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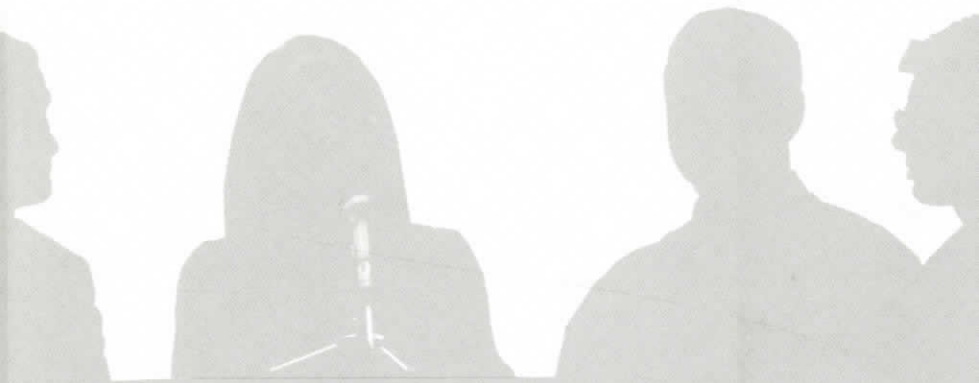
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graduate sessions



1
SYLVIA
LAVIN



SYRACUSE
ARCHITECTURE

Sylvia Lavin
Graduate Session 01
10.26.05

Syracuse University
School Of Architecture
Graduate Programs
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Sylvia Lavin is Professor of Architecture at UCLA and writes widely on contemporary architecture and theory. She recently completed a year as a Getty Scholar where she was working on her next book, *The Flash in the Pan and Other Forms of Architectural Contemporaneity*. She is co-editor of *Crib Sheets* (Monacelli Press, 2005) and the author of *Form Follows Libido: Architecture and Richard Neutra in a Psychoanalytic Culture* (MIT Press, 2005).

Graduate Sessions is a seminar series offering Syracuse Architecture graduate students the opportunity to engage leading scholars and practitioners in conversation and debate. The resulting pamphlets offer unique insights into the work of our guests as well as the ongoing concerns of our students and the graduate programs.

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graduate session

01

“sylviaLAVIN

RK: Welcome Sylvia, and thank you for this opportunity to extend the discussion following your lecture last night, "The Flash in the Pan and Other Forms of Architectural Contemporaneity." We also have many questions about your soon to be released book, *Crib Sheets: Notes on Contemporary Architectural Conversation*. We were able to get the very first copies here at Syracuse, so we are immersed in contemporaneity here today. Which leads to our first question: how does a historian become so fascinated with contemporaneity? In terms of your biography, or bibliography, how did you shift from enlightenment history, the topic of your first book, *Quatremère de Quincy and the Invention of a Modern Language of Architecture*, to contemporary theory in *Crib Sheets*, or in your previous book on Richard Neutra, *Form Follows Libido*?

...contemporaneity has something to learn not only from its own history, but from its own refusal to think historically.

SL: I think a better question might be, how did I end up at Quatremère in the first place. My interest has always been in contemporaneity. The work on Quatremère was done in the 1980s when thinking about language in architecture was central to contemporary discourse in design culture. At that

The more I looked into it, the clearer it became that Neutra and my mother both had a similar misinterpretation of a core text in psychoanalytic theory.

time, the lesson to learn was that historical work had its own form of contemporary practice, while today it is useful to learn that contemporaneity has something to learn not only from its own history but from its own refusal to think historically. The contemporary is not ahistorical or in conflict with historical studies, but imposes a specific set of demands on historical research. My choosing to work on Neutra is a good case in point, since it was the result of serendipity. I was sick, stuck in bed, with nothing better to do than flip through old journals. In my state—a cross between literal malaise and deep boredom—I came across a Neutra essay that I had never read before. Who even knew Neutra back then? What did I know about Neutra? I started reading through this text, which at first seemed very disorganized, sophomoric almost, and proselytizing in the manner of the first generation of modernists. But my trance was broken when I came across the words "birth trauma" in his essay. This was very provocative because I thought I knew all about the birth trauma: I firmly believed it was a totally kooky, cockamamie theory invented by my mother. My chance encounter with Neutra made me realize that while it may well have been cockamamie it certainly

wasn't my mother's theory. (You should never underestimate your mother). Birth trauma is a central tenet of early Freudian psychoanalytic theory. The more I looked into it, the clearer it became that Neutra and my mother both had a similar misinterpretation of a core text in psychoanalytic theory that spoke to both the tremendous influence of psychoanalysis and its immediate and profound transformation as it entered American life and culture. All of this may seem to be mere coincidence, but further reflection suggests that apparently serendipitous connections made in the present are actually articulations of historical intuition: a conversion of theoretical goals, speculative hunches and historical information.

