THE 21ST-CENTURY CITY AND ITS VALUES: URBANISM, TOLERATION, AND EQUALITY

October 1, 2004

SESSION 1: URBANISM

Hilary Ballon: Our last speaker this morning is Mark Wigley, the new dean of the Columbia Graduate School of Architecture, Preservation, and Planning. Since coming to this country in 1987 from his native New Zealand—I thought you might all wonder where he was from—he's been shaking things up in the world of architectural theory and criticism. A scholar of modern architecture and exhibition curator, he's also a very prolific critic with a sparkling intellect and a gift, if I may say, for overturning conventional ideas with an arresting image that quite simply changes the way you see things. We're lucky to have a person of his wide-ranging interests and his intellectual flair at the helm of the School of Architecture, and as our last speaker this morning. Dean Wigley.

Mark Wigley: Thanks, Hilary, and thank you very much to Hilary, and Ira, and Alan for, not only putting the conference together, but putting it symbolically at the end of the 250 years of celebration of university. I think it's almost impossible for me to follow my esteemed colleagues, and so what I have to do is divert attention for a while from the brilliance of their work. And in a way that seems to be by design. I mean, conferences have an architecture as well, and in this case it's an interesting architecture. All the architects are in the morning, and some people think the best things are in the morning. And in the afternoon you go to sleep, so normally architecture, the design of architecture, actually happens in the afternoon.

If we look at the global schools of architecture, they have only two things in common. One is that in every school, in every country, you're required to do some mathematics and physics before you train as an architect. It's also the case that no amount of mathematics or physics is ever used inside a school of architecture. So the reason we suggest that you need to have mathematics and physics in a school of architecture is to, as it were, give the sense that the architect is a practical person, in control of the physical fabric. And as you know, in fact architects are not allowed to do the mathematics and physics for buildings. And since most of my friends are architects, I can tell you that's a very good idea. But we like to give the impression that we are practical, thoughtful people. The second thing that's common in schools
of architecture throughout the world is that history and theory is taught in the morning and design is taught in the afternoon, and it's an absolute kind of rigid sense. That is to say, you think in the morning and you draw in the afternoon. So lunchtime becomes crucial; lunchtime is the sort of moment in which all the history-theory classes of the morning get digested and somehow the student then applies the work in design. So to put three of our very best designers in the morning is to treat them as thinkers, as people who have ideas. And of course that's exactly what they've demonstrated, which creates an interesting position for the lawyers, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, economists, and political scientists in the afternoon because they're occupying the space of design. And I think that's exactly the issue I want to talk about: what might be the relationship between design and thinking, reflection, and the city?

The twenty-first century, right? A very particular kind of city, that is to say, the city of today and tomorrow. And I suppose if we'd added to our list of statistics about the evolution of cities, if we added another statistic on the evolution of conferences about the city, how many times does the city get talked about in conferences in universities? It would be an absolutely staggering amount. And of course all of us know instinctively that there is no amount of conferences that could come to terms with even part of the city, but we do desperately try, and it seems that we should do so here in a university. But that very concept of "the city" seems to already, as it were, foreclose the very thing that makes these conferences important, interesting, and even pleasurable, which is actually, frankly, we have no idea what "the city" is. And so it's not "the city." If it was "the city" we would've figured it out centuries ago. In fact, it's not the case that a city is like a patient, something that has a kind of a clear form and a series of pathologies and we can meet like doctors and discuss. And often the medical analogy is used—what would be the appropriate regimes, what would be the appropriate medicines, which part of the city should be, as it were, chopped off, which part needs plastic surgery, which part needs rebuilding, and so on. The city is not like a patient that walks in the door and says that I'm not well. And in fact one of the things you could say that is unique about the situation that we find ourselves in today is that it's precisely today that it's no longer clear what a city is; that is to say, we meet precisely, in Steven's words, in doubt, we are working in doubt, doubt about what the patient is, in fact. And I think that's why a conference about the city in a university is especially important, because this is a place for thinking, right? A university is not a place for ordinary people, it's not a place for people that know how to get things done. Actually it's kind of a place for losers, people who are disconnected, people that have vacations lasting all the way from July through to September, right? People that cannot be fired, right? A university is not part of the city, it's in the city but somehow detached from it. When you pass across that threshold very near this building, interestingly enough, when you entered this room today you entered from the street, which might mean this conference is literally poised, let's say, between the century of the university and the city itself. And it's precisely that detachment from the city which allows the university to then reflect—allows these people whose lives, whose sense of fashion (but not their sense of food, as Steven pointed out) has been somehow lost in order that we can reflect. And we invite our students to leave the city behind, to reflect upon the city, and then return to the city with new forms of expertise, new forms of passion, new forms of commitment and energy. So it is precisely in the university that we embrace the idea fully that we have really not a deep sense of what the city is, and we work together collaboratively to try and figure out what it might be and what kind of actions might
be possible within it. We are watching the city all the time, we are losers but in another sense we have the potential to create winners.

