ENVELOPE
FACULTY CONVERSATION

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AZP: I began considering the building envelope as a sort of post-rationalization of the work that we have been doing in the office over the last six or seven years. After finishing Yokohama we entered into a phase of intense production and did not have much time to theorize about what we were doing, and the envelope offered a theoretical frame to evaluate the work done during this period. The choice of the envelope as a subject was almost inevitable: most of the commissions had to do primarily with the envelope, so it was more of an automatic result than a choice. The choice of this topic was therefore opportunistic: identifying in the practice something to theorize, that could ultimately ground a more precisely calibrated future practice.

Focusing on the envelope revealed an interesting phenomenon: the building industry seemed to have been carved out by different specialists, such as cost consultants, engineering consultants, shopping experts, office experts, residential experts, etcetera, and we were finding that the envelope was the last redoubt of the architect. It was the only domain where we were given some sort of credibility and some power to make decisions.

There were other aspects of the envelope as a theoretical problem that were related to an observation I had been developing vis-à-vis issues that had dominated our field in the years before 9/11. Architects from my generation had been primarily interested in dealing with flows and movement; Transport, migration, and communication were our favorite subjects and the world of globalization was the most attractive field to explore as an architect. After the events of September 11th, however, we were faced with the reality that this naïve picture of the world as a seamless, mobile space where everything communicated with everything else was anything but seamless. In short, an important hypothesis underlying this research is that flows and continuities have ceased to be the most crucial (or even relevant) topics for architecture, and what we

are witnessing today is in contrast a global reconstruction of borders: the Berlin Wall has been replaced by the Palestine Wall, the class divide by the division between production and consumption, and issues like security, protectionism and environmental concerns are only contributing further to this reconstruction of borders.

If we look at the history and geography of building enclosures we find that their evolution reveals a sequence of stages where politics, climates, environments and ecosystems are embedded in the envelope's technical capacities. Understood as such, these technical capacities can then be reconsidered as possible sites of agency for affecting all of these overlapping spheres. Certain theorists, like Peter Sloterdijk and Bruno Latour were also important references during the articulation of this research (Sloterdijk's very graphic depiction of the contemporary world as a constellation of spheres and Latour's notion of Atmospheres). I became interested in the idea that those atmospheres described by Sloterdijk and Latour could be best synthesized at the very moment of their borders, which necessarily recognizes architecture as a powerful transformative agency.

The background to these questions is ultimately about the relationship between the practice of architecture and its relation to larger regimes of power, which is a subject that has been present in my theoretical work for a long time, but I have never known how to engage them productively until now. The practice of architecture is in this sense akin to the practice of fashion design in that we are dealing with problems of both homeostasis and representation. If you look at how fashion designers work, there are two ways in which they attain authority: either on the grounds of sensibility, glamour and charisma, like boutique designers, or on the grounds of accountability, knowledge of the production and market typecasting. The first group of practices, both in the fields of fashion design and architecture is over-subscribed and there is not a

lot of room left to practice. So, it didn't seem to provide a particularly promising model to reset the relationship between architecture and power. And the second model seems to lead only toward a perpetuation of the status quo and so it simply cannot offer productive fodder for an experimental practice. And yet, if we continue the analogy, looking at it in the context of clothing, the models that have evolved the fastest and have had the biggest impact in the social and political realms would be companies like Zara, Muji, Topshop, etc. These companies have entirely redesigned, for example, the relationship between fashion, geopolitics and consumption patterns. In a similar way in which no-frills airlines had an equally revolutionary effect by for example, suppressing classes in the cabin and making long distance travel affordable to the middle classes. So, if the high-end boutique model is empowered by proposing new visions, the no-frills model is totally enslaved by typecasting and accountability. This observation leads to the hypothesis that there is a rich niche for a new type of practice of architecture capable of engaging with a growing middle class that is increasingly hungry for performance and design but without the resources or patience to consume starchitecture. This possibility avoids the typical pitfall of most visionary projects, which are all too often tautological and voluntarist, thereby missing the chance to give expression to certain efficiencies that may produce a more broadly accountable project.

