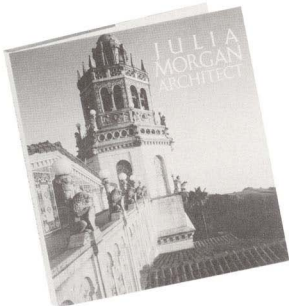


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DIALOGUE: JOHN WHITEMAN

John Whiteman is the new director of the SOM Foundation's Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism. Born in Manchester, England, in 1954, he attended Cambridge, Bristol, and Harvard universities, and has degrees in architecture and philosophy. As an architect, he was active in community design projects in several countries, including a project in London's East End called "The Planning Bus." The Chicago Institute is located in the recently renovated Charnley House, where it will host several research fellows for limited terms. *DBR* interviewed Whiteman in April in Chicago.

DBR: You were preceded as director by Leon Krier, who lasted only a short time. What will you do differently?

JW: The institute is currently a vacuum, and it needs to be run with the idea of architectural research rather than architectural pronouncement. It has sometimes been compared to the Brookings Institute as an ambition. I find that incorrect because Brookings already has a kind of legitimacy from which it can make statements. True, it is based on research, but one of its major functions is to make statements about the way economic policy should or should not be done. There is no possibility of having that kind of institute for architecture where you could do the proper amount of social or artistic research to be able to say what is the right thing to be done.

DBR: The Chicago Institute has models, though, like the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, which created a cultural spearhead that seceded from official and academic architecture to produce some of the most original and vital discussions in the field.

JW: I think that our institute in Chicago will always be seen in that shadow, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. It will be a place where a new generation of people working

in architecture will gather and try out their ideas. Since it is outside both the university and the corporation, it becomes peripheral almost by definition.

DBR: How much autonomy do you have?

JW: I have almost complete autonomy over the programs I run. The only thing I have to do is report to the board twice a year. In one sense, you might look at the institute as an exercise in widening the franchise and the debate, bringing in new voices.

DBR: Can you give some examples of what you are planning?

JW: I am going to set up a series of fellowships, mainly for those individuals, whether in practice or on the fringes of the university, who are on the brink of doing something and have a project they want to bring to Chicago to complete. The project can be written, drawn, or constructed. The first fellowships will be given this fall. There will be three or four junior fellows, in their thirties, and one or two senior fellows. The institute will put together an archive of materials and discussions produced here and also of the work of people that we decide to exhibit. There will be very small, ad hoc exhibits, perhaps one project at a time. Our publications will simply display what we have done—and reflect the two kinds of activity I hope to sustain: drawings and construction, and theory, self-conscious theory.

DBR What will you get out of all this?

JW: Initially, I will be swamped with organizational tasks, but I eventually plan to stick by a fairly monastic schedule that will allow me to do my own writing and drawing. Paradoxically, I find the university to be an uncongenial place for architectural research. The university has never been able to take the arts seriously as a form of sense-making, of cultural activity and production. It ties itself to a definition of rationalism that I find too narrow. Architectural research is much more difficult in practice, obviously, because the seductions of architecture are on the business side. Yet, if you look at the architects you like,

you find that they ran their offices and their lives as a continuous course of inquiry: Le Corbusier painting every morning, or Alvar Aalto using painting as a form of research. The type of research I mean is what Aalto was actually doing when he made those abstract paintings: exposing his problems to another medium, working on it in paint, and linking it back to architectural drawing. The university finds it difficult to give credence to an activity which would call itself a form of reason, but is not rule-bound and repetitious in the sense of being generalizable. In a painting or in a building, though, it seems that what you know through that painting or by that building you can only know in that medium. It is an intensive form of knowledge, as opposed to one that is extensive ("if I can't repeat it, it is not knowledge"). A work of art does not function like that—it is intensive. To misuse Wittgenstein's phrase, it is knowledge "in the case of one."

DBR: That seems diametrically opposed to SOM's interest in making buildings that can be done anywhere at any time.