And I think this is what makes, let's say, the possibility for a different kind of discourse today. There have been so many conferences, particularly since the 1950s—the late fifties—about the fact that cities are spinning out of control, that there is this unsustainable growth, that there is these vast kind of explosive contaminations of urban sprawl, these super super-cities, all of this idea that the city has become, as it were, out of control. But these theories really don't have any bite, don't have any potential for us, and they don't help us to learn what kind of actions are necessary if we haven't figured out what a city is. That is to say, everybody gets up and says, "The city is out of control," but what "the city" is has remained, let's say, unclear.

What does this mean for us, let's say, just at the level of daily experience? It's possible to argue, let's say, in this conference, which might not have been possible in the late fifties, that this is a moment in time in which people actually experience in their daily lives what used to be a kind of theoretical position, a university position, that the local and the global have become inseparable. This is now, let's say, not a theory, it's how one lives. This of course was very, very clearly predicted in those conferences of the late fifties, but before that most importantly it was imagined by science-fiction writers, particularly in the nineteenth century. And in fact a lot of our best thinking about the city has come again from another group of people, who detached themselves from everyday life in order to generate new kinds of fantasies about what the future might hold. And all of us to a certain extent are now living inside the fantasies of a previous generation, but we should remember a generation more or less of the nineteenth century. So to a certain extent the twentieth century has in fact been constructed in the nineteenth century.

Now the vast changes that have occurred through the evolving systems of communication and circulation, electronic, physical, and so on, have certainly taken us to the point, a point that was theorized and now is experienced, where our cities are so intricately networked into a global system that the perceptible limits of the city have simply disappeared, don't exist. The paradoxical symptom of this disappearance is that the name of each city has become bigger and bigger. Each city now has to promote itself like any other product, precisely because the city is not there, it's not in front of you, doesn't have a clear identity. There have to be advertising experts who produce a sense of that identity, and in fact architects are often called in as part of that publicity part of that campaign. And more than that, if that campaign was to stop for a moment, if all of these extreme images, all these extreme definitions and so on would disappear, the city itself would go away. And I remind you of the fact that this is not just, let's say, a whole new phenomenon. It's always been for us the case that you know when you have arrived in a city because there is a sign that says "Welcome to the city," and that sign always appears in a kind of gray zone somewhere between the inside and the outside, and that's why the sign is there. The city itself doesn't say, "I'm here." And remember, the city is supposedly filled with millions of people and enormous quantities of glass, steel, plastic, and so on. So what you have is a huge social and physical infrastructure which is actually more or less invisible. It becomes visible as a city only through the actions of the sign that says "Welcome" and another sign, by the way, which says "You are now leaving."
Now if you do a history of such signs, if you go back and say when was it that cities required signs, in fact you will find yourself back at the very beginning of the city; that is to say, this is not a recent phenomenon. A city is in fact a kind of observation on a social system, on a physical infrastructure. And I return to that point later. But for us what does it mean? It means that we actually don't go to cities anymore; cities come towards us. And when we, as it were, visit a city, we are in a certain extent visiting the hard copy of the images that have been streaming towards us of that particular city, and more than that our whole experience of a city of course has to do with those images, those thoughts, that we had before we went there. So to a certain extent what goes on is a dialogue between what we imagined we were going to find and what we find. And since what we find is controlled or organized or displaced by what we thought we would find, we can never really say that we were there; rather, we were in the vicinity of the idea of a city. And this of course is a pleasure, this is the great pleasure of visiting a place and thinking, thinking about what that place might be.