The idea is that we may be able to tap into this potential market, or as Latour would say 'develop attachments,' by withdrawing temporarily from the ambition of producing new architectural effects in order to establish legitimacy and agency. There is obviously a complex trade-off between empowerment and attachment that is difficult to delineate in the abstract, but I believe that a new model of speculative practice that is more connected to the market and the construction industry may create opportunities to produce new expressions and effects from these materials.

Developing attachments and making design accountable is what will enable us to discipline our intuitions. This is what I have theorized in the past as the discipline of the excuse, which is a protocol that I have systematically used in my practice, which basically states that no matter how convinced you are that you need to do something with your project, you have to find the excuse to do it. Otherwise you are not allowed to do it and you should not succumb to your architectural desires. In our experience, this protocol guarantees the most interesting effects. The best example I can think of is when we did Yokohama: there was a moment when we had to decide whether the organization would become symmetrical or asymmetrical. We wanted to do an asymmetrical organization because we had been told that symmetry is dumb and asymmetry is cool and complex. But we failed to find an excuse, so we ended up with a symmetrical structure that was slightly deformed so as

to take account of an asymmetrical foundation. In retrospect, settling for symmetry was the most progressive decision because it took us off the predictable path.

R: Yes, our entry was symmetrical as well!

SA: I believe that after Yokohama Greg Lynn referred to it as the 'new novelty of symmetry'.

AZP: The idea of the excuse is what links expression - material expression - to efficiency. The theory of the excuse is an attempt to resituate volition within the context of a pragmatic practice, and this is an interesting question for those of my generation generally labeled as pragmatists. It is frustrating to see that certain people assume that once you use, let's say, factual data, you renounce volition, as if pragmatism and agency
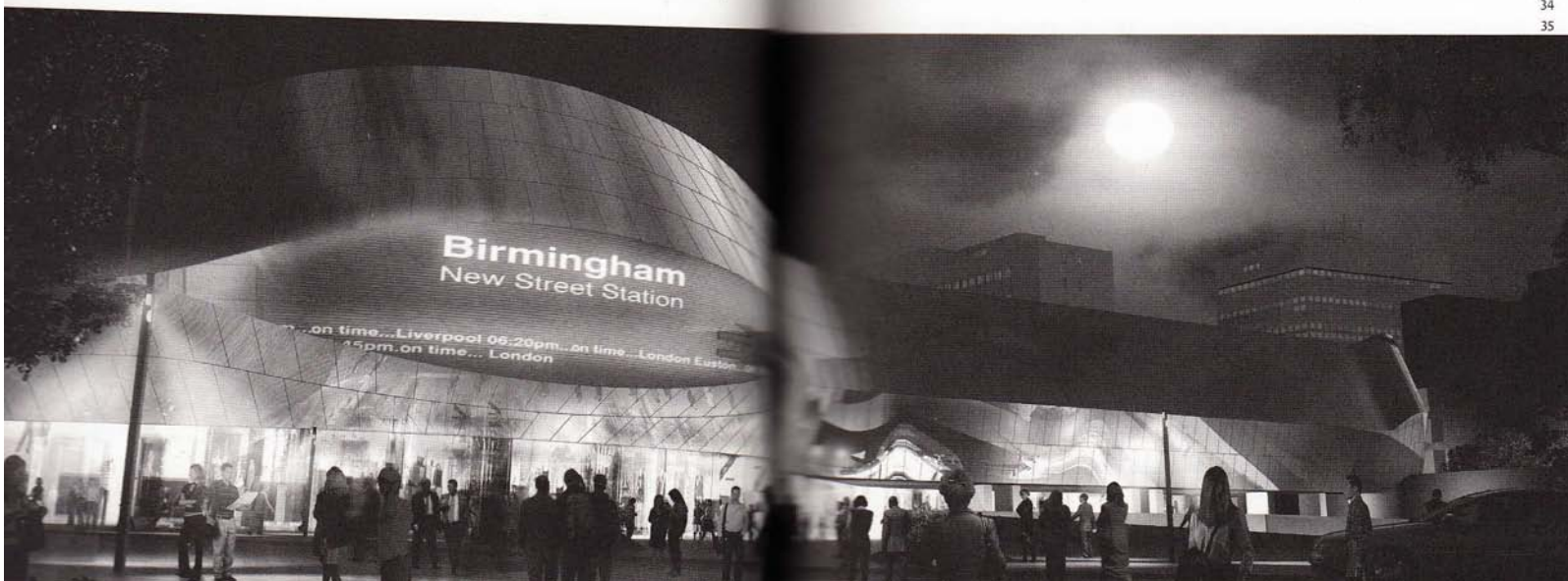
were incompatible. What I find interesting with the excuse is that is a mechanism that accepts desire, sensibility and intuition without making them into a sufficient cause for the project, as they can only survive when they project themselves as attachments.