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that had a full-page article in a national
newspaper asking was I a bitch or was
I just really smart?

RK: In *Form Follows Libido* there is a fixation on, or interest in, psychiatry and its influence on architecture. What potential does a more open discipline suggest to you? Does this strengthen the architect's voice? Does it bring the architect closer to the "contemporary" condition?

SL: I got stuck on your word "fixation." I think one has to be attentive to a certain isomorphism that is very often produced between the shape of something as it exists in a text and the way a text is interpreted. The fact that the text is about fixations doesn't mean that the text is "fixated," nor that the reader needs to be fixated about things that are described in the text. Even more important is to make sure that you don't allow a text, any text, to become an authority that limits how you are going to read it. So, don't get "fixated." Academic disciplines, and some more than others, are themselves sorts of fixations. At best, their myopia helps establish a territory of knowledge and a set of vocabularies for its description. At worst, they police what's inside and what's outside, producing a defensive rather than generative posture. So understanding the operations of fixations is not the same as becoming fixated.

Keeping schools open to counter-intuitive ways of doing things is an important goal not only in terms of professional training but in academic work as well.

RK: Is that part of your interest in "the productivity of pollution"?

SL Pollution is a complicated concept. Dirt has been defined as that which is in the wrong place. In other words, pollution is not inherently a thing but is something produced through contexts and relations. In those terms, putting the right thing in the wrong place becomes a productive possibility and probably one that you are familiar with in terms of design practice. Collage is an invention of a certain kind of mismatch between right and wrong, as is the tradition of the supplement and the prosthesis. From the beginning of this century at least, the mismatch, polluted and polluting, has been a persistent design generator.

So there I was, amongst other things,
young, a woman, and a non-architect
running a professional school.

That was heresy.

KW: The introduction of Crib Sheets advocates a more promiscuous discourse in architecture. What is the impact of this promiscuity on architectural education or, more generally, on research and design methods?

Why not just say, 'Adios, metaphysics of depth and surface'? Don't fight it, find other ways to do things.

SL: My years at UCLA have been controversial. I think I'm the only head of a school that had a full-page article in a national newspaper asking was I a bitch or was I just really smart? It is very important to remember the profundity of the controversy for which I was a lightning rod. To actually be experimental in a school is very rare. There are about 150 accredited architectural schools in the United States and I would classify no more than ten of them as fundamentally experimental. Probably fewer than that. So there I was, amongst other things, young, a woman, and a non-architect running a professional school. That was heresy. Then, I did things like put non-professional architects in the studio, or had professional architects not teaching studio, or offered studios that were not driven by building culture but by other kinds of research cultures. The reason that I think it is important to remember the controversy that was generated by these activities is that architecture likes to complain about how slowly the field moves. But in my experience, architecture is as fast as anything else and, in fact, has changed a lot in these last ten years, enough so that the things that I'm talking about can be taken more or less for granted today. I'm sure by now you have all been in a studio

in which the brief was not a building and you didn't start with a program and a context. Or you have probably had some contact with a basic design curriculum that doesn't go from a one-room house to a four-room house to a five-room house in a city to a public building, and so on. But ten years ago, to not do that was considered aggressive, an affront to the core values of architecture. Architecture changes quickly and absorbs the results of advanced experimental schools at incredible speeds. UCLA students are much more sought after now as employees than they used to be because they have skills that nobody else has. What were once forms of academic exotica are now essential to the operating ecology of any productive office. So even if you want to adopt the language of brute professionalism, there is more than one kind of metric for evaluation. Keeping schools open to counter-intuitive ways of doing things is an important goal not only in terms of professional training but in academic work as well. For example, in my current seminar I have asked my students not to write a traditional paper but to produce a set of CliffsNotes that focus on a series of arguments and texts. Initially, the students were shocked that I know what CliffsNotes are, that I would imply