JW: That is probably true, and the same could be said about Mies van der Rohe. When you go to his buildings, though, you realize that they are individually conceived—they never quite repeat, although outwardly they look very similar. The curious thing about SOM's history is their lifting some of Mies's technology, ideas, and principles and missing a rather vital point, which is that when Mies finally put a building down, that's where it is. It couldn't be anywhere else because he has done very subtle things with dimensions, the placements of window mullions, or the orientation of interior and urban spaces. I've always been struck by the individuality of his buildings rather than their generality, so I find it ironic that SOM has for the most part produced generalized buildings. There are exceptions. Inland Steel, for example, is a remarkably American, specifically Chicagoan building, and very successful. But much of SOM's work flounders on the distinction between administrative techniques that demand a repetitive knowledge,



and others that require knowledge of a more singular and intensive form.

DBR: SOM succeeded in applying the corporate model to the architect's office, and this similarity to their clients perhaps explains their tremendous success. Is that model of organization now in crisis? In setting up the institute, are they saying that they've missed something?

JW: The institute does not exist solely for SOM—that is the open and declared policy of Bruce Graham, who set it up. It really doesn't exist as a child of the firm, and if it turns out to behave like that, I would regard it as a gross failure. SOM's royalties from designed works, chairs and things like that, go to the foundation, and much of the current funding comes from that. We will be seeking support from others, so the institute will not have to rely on a single source. This will take several years.

DBR: In the past you've been involved with projects that have promoted the politicization process. Do you think this political approach will thrive in Chicago?

JW: The way the question is often posed—"can architecture actually perform any reformist or revolutionary activity?"—seems trapped and in a way misunderstands architectural history. The way that architecture transforms sensibilities, if it transforms them, is by becoming a small locus of a new way of feeling. I don't think that anybody can provide the necessary defenses. Architecture can be appropriated by the bourgeoisie, as in the U.S., or just allowed to spread and produce a new kind of sensibility. In my view, architecture can never produce reform, but it can introduce more equal and just sensibilities into the world, and will do so in very localized and rather painful instances. These instances give rise to others that are then appropriated or bred into a new style to be copied by the bourgeoisie. Architecture is entirely vulnerable to that process, and that is the most realistic thing we could hope for it.

My grandest hopes for the institute are to make people realize just how difficult archi-

itecture really is, and to produce descriptions and perhaps a few examples of that difficulty. I want to make the work of good architects more difficult, and yet to make that difficulty the locus of their operation. I want to find a form of persuasion that says "this is the task of architecture," and urges architects to work on their intuitions by locating them in difficulties.

Contrast that with the sixties belief that architecture could achieve some reform by making its social tasks clear: "If we can ask the right sociological questions, we can come up with the right architectural drawings to fit them." Although I am sympathetic to its political and social ambitions, that conception of the architectural task leads to buildings that are mere illustrations of the theory that gave rise to them—illustrations, not buildings. The thoughts that are guiding the design are not rooted in material practice. It collapses the project that is actually the most interesting for any radical intelligence in architecture at the moment: how to deal with the material of architecture.

Architects will always be in the grip of power. The question is how the power is distributed and what one can do in its grip. How can you produce a form of intelligence that deals on the one hand with the extreme difficulties of making material forms, and on the other with a form of morality that surrounds architecture and allows it to operate in the grip of power? When I talk about difficulties, I don't mean that we can consciously choose to be good guys or bad—that doesn't happen. The question is whether, while in the grip of power, we can make a building according to "their" expectations, but then do something different. One way I like to read buildings is to see that they are hostage to and yet at the same time not limited by the power that beckons them into being.

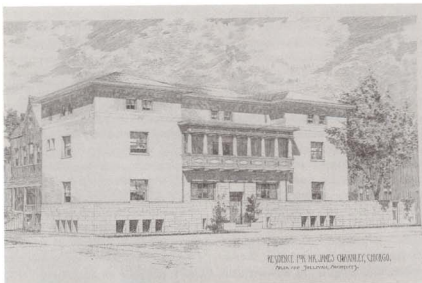
Why is it that money needs to build a building that almost illustrates its own financial calculation? This is one of the difficulties behind the office building, for example. Yet, as a philosophical device, money is actually a substitute, a thing through which value transmutes itself from

material quantities into money and back again. No form of reference between the material artifact and the money is necessary, so, logically speaking, there is no reason why a building needs to illustrate the financial power that gave rise to it. Within the business community, however, there is a desire "to see what you get"—very much like Weber's protestants' and capitalists' desire to see their own virtue reflected. Still, it is not a necessary condition, although nothing seems less obvious now in a world that has surrendered itself to those kinds of desires, the fantasies of capital.