For example, we are now developing a project for Birmingham New Street Station, one of the busiest train stations in England. The project is a redevelopment of a truly unfortunate 70s building, in a bad state of decay, right in the middle of the city. The station is surrounded by holes that cannot be covered for technical reasons. The competition brief was aimed at the cladding of the volume, expressly forbidding any design on the inside with the exception of a new atrium that will be opened in the building's center. *So the question was how to design a new façade for the building that would perform beyond mere ornamental effect.*

So we could not use the interior of the building to construct the 'excuse' for a cladding whose primary function is to offer a crucial public infrastructure some degree of excitement, to produce, yet again, the desired Guggenheim effect, but without the costs associated to do the whole building. Birmingham is actually a city that is in the center of the country and has been formed by the crossing of roads and canals, so, it does have a certain tradition as a transportation hub, and that was the story, or excuse, that we used to construct the project: the new cladding was not used to provide an identity for the Station but for Birmingham as a whole. Rather than determining the façade from the inside, we decided that what the envelope would do is actually to refer to the outside. We selected a number of aspects of the surrounding field that the building would render visible, quite literally, by reflecting a number of latent presences around the station that we thought were quintessentially Birmingham; the city used to have a famously black sky from the steel industry but today it is a service economy, so we could celebrate the new, clean sky in Birmingham. The trains pass underneath the station but

at any point they become a part of the building's expression, providing another opportunity; the site is a beehive of commuters coming in and out of the station from all directions, but you never see them. Additionally, we envisioned a number of media display boards around the station that can be used for broadcasting different content.

In short, all we needed to do was to literally reflect all these in the façade of the building, and we would get an interesting image of the city and the station. We started looking at the different positions the public spaces around the station created, and tried to shape the envelope so that, if built with a reflective surface, it would reflect the tracks, the commuters, and the clouds, or launch a media screen, as if we were making a sort of Koyaanisqatsi movie of the centre of Birmingham. We studied the depth of field of public spaces around the building and calculated the key sections so that certain reflections would be included or excluded. We then morphed those sections into a warped, polished stainless steel wrapping.

I think that we won the competition not because we had the most beautifully accomplished envelope but probably because we had the most convincing excuse of all the entries, the story that could allow people to enter into the process. As we could not use the interior of the building as an alibi, we resorted to the outside as the engine of faciality. There is no subjectivity of the station in this face. It has become a mirror of the surroundings, capturing different lights of the day, clouds, commuters, trains and messages projected onto the screens; it has dissolved into the matters, the flows that constitute Birmingham's DNA. At least in principle, we were not necessarily inventing new effects, we were disciplining them. We knew from the beginning that a Guggenheim-like aesthetics would be well received and we found the way to explain how to do a Gehry-like building with an automatic technique simultaneously capable of drawing attachments for the project.