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I'm very interested in trying fundamentally very different things and seeing what happens.

that they, my students, had probably used CliffsNotes at one point or another, and, worst of all, that I would suggest that they use CliffsNotes as a model of intellection. I am very interested in this guilty cover-up of the shortcut. Architects are supposed to like expedient shortcuts, so why is it okay to valorize expediency in terms of design culture, but not in any other kind of culture? CliffsNotes offer a very intriguing model of both scholarship and argumentation. Many of them are written by leading academic figures. It takes a lifetime of distillation to be able to take *Moby Dick*, which is long—I mean it's really long—and distill it into a paragraph and five questions. If you take that as an achievement, as a form of intensification, as a high impact and tremendously expedient form of writing, it becomes a pretty interesting model for architectural discourse. And, frankly, I really, really, would rather read a good CliffsNotes than a bad research paper, if for no other reason than it takes less time.

Reyner Banham once said that the only way to demonstrate that you have a mind is to change it once in a while.

Part of what produces a buzz word is, in fact, theft: taking a word out of context and using it for with a highly polemical charge.

KW: It is an intriguing intellectual task to create CliffsNotes. But typically they are tools to get somewhere, not a good read. In your article "The Newest New Criticism," you argue for recovering reading from theory. How would you distinguish between taking shortcuts and reading as a pleasurable, productive act? Or are those unified in some way?

It is risky to relinquish an intellectual structure that you have mastered, but there is some pleasure in the process as well.

SL: They are absolutely connected. My interest in the shortcut should be considered a lesson learned from Sigfried Giedion and an act of resistance to Manfredo Tafuri. I actually like to read Gideon: there is pleasure in his texts, evidently for him as well as the reader: he almost swaggers in his own pleasure in reading the buildings at hand as well as produces

a rhetorically elegant and seductive style of prose. On the other hand, I really don't like to read Tafuri. The displeasure he feels in his own design culture is palpable and the cumbersome prose, often erroneously blamed on bad translation, irritates the reader the way Tafuri himself is bothered by what he sees. These different experiences as a contemporary reader of both Gideon and Tafuri are not incidental to the structure of the texts themselves. It is more fun to read Gideon than it is to read Tafuri and that difference suggests a great deal about what they have to say about architecture and about the lessons we can learn from those texts about how to write and think about architecture today. There is a passage in Giedion where he pleads for more argument and less bibliography. There should be no mistake that Giedion had plenty of bibliography at hand. So he chose to put aside the demonstration of erudition as a way to gain authority over the reader and instead used his erudition to construct an argument that was persuasive in different and highly contemporary terms. When students make CliffsNotes there is no room for them

I didn't go out and tell anybody to make a Flash in the Pan, but I have been consistent about the need for and the difficulty of maintaining intellectual openness and agility.



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historical depth to argue
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to produce an erudite book report: they have to move on to understand that all good reading is a form of argumentation about a text. It is not a matter of being right or wrong, but of making better and worse arguments. How do you differentiate between a good set of CliffsNotes and a bad set? We'll see. I'll let you know at the end of the quarter. Giedion shows one way that argumentation can be understood as not opposed to erudition. It can actually be a superlative mode of scholarship. Reading Gideon again, noticing his use of superlatives, excessive claims and way of using images, paying attention to all those things for which Gideon has been almost taboo for at least two generations, makes it possible to rethink the efficacies of the architectural text. One type of efficacy that interests me is reclaiming criticism as a worthy form of writing. Many schools in this country use the vocabulary of "history, theory, criticism" to describe what it is they teach students. This is by now a classic formulation. But, it has probably been decades since anybody took criticism as either a serious object of study or a legitimate object of production.

...it has probably been decades since anybody took criticism as either a serious object of study, or a legitimate object of production.

Recognizing the value of novelty and tolerating its inevitable lack of familiarity is extremely challenging.