A second point we might make—and again this is a contemporary experience of all of us living in the city—is that the difference between the city and nature has become again completely dissolved. And right now, for example, a lot of our scientific research has taken that concept even further. It's not just that cities are, as it were, sprawling to such an extent that there is no visible line between urban and suburban—not even exurban seems like a valid category right now—but our very best scientists are demonstrating that the huge built-up conglomerations of the contemporary city are in fact enormously agile, lively ecosystems in a traditional sense. That is to say, there are an enormous amount of species that are living very well precisely because of these huge physical infrastructures that we have installed that for so many years we imagined to be, as it were, the enemy of nature, and so on. It turns out that the built environment is considerably more natural in that sense than we thought. Again, this was very much a theoretical position, it was aligned to the idea, as Hilary pointed out earlier, the thought, that the city itself was a biological species, and therefore to live in a city is one species to, as it were, live within another. And as we live and die, so too do the buildings around us live and die. But somehow now this is a little bit more in the nature of experience. And I think this shift from a kind of theoretical position, then a scientific position, then even, let's say, a political decision, to the experience in one's own body, in one's own life, in one's own social transactions, is a kind of a crucial shift that has to be dealt with, let's say, back here in the university.

All of this means that the whole category of the city is radically in doubt right now. But if what I've said to you so far is true, it sort of seems odd because how could I be speaking to you so passionately about this thing that I claim doesn't exist, the city? And the reason that we can have a conversation about something that never exists is [that] I believe all of us have a certain image of the city in our mind, which is basically a middle-sized medieval town, that is to say, a central public space—what we would call today a public space—lined with religious, marketplace, and political forces, leading to a kind of quasi semi-industrial sector which makes its way towards a fortified wall beyond which lies the outside, the rural. And this little image, this sort of perfectly naïve image, of an elegant little town is an image of the domestication of the wild, that is to say, beyond the limits of the city walls lies the uncontrollable
forces—literally the forces of violence, of the weather, and so on—and inside is provided sanctuary, social life, stability, and so on.

Whenever we talk about something like the twentieth century city and what's happened to it, it's my view that that old image, that kind of chocolate-box image, is in everybody's minds. And why is it a chocolate-box image? Because there is no crime in the image, no disease, no waste, no violence, no inequality, no social immobility, no smell. Do you know what a city of that time smelled like? Even London—until very, very recently, members of Parliament would faint due to the fumes at the front. You know, in London when the horses die, the horses lie in the streets and rot, and there's a kind of a union which was dedicated to removing the horses, but the union would not, depending on how things were going, be cleaning up all the horses all the time. The city of our dreams—the medieval city that has been so radically lost and leads people to say that cities today have no place, that we have no real feelings, that everything is a disaster—we wouldn't survive for a microsecond in those cities. It's not just that there's not a Starbucks, although that's a major feature—and, by the way, when these such cities are restored and there's a kind of restoration movement devoted to protecting this image, so that we can then, as it were, modify our experience of other cities, all those things are removed. One could argue that if you want to faithfully restore a medieval town in the middle of so-called Old Europe that you should, as it were, restore the dead animals, restore the political system, restore the hierarchies, and so on, and so on. We don't do that of course, so what we do is very conveniently hold in our mind a kind of a dream. And it's very important when that dream is still alive when discussing something like, for example, a major urban conglomeration in China, because what would it be to, as it were, import that dream to such a situation and in the reverse?

Anyway, this radical displacement of our traditional concept of the city calls for new forms of analysis, right? If we can really not be so easily talking about "the city," we will require slightly different approaches. There will no longer be simple concepts like planning and design, it will no longer be so easy to say that the designers in the morning and some other kind of person is in the afternoon. The status of the architect will surely shift. But most importantly, it's my view that the status of the other disciplines will shift, that is to say, the sciences and the humanities will also be reconfigured and quite possibly will be the ones that will undergo the most radical transformation.