SA: The way you set it up at the beginning I found very interesting. You outlined an evolution from the preoccupation with flows, movement, and continuity - the project of surface - then made a remark about the naiveté of that as a political project: The false Utopia of total connectivity. This forces our attention from continuity to stasis, towards paying attention to the envelope as a boundary and looking at the power of political relationships and the condition of the boundary. It seems to me there's another thing that's implicit, and that that you didn't talk about so much, which leads me to my question. In that shift, let's say broadly from a kind of horizontal orientation to the vertical orientation, the question of content, iconicity and even the semiotic returns, but it also returns in a way that is not the semiotics of the 1980's. You could claim that under the semiotic project of the 80's there was a sort of disconnect between the material condition of the building and its signifying capacity. Necessarily when you talk about the contemporary condition of the envelope, you can't detach those two.

AZP: Exactly, you cannot detach those two. I believe one of the tendencies that characterize the most interesting contemporary experimentation with the envelope is a sort of transfer of semiotic performance from language and iconography to becoming an intrinsic part of the matter that forms the envelopes.

SA: Well they're bound with one another in much more intricate relationships. I wondered if you might talk a little bit more about your attitude towards this question of iconography, and signification. Does one still hold the semiotic at arm's length?

AZP: One of my seminar sessions is on semiotics. After years of denying the relevance of semiotics, I am actually interested in exploring how meaning can be actually become a material texture. The envelope is the primary site of any building's identity. And whether we like it or not, identity is formed by a complex variety of inputs. I am particularly interested in Latour's idea of things, where objects or sub-human entities acquire meanings, rights, and political roles. One of the problems Latour has been working on is that of iconography. For him, representation is a cultural trait that guarantees democracy: if we ban representation, as certain fundamentalisms do, it is because we believe it provides direct access to the truth. It is precisely the metabolism of icons that guarantees cultural progress and democracy. The question of how the building's identity is constructed and how this construction interferes with physical construction is a fascinating question that you can see unfolding in many of the current experiments with the building envelope.

JK: Is that photograph a fabrication, is this metal? The reflective surface?

AZP: Polished stainless steel. At some point we considered ETFE for the envelope but we discarded it because it was not permanent enough for a building that had to attain a certain monumental quality: It had to be steel-- formally extravagant, and representing the movement and dynamism attached to its transportation function. It was clear that Birmingham City Council wanted a landmark building with a 'wow' effect.

JK: Stainless steel, okay. I'm trying to figure out what's the excuse and what's the problem. The excuse is the reflectivities of what you consider to be the quintessential Birmingham as a kind of phenomenological essence. Reflect Birmingham's essence back to itself and you're going to use that as an excuse to produce the pseudo-indexical form, which was a part of the vocabulary of instantiating flows through architecture, but is not a part of flows. So the profit is flipping the bird to all of us indexical folks. So give me an example, I don't understand what the accomplishment is in the art community? I get the excuse. What if it is the form you were really after?

AZP: I believe the building will be interesting once is completed because it will produce a mixed image of the flows on the site. Even if the initial

geometrical reference is the Guggenheim, the surface will have a very different construction and a very different effect, as it will be much flatter and much more reflective. It will hopefully perform more like one of Anish Kapoor's clouds in Toronto, distorting the image of the crowds, the trains and the sky, as a contemporary triptych of Birmingham.

JK: So you detected anticipation and as you detected those desires, the goal was to win a competition.

AZP: Yes, winning the competition is what makes the project real, but by constructing the narrative, the excuse of the project, we produce the argument that will sustain the development of the project and establish a ground of reference for future discussions with the different stakeholders.

JK: And from a cultural perspective, this is like a Matthew Barney in the sense that it appears to be the result of a process, but the narrative is actually a raiser of the process. Though it's not an indexing of forces, it's simply the producing of the figure from actual forces. It's a production as opposed to a process, through a kind of systematic cinematic. I think that's really interesting, but I don't understand why that's not married to your interest and to figure out why there isn't an invention in the form that takes that to another step beyond simply a kind of irony of process work?

