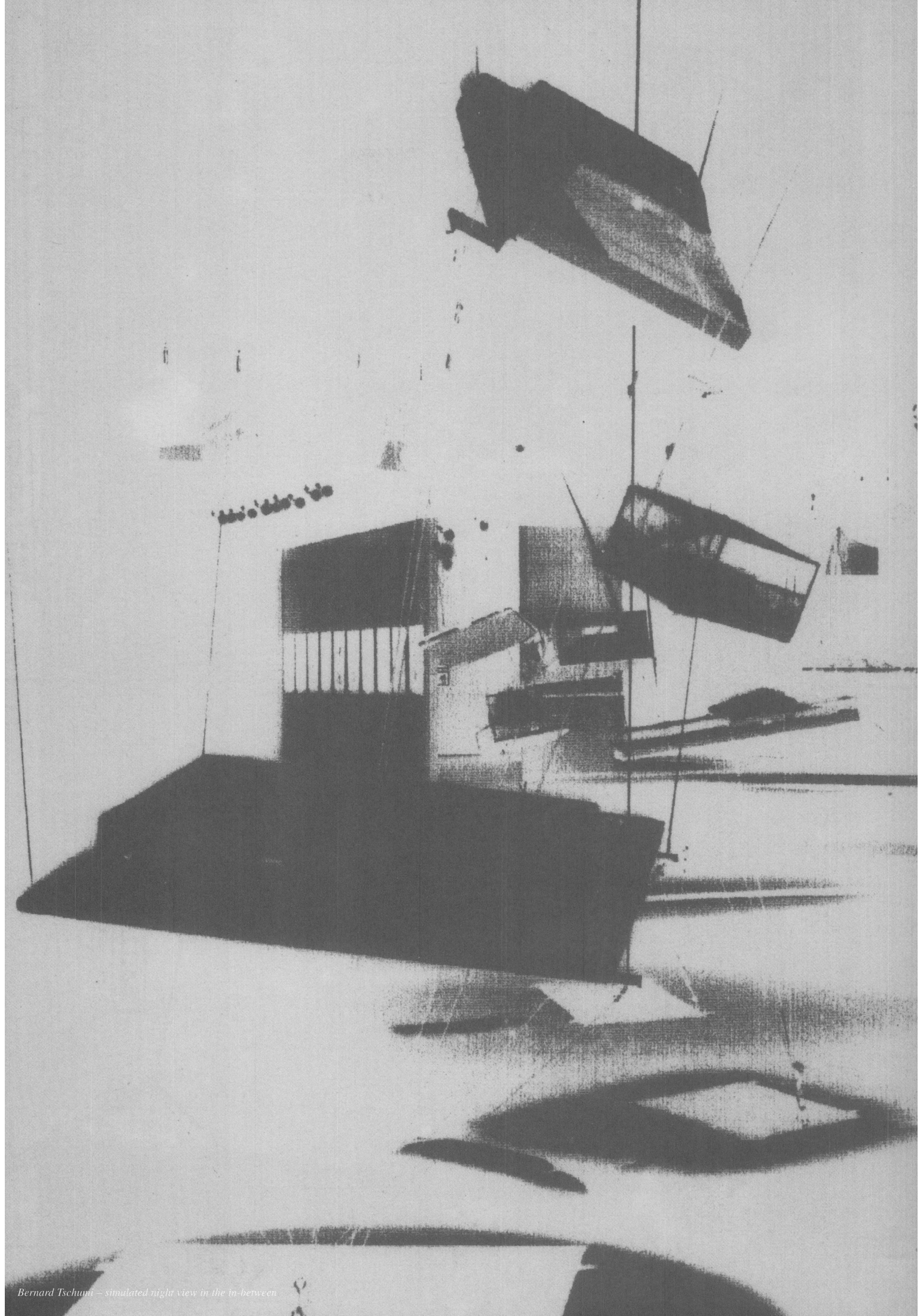
Architecture is a form of knowledge, and you want to push it as far as you can. And often you have to go to the limits and to do things which absolutely have nothing to do with the norm. They are about a deviation, they are about exception and so in much of the work that I'm trying to do, I try to play the norm versus the exception, because the world is neither simply norm, nor simply exception. The world is not so simple.

trans: *As the dean of the Graduate School of Architecture at Columbia and as a designer of many schools of architecture: What's your vision of our discipline after the millenium?*

BT: It's a crucial question. A school has to do two things: First it ought to be a scene. In other words a place of excitement, a place where a lot of people come and exchange ideas and all that. Second it ought also to generate a culture. A school that does not generate a culture, will not have a major influence. I think historically some schools have generated a culture, the Bauhaus or the Architectural Association in London. I hope that Columbia will generate a culture. In other words something that has an influence on the state of the discipline. And architecture is not alone in itself, it always communicates and exchanges ideas with other disciplines. It imports and exports. But this of course is not only an architectural statement, it's a political statement.

Architecturally then I would simply say that I try to design spaces that can be appropriated by the students and the young faculty. To place spaces of research and experimentation that are versus opposed spaces that are uncomfortably unusual making sort of opposition with the more normative parts of it. In the case of Marne la Vallée or Miami, there are some spaces that are comfortably normative.

trans: *Mister Tschumi, thank you very much for this conversation.*



Bernard Tschumi – simulated night view in the in-between