This third term has completely disappeared and Tafuri most forcefully launched the trajectory of that disappearance when he wrote dismissively about "operative criticism." Tafuri's focus was on specific types of hyper-positivist and pseudo-scientific criticism but the result, perhaps because acolytes are generally more faithful and fundamentalist than the people they follow, is that criticism as a form was demonized at best and simply neglected at worst. I think that the 1980s was the era of history writing and the 1990s was the era of theory writing. Now, I have been arguing, this decade needs be the one of reinventing and rewriting criticism. One of the first definitions, or perhaps better, descriptions, of criticism is that it is characterized by more argument and less bibliography. This assertion reflects the history of the genre where criticism was once considered the language of aesthetic pleasure. Unlike aesthetics, which began as a philosophical matter, criticism developed a stylization that made it closer to literature. In Diderot's or Baudelaire's criticism, the very elegance of the writing gives the texts ontological uncertainty as they waver between aesthetics, literature, and even journalism. It would be hard to select more than a couple of texts from recent

architectural theory that could be classified as literature. Most current writers shadow Tafuri: smart, but often a drag to read, producing texts that use their “dragginess” to demonstrate depth, the profundity of which is proven by the labor the reader must perform to discover it. This is a metaphysics that casts the superficial as negligent and intellectually vapid and the laborious as virtuous and important. I thought one of the things that theory had been working hard to do in the last 20 years was to free us from precisely that metaphysics, but it turns out that it remains embedded in the texts that seem to be shouting for liberation. Why not just say “Adios, metaphysics of depth and surface”? Don't fight it, find other ways to do things. I don't know, Mark. I'm a little worried that you are going to start getting papers that don't have any footnotes.

The contemporary is not ahistorical or in conflict with historical studies, but imposes a specific set of demands on historical research.

ML: That raises a question that I'm hoping will emerge from the students. What kind of research does today's architect need to do? Over the last few years, we have emphasized research as a fundamental part of the graduate program at Syracuse. We try to distinguish the modes and potential of

design research from the apparatus of scholarship. We want the students to seriously engage and reap the benefits of, but move beyond and apply, the difficult theory and history writing which got us to this point, and to devise other modes of research, theory, and practice. The question is to what extent do the students also need to grapple with Tafuri or Jennifer Bloomer or Mark Wigley or whomever to effectively produce the kind of work you're talking about.

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SL It is very hard to go so far as to say that what benefited us needs to become a model for others. There is also a big difference between Jennifer and Mark. Jennifer uses textuality as a designed surface. There is a rhetorical quality to the way she writes that she wants the reader to know about. Mark, on the other hand, despite the radical nature of much of his content

and research, uses the text itself in more classically academic ways and relies on a tradition of scientific demonstration in the humanities (if that is not a contradiction in terms). This makes it possible for him to build extreme consistency into his position. No matter what the topic —philosophy, decoration, the Situationists, power, institution building— the structure of the argument is the same. The consistency and apparently self-evident formulations of his arguments makes Mark's work more amenable to transformation into CliffsNotes than Jennifer's. Reyner Banham once said that the only way to demonstrate that you have a mind is to change it once in a while. I'm very interested in trying fundamentally different things and seeing what happens. In my case, that means different ways of writing. It is risky to relinquish an intellectual structure that you have mastered, but there is some pleasure in the process as well.

What were once forms of exotica are now essential to the operating ecology of any productive office.

KW: Is one of the aims of Crib Sheets to reestablish criticism as an academic activity? Is it prototypical in some way?

I am very interested in the guilty cover-up of the shortcut.

SL I won't make any big claims about the book, but I can tell you a bit about how it came about. We wanted to publish the proceedings of a conference, but the transcripts were extremely uneven, until we came up with the idea to determine what terms were used most frequently. It turned out, in fact, that there were a very identifiable set of terms, or buzz words. Like CliffsNotes, you can take the buzz word as a highly efficient, distilled, concentrated formulation (which in this case emerges out of millions of independent utterances) that is more provocative than the transcript as a whole. Part of what produces a buzz word is, in fact, theft: taking a word out of context and using it for with a highly polemical charge. It's a grab, like a screen grab. You will notice, however, that every buzz word is footnoted in the backmatter of Crib Sheets. If you want to understand the words' sources, we provide that information.

He *chose* to put aside the demonstration of erudition as a way to gain authority over the reader and instead used his erudition to construct an argument that was persuasive in different and highly contemporary terms.

JR: In your lecture last night, you identified the “Flash in the Pan” as —like a buzz word in many ways— a particularly intense effect and fleeting instance of contemporaneity that isn't necessarily an intended result. How do you teach architects to purposefully engage the contemporary?

I think that the 1980's was the era of history writing and the 1990's was the era of theory writing.