AZP: I think the difference between art and architecture is that architecture deals with a much longer, more complex and more mediated process, and there are many things that happen through the process that are difficult to predict. You cannot close down the project as quickly as an art installation, and I think it is more difficult to predict the effects of the building and to forecast the processes that mediate or interfere in the construction of something like this. I would even say that it is maybe not very interesting to close the potentials of the project at the onset: you need to give the project enough space to keep evolving, and be strategic at

every phase of development to ensure that the project remains alive. And I already can see where this project is evolving away from the more cynical strategic departure.

JK: So you're saying once you know you've got the competition nailed; the first job of the architect is to get the job. If it had that dimension, then the piece would be a sort of culturally poignant piece. It just basically stopped. Stopping short of a kind of irony of an ugly form of index turned into a machine of representation to produce a kind of...what's the word I'm looking for? A disingenuous commitment to the phenomenological essence of Birmingham.

No, I understand and this is familiar. This is a prerogative's audience, they're going to have expectations about this which are poor, and that makes this interesting. You thwart the expectations of what the justifications of process are, but basically it seems to be ending there.

SW: To a degree this kind of approach allows development over the process of negotiating the project. In other words, the excuse, or the attachment is not the same thing as a single, original narrative, but is something that can evolve with the project.

JK: But Frank Gehry's process is to make small deformations in the field in order to make increasing numbers of subtle connections to the contextual relationships. Every project is about looking at the local relationships and inflecting the surface so that it actually joins ontology in the locality like for example the hills in Bilbao to the water. So it's not so much different.

AZP: It's not so different.

JK: It's not so different at all. I believe Frank when he said that he didn't mean to do Fred and Ginger and that at some point in the process, he identified the figure and said that it was interesting, but that's actually really simple. It's a real piece of Czech contextualization. He has those two window echelons and two constructions and he basically figures out one system to bring coherence to them. I'm sort of curious about the profit. Is it this sculptural desirability and monumentality of the form?

AZP: Yes, except that this is a type of monumentality that operates by reflection, which is different from what you can see in Gehry's work, which always operates as a solid form with certain material qualities.

JK: Why would you float a mountain on a sea of glass? You've got this stainless steel mountain and it's floating on a sea of glass, it doesn't ever get to the ground.

AZP: It doesn't touch the ground because it can't touch the ground, because of retail and the other things that need to have an active frontage. The active frontages are not even part of our budget or our remit and they are off limits from our mandate.

JK: If you go back to Stan's question about the icon and the semiotic, which strike me as the relations you can add to a building, like clocks, a clock tower in Boston right? This thing tries to disappear in a sense of reflectivity and offer some sense of confusion where the sky and the buildings blend into one reflection. It has a very clear ethnicity through being a tower so you can still mentally hold onto that icon but what strikes me here is that you have a sort of messy icon. You know, you can't do a little cross deck sketch of this being, you know, two mating turtles, can they? It's visually difficult to apprehend this as an object despite your desire to make it a monumental object, but you maintain a very clear distinction between the reflecting parts. And so you did. There's a horizon line that's maintained that you see, especially in the animation between the sky and the trains below. So, it's a funny play between the desire to keep things very clear and distinct and also mesh things into something that's indecipherable. Can you talk about that in terms of the desire for a new kind of monument or is this an issue of semiotics?

AZP: The building is so large and it's so embedded into the fabric of the city, that you will never see it as an object. You will only see sections of it as you walk around. Maybe there are some places where you will, but these comprehensive views we constructed for the project are really mostly fictitious. That is one of the reasons why the strategy of trying to apply a figural idea did not fly already from the beginning. What you say is plausible; at the moment one surface is reflecting the sky, and the other is reflecting the flows of people and trains. One possible development would have been to try to tangle them more but for some reason the scale feels right.

Audience: It's going to cause a car wreck.

AZP: This is one of the problems we have now. We have to do a reflection test for the trains, not the cars because the train drivers may be blinded. This is now becoming a part of the project because you can manipulate

the tilts so that all of these things are now being calibrated and embedded into the form.