It seems to me obvious that a university could help the world, and it seems to me that would be [a] decent enough mission for a university; we could help the world figure out what a city is or is not, and therefore help to foster new senses of responsibility, new forms of action outside, but also new forms of knowledge-generation and reflection and research within the university. And it's my view that like all questions of responsibility this best starts at home. That is to say, the best way for us, certainly for Columbia, to engage in, let's say, a debate about the global city would be to simply try to understand our own city thoroughly, so thoroughly that we would then be able to engage in fruitful dialogue with other cities. That is to say, it's somewhat too easy for us to go to another city that seems bigger, stranger, faster, and so on, an interesting moment because one of the kinds of implications of Marilyn's statistics is that New York is becoming relatively rural, one of the implications of it dropping down to the situation of being the 11th city, and hopefully,
let's say, in a few years the twentieth city, and so on—we would become, as it were, a model for a new kind of low-density rural stability. And it's in that spirit I think that we could precisely examine Manhattan as an island, as a model of biodiversity, as a model of the very things that we find upsetting elsewhere.

And of course if what I was saying to you before is the case, that the local and the global have become inseparable, to study deeply New York City would be in fact to study the global city directly. The deeper one would go into the unique character of New York City, the more one would find out that it's intimately connected at its heart to other cities that seem so far away and foreign. Indeed, the deeper one goes into Manhattan the more one finds oneself right in the middle of other cities, and I don't mean sort of philosophically, socially, and so on; one is actually there to a certain extent. And of course this is perhaps what makes New York in its classic form slightly different from other cities: It is certainly a city that has for a very long time belonged to the global city and acted as a kind of transit point for reflection and so on. Again I would suggest that means that New York itself is our most valuable resource if we want to, as it were, with both expertise—but also most importantly—with modesty, and a certain caution in our thinking, we should start our thinking at home.

So let's say some very, very quick points then, since my role is to somehow stand as an academic architect between a series of practicing architects and a series of expert philosophers, historians, and so on. What would be a few quick points to put there in the middle? I could of course act here as a kind of insulation to make sure the world of design stays away from the world of philosophical, and social, political reflection. That would make sense. Lunch would then perform the kind of classical role of kind of mixing everything up and then suitably digesting all the various projects we have seen that were so elegant, so precise, and so clear, the clarity of the architect versus, let's say, the uncertainty, caution, prudence of the academic might get blurred up a little bit.

If I make to you a couple of points, very quickly. Number one, architects don't design cities, and they don't even design for cities. Rather, they develop kind of reflections on what a city might be. If you want to know what an architect is, an architect is somebody that doesn't answer questions but somebody who asks questions, almost always the case. The architect is called in when there is a situation in which people do not understand. There are complex and heterogeneous forces that don't seem to be off to work. The architect is the person who provides, let's say, an image or an organization that makes incompatible things work together. The architect is extremely gifted at seeing, at visualizing the possible connection between things that don't seem to belong together. But it is the weak architect, the uninteresting architect, that does so in such a way that the uncertainty of that situation disappears. In fact, it is the great gift of the architect to provide this kind of clarifying organization while at the same time allowing, even accentuating, the experience of that dissonance, of that complexity, in that situation.

My point would be that the architect, while being, of course, for all intents and purposes supposedly a practical person—somebody that knows a lot of mathematics and physics, and has friends that will help them out to make sure the buildings don't fall over—is in fact a public intellectual, somebody who builds in the material world, who acts decisively in the social environment, but does so to raise questions, to think, rather than to answer questions, to close down thinking.
You know, you can be uncertain and right. Now the university is of course exactly the place in which uncertainty and doubt are balanced with assertion, with claim, with hypothesis, exactly a place in which one tries to sit constantly on the line between certain and uncertain, to hold one's students between confidence, expertise, and doubt that will allow them to modify and change their confidence and expertise.

Okay, expertise about what then? If the architect is more of a philosopher than a practical person, more of an artist, more of a thinker, more of somebody that helps other people to think and to reflect—reflect about what?