SL: What we have been talking about would be a demonstration of how I would try to train students to take advantage of whatever creative and intellectual possibilities are made available by the concept of the Flash in the Pan. I didn't go out and tell anybody to make a Flash in the Pan, but I have been consistent about the need for and the difficulty of maintaining intellectual openness and agility. Recognizing the value of novelty and tolerating its inevitable lack of familiarity is extremely challenging. The role of the “resident historian” —every architecture school has one— in the culture of studio reviews is a good case in point that suggests just how difficult novelty is as a concept. Isn't there always a historian on the jury who says, “Did you know that in 1911 so and so already did that?” Not only is this moment tremendously deflating to the student, it sets up history as a trap that you can never escape because

the "resident historian" will always be able to manufacture evidence proving that someone else did it first. This performance is an attack on novelty, not a demonstration of historical depth. Instead, I prefer to use historical depth to argue in favor of newness. I actually believe in novelty as an ethical value. I believe that some things are new. I don't believe that they are better than old things necessarily, which was a modernist fallacy, but I do believe that, lacking other criteria, novelty is better than obsolescence. Today, the historian should use history to provoke and valorize innovation. Post-structuralism had countless techniques for devaluing the notion of newness, the most formidable of which were the transformation of originality into a myth and the substitution of repetition for innovation. It's tempting to think about how and why novelty turned into such an object of terror that so much intellectual power was aimed at discrediting the notion. Up until the middle of this century, every major development in the history of Western Modernity invoked some idea of novelty. The word itself emerges in philosophical discourse in the 5th century. It's old! By definition, historical development requires newness, yet somehow 1500 years of exploring newness has been completely forgotten. Instead of forgetting novelty, the concept

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has to be renovated, as it were. This is why I think the Flash in the Pan is a useful concept. No Flash in the Pan could serve as an element in a teleological notion of progression. A pet rock cannot be said to have been an improvement on the hoola hoop. Such terms are simply irrelevant in this context. As a result, the Flash in the Pan eliminates one of the most fallacious elements of previous models of innovation. But, a pet rock demands invention on the part of the critic, because it lacks a predetermined epistemological status. In this sense, the Flash in the Pan, or novelty, acts as a guarantor of intellectual agility and as a principle of adaptation. What if you just say, changing your mind makes you smarter?


The retail world, for example has a huge range of sophisticated ways to deal with speed and duration, while most architects, from the radically conservative to the apparently most progressive, all say that architecture is slow.

DS. Would you say that the Flash in the Pan is a condition that emerges out of consumer society?

In the process of filmic unfolding,
therefore, lies both the experience
and its undoing.

SL: Yes, I think it is fundamental to consumer culture, and particularly to that aspect of consumption that generates an interesting and complex system for dealing with durational difference. The retail world, for example has a huge range of sophisticated ways to deal with speed and duration, while most architects, from the radically conservative to the apparently most progressive, all say that architecture is slow. Well let's get fast and learn from who is fast and how they are fast. I'm not saying architecture is inherently fast or slow, but that our tools for measuring and calibrating a range of speeds are totally inadequate. Not only is there much to learn from retail cycles and cycles of production, there are also things to learn from other cultural and technological practices. For example, special effects in film enter the world with a very different set of durational expectations than a piece of architectural design, even though some have defined architecture as special effects with a roof. The Matrix was novel for most people, but only for the first viewing. Like most special effects, The Matrix actually trained its audience to learn the optical and technical tricks involved. In the process of the filmic unfolding, therefore, lies both the experience and its undoing. *[continued on back cover]*

The first time you go to an IMAX film, you are grabbing at the flowers that are waving in your face. Well, you don't do it the second time. But in that initial moment, the viewer is able to evade dominant models of optical perception. Anticipating that mode of evasion—in my opinion, for today, in architectural design—is an important technique for avoiding eidetic monumentality. It demands agility, and the ability to change your mind. But it only works with the understanding that its efficacy is short-lived. You have set up an analytic structure in which evading particular forms or habits is like working as a bounty hunter catching the next new thing as it is on the run. That structure makes you fast. It doesn't make architecture slow.

The image shows the lower portion of a page with a light background. In the middle, there are dark silhouettes of people sitting at a table, facing right. The silhouettes are simple and lack facial features. At the bottom of the page, there is a block of text in a bold, red, sans-serif font.

I actually believe in novelty as an ethical value. Today, the historian should use history to provoke and valorize innovation.