SA: Your description's interesting, because of the building exists in a specific urban context. The aerial position is cinematic, but it's really a kind of metropolitan experience of reconstructing the subject out of these fragmented moments, right? To that degree, the project of a coherent totalizing object is also called into question here. It is a project that anticipates being understood as a series of fragments.

AZP: There is actually an antecedent to this competition that is relevant to mention now, which is that there was a previous design for this building done by John McAslan. His was a glass scheme hanging from the building; it was simply a curved scheme wrapping the form. The competition was actually called in because the CABE, the Commission for Architecture and the Building Environment, criticized the scheme because it was not sufficiently differentiated and it didn't establish any local relations to the surroundings. There are 19,000 square meters of stainless steel in our project. So it is quite a large object, and we knew from the very beginning that whatever we produced, it had to be differentiated. That was one of the desires expressed by CABE in the review that sunk the previous proposal.

Interestingly enough Ben van Berkel's entry was very similar to ours in identifying the basic strategies to follow; it was also stainless steel, it was curvy and it reflected the public realm. The main difference between UN Studio's and ours was that he played with tilting the steel in the entrances to reflect the public space below and the people entering into to the station. He tried to regularize the form by having a systematic flip of the surface, which instead of referring locally to the depth of the field in front of the station, had a kind of internal logic. It was also a differentiated surface unlike John McAslan's. It is amazing how we both identified the same strategies: both of us used a reflective metal cladding, light and dynamic.

Audience: To what extent do you consider yourself responsible, not practically so much as conceptually, for the residual space that you end up with in the disconnection of the box and the new envelope? You're creating a tremendous amount of space between the building and the new cladding. Does that factor in?

AZP: Yes, well, the cladding is actually a rain screen. So that space is not climatized, it's not waterproofed, and it's not insulated. It's just a face to the building. We create a poché space and have a little more surface, but I do not think that that is an important economy in the project and we were discouraged to tamper with the inside of the building. We knew that this was primarily a monumental project, so we did not mind having this kind of waste.

Audience: No, I wouldn't expect an argument that accounts for cost or material efficiency, but I find it interesting that your strategy versus McAslan's strategy obviously creates that new space, which didn't exist in some other proposals and I was curious if you saw that as some kind of opportunity?

AZP: No, we discarded that possibility early on the grounds of costs and security concerns. In some places the rain screen becomes an enclosure, but those are difficult moments in terms of construction because you have to shift within a rain screen type to a waterproofed, insulated façade, and that is not an obvious problem.

SA: I wonder if there's a follow up question to that which is not specific to this project because you've accepted the constraints given here. You were limited to the skin. I wonder if you could further describe what you mean with the difference between envelope and form; even if you stay within the parameters of only the building envelope, there could be instances where the potential of the building envelope might be to fold in on itself and create new relationships of interior and exterior.

AZP: I think 'form' and 'envelope' are very different things. Form is a much more general term. What I like about the term envelope is that it talks about a very specific set of techniques and relationships that had to do with the specific construction of a building. I believe form is a very general term and that is why I find it less precise as a grounding of a discipline. I find it very difficult to elaborate a discourse about architectural form because it is inevitable that it derives philosophical questions. By addressing the envelope specifically I am trying to construct a more disciplinary discourse.

PA: Aren't you afraid that by placing too much emphasis on the envelope, the building will be further diminished or undermined to the point that another screen might arise? Can we call it exterior design as opposed to interior design?

AZP: On the contrary, one of my hopes is that by doing this investigation we can find opportunities for using the envelope as a site of agency. The massing and shaping of the envelope immediately organizes force fields inside of the enclosed volume. One of the ideas that we are starting to use in some of the prototypes that we are producing in the studio understands the envelope as a body without organs. It's a body which you can manipulate to produce certain intensities and gradients. By starting from the envelope we can question the grain of those organizations that are given systematically by shopping consultants, office planners and all these people who already set up the grain of how the space is going to operate in a building. If we are able to find arguments in the shaping of the envelope powerful enough to challenge those other typological forces at play we will be better prepared to project the discipline into a position of power.