So point number two, the city is not a physical thing. Despite the very strong association that we always make between large groups of people and large conglomerations of physical material, cities are not physical. It's certainly the case that cities are, indeed, all about density, that the word city invokes certain density, but it's many different kinds of things coming together, and it's not a visible density of certain kinds of buildings or certain kinds of people, it's a density of transactions between dissimilar people, dissimilar objects, and dissimilar ideas. The heart of the city is therefore, as Hilary so eloquently pointed out at the beginning, heterogeneity, diversity, but more important, ongoing diversity. Even, one could say that a city is a machine to not only accommodate, but to increase diversity.

For this reason, point number three: In my view, the biggest single threat to the city is fundamentalism in any form: religious, economic, nationalistic, ideological, even if not especially artistic. That is to say, intolerance of difference is the only enemy of the city, that thing which we can never exactly say what it is. And it is so typical, let's say, of the way one thinks in the university that one can be much clearer about what something is not than what it is. And in so doing one edits out the confusion in order to focus and to ask people to focus on the same point.

So, fourth point then. If this is the case, then human rights is an issue, if not the issue, of urban design. That is to say, if fundamentalism is the single greatest threat to the city and to the quality of the city, then human rights is in fact the major issue in urban design. To take one of the examples of the subjects that will dominate the afternoon, the law itself, for example, can be understood as an urban mechanism, I mean directly an urban mechanism. And by this I don't simply mean that actually historically the city is in fact a legal decision, it is nothing but that actually in the end. But more than that, the law itself, I would argue, is part of the fabric of the city, the very fabric in its ongoing definition and continual redefinition of limits, rather than something that is applied to the city or applied to the occupants of a city. The law, you could argue, is constantly negotiating over, therefore designing and redesigning the relationship, for example, between private and public. And the relationship between private and public is one of the standard ways you identify an architect, that is, one of the fields of expertise of the architect—lawyers and the people who work for them, lobby them, and so on; that is to say, all of us are in the business of renegotiating the relationship between private and public, and in that sense the law is operating as architecture.

The reverse is also the case. Physical design in the hands of an architect (or, as is most often the case, not in the hands of an architect) can be understood to have ethical, even juridical function, that is to say, legal function by virtue of its definition of space. The designs of an architect offer limits that allow people to live together, negotiable limits, where living together means not just breathing but the
multiplication of diversity, the production of mutation, the production even of conflict. The key issue, then, challenging the disciplines responsible for the physical environment today is responsibility itself; that is to say, how does one conceive of the relationship between design and responsibility? Which is why I would like to end my comments by suggesting to you that in fact the morning session of gifted architects was devoted, as you saw, to philosophical reflection, to doubt, to—as Steven put it—working with doubt, in doubt, creating, let's say, brilliant projects that allow you to see the city differently, which means in fact to sort of see it for the first time. And I think this is exactly what an architect tries to do, to bring something of this mysterious thing, the city, into visibility, not simply so that people can live in it, but can think, and reflect, and live differently in those places.

So I would like you to think of the morning as being in fact a morning of law, history, anthropology, sociology, economics, and political science. And I look forward to the afternoon which I believe will be an interesting group of architects, of designers, who will be not simply reflecting upon cities, but each of those fields, law, history, anthropology, and political science. I would just for a moment suggest to you that you think of them as fields of design, not as forms of reflection on cities, but on forms of design of the cities, and I invite you then to consider each and every one of the arguments that you will hear this afternoon as a series of elegant, precise, reflective designs to be, as it were, embraced and even exhibited here in the same way as one would normally exhibit the work of an architect, because in my view architects they are. And if these two groups are not working together, hopefully eating together at lunchtime, nothing good will happen here. I'm of the view that enormously good things will happen here, and I'm incredibly proud to be working in a university that will choose as the way it will end its 250th anniversary to focus on what is the question that hurts us and helps us the most, which is that of this mysterious thing, this impossible thing, this thing that you can never see, that I claim doesn't exist, which is our life, which is to say the city.

Thank you.