SA: But there's another aspect to that simply has to do with situating this particular project as one incident within the larger investigation of the envelope. That is to say that this is a really thin envelope. The things that it's doing are part of a relatively small category of things an envelope can do, right? As Andy Warhol liked to say, "There's nothing deeper than surface." That would certainly apply to this project. It's all about thinness of the envelope in a way but it seems to me that there's another component of the larger envelope project which has to do with a kind of thickening of the envelope and the treatment of the envelope as enhancing its performative capacities. I mean certainly in the work that Marc Simmons and Front Inc. do, it seems to me it's more about claiming the envelope as a properly architectural problem that can do many things beyond functioning as a static boundary for the inside and outside.

JK: It's making the role of the architect more precise in relation to the other forms of expert practice, which gives us the increasing ability to make consummately a more successful project. For example, I'm glad cinematographers have arisen as a separate profession from directors because to have the director be the one who wrote, direct, act it in, shot, click the camera produced less interesting results. I'm not really worried too much about the increasing expertise in the world of architectural practice.

DLP: Your research argues for a renewed focus on the building envelope in response to the role of the architect becoming increasingly reduced to working with the building envelope. I don't have a problem with developing expertise, but I wonder if you can reconcile the claim for specialization within that of general practice. If you start by saying that there are a number of fields of expertise in the project, leading to specialists or consultants taking over, is the amount of design work left for architects more and more limited to the design of the building envelope?

AZP: No, you lose those areas of expertise. The projects come to you done by other experts. When we did the project for the John Lewis Department Store in Leicester, we were issued a set of drawings that described with great level of precision the prototype. It was incredibly difficult to convince them to move from a straight box to a slightly kinked box.

JK: Well you can't lament for a specific client to form a building type expertise and know for a fact that they can better produce the effects that they want to produce in their building, than you might be able to imagine, that is not a problem. The problem is to convince people that architectural intelligence, which is not a form of service of building types, can produce effects that they don't know to imagine which will actually augment their condition. You will never do a better job at planning a shopping mall, or planning an airport with a shopping mall or an airport near a shopping mall.

SA: It doesn't have to be an either/or condition. I think part of the point is that the organization of space of structure is a very long standing traditional part of architectural expertise. Because you turn your attention to the envelope doesn't mean you essentially give up on structure and space.

JK: What about the boutiques specialization based on building types? That is where we're losing our power. Are we only going to be able to retain our relationship to power by retaining our traditional relationships to power? That's not true?

SA: Precisely from the educational perspective, you want to teach a broad notion of expertise that includes the traditional structural and spatial organizational capacities of the architect. It's not a zero-sum game; it's not like you're no longer an expert in space and structure because you started thinking about envelopes.

JK: I think architects have to be able to sit at a table today with the budgets expert and when they go around the table, what is it they're going to bring to the table that no one else can do? If that architect says he'll be the general contractor or he'll be the synthesizer, he's dead. He has to be able to say, here are the things that I can do that you don't know how to do and it's not going to come out of the service, it's going to come by learning that history. I don't think it's nostalgia for the romantic tradition just like

it can't be in any field. You can't play chess today on the base of romantic chess; you can't play chess today without knowing. We can't claim that unless we do something. I wonder if you think this is an issue of the term envelope. I understand that you're not usually explicit in saying you are developing an expertise that has to do with the building. You don't forget about the quality of the structure or the fact that it might have some performance that changes the inside or the outside. You know it does have a bias toward the building and for example some might say that actually there are kinds of fields like interiors or for concourse design inside of building that are completely forgotten by architects, or for example ceilings. You know, suspended ceilings, they're kind of whole areas that are not programmed to certain kind of degree.

AZP: Yes, but I'm not claiming that architects have to do only envelopes.