As to whether architecture is a response to people's needs, my fears are about the difficulty of describing them, and of producing forms that are capable rather than responsive. We cannot produce a sociological description of needs and then know what to build. The idea that this might be possible is itself quite an astonishing ambition. I think the architectural task is in some ways both simpler and more difficult: simpler in that there is no need to undertake such a grand description, to search endlessly for the right formula; more difficult in that it is extremely hard to recognize when an art form has actually settled on an abstract form of experience that is worth having. We use the tight argument of satisfying needs to excuse ourselves from this difficulty, to avoid dealing with the relationship of buildings and bodies, for example, or with the way that buildings construct human experience.

On the other hand, there is the denying of social response. Architecture, it is argued, because of its duration beyond ideological systems, becomes an ideological and historical innocent, an indifferent shell. I'm not convinced of that. This strikes me as the extreme opposite of the functionalist goal of having a description of human needs to which the building must be completely accountable. It is much more difficult to negate both of these positions and form some understanding of the very fragile relationship between buildings and people—a relationship which is quite intimate, yet perpetuating and consolidating over time.

Aldo Rossi's acolytes in Italy, who ob-



The renovated Chamley House, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in the offices of Adler & Sullivan (1891), now houses the Chicago Institute.

viously don't understand him, make outrageous statements like, "There is no invention necessary," and giggle when you try to deal with the relationship of buildings and people. But buildings do participate in the construction of ordinary experience. The conditions of their participation are largely based on a logic that has been excluded from the university because it lacks that linear, sequential flow of argument that lets you say "I know what I'm doing."

Most art forms work indirectly—they take issue with the dominant senses that are around them. This is different from the positions argued by Rossi and also by his enemies, the naive functionalists. Both the construction of architecture and the living of it is a kind of performance. It is clear that Rossi understands this when you see him dealing with the theatrical metaphor. It doesn't appear much in his writing, but it is certainly something he draws about: the idea that architecture contains a theatrical metaphor, and is a way of considering space as a political entity.

DBR: How might this sensibility affect the institute?

JW: The principles by which I want to run the institute will be the production and testing of architectural propositions. I am

currently negotiating with the city of Chicago to get hold of peripheral spaces in the city for experimental structures. I am interested in the notion of translation from one medium to another. One way to understand the problems of the 1960s sociological descriptions is their inability to make architectural sense. The difficulty of translating between words and buildings was never admitted. A statement might be true in the realm of words, but translating it into a building is another matter. The biggest problem I find in the production of architectural theory is exactly this: what is the relationship between words and forms in the constructional sense? Particularly in the schools, this problem has gone unexplored.

DBR: Who will come to the institute?

JW: We start a fellowship by correspondence. They write to me. I write back, and we keep writing to each other until we are both happy with the subject matter and the conditions. I am concerned with both their relation to the institute as a community and more especially with their interests as individuals. We want the time spent at the institute to be very constructive for the individual, and at the same time good for the construction of the community. This review process is less cumbersome than

going through tons of applications because it is more direct. It allows us to be more precise about certain issues.

DBR: Might this process of selection result in a pretty closed circle? I could see you being attacked for elitism.

JW: Whether the institute will be accused of elitism will have to do with whether it can produce anything that seriously affects the culture. The fact that it is going to be a small, select group of people is not necessarily an indictment of its activities. It is actually necessary to pull together people who are already out of certain issues and into others, who can form a community and yet are not pushing those issues in ways that are cliquish or clubbish. I'm looking for people who are at least willing to entertain the correspondences, if not necessarily able to translate between architecture and what they know in their own discipline. Given that criterion, the institute is bound to attract only a small number of people. I don't find a problem in that. It would be a problem only if I couldn't explain the basis of each choice, and then validate it in terms of the work produced.

DBR: Doesn't this put you in the position of a father who has selected his own children?

JW: No, and I find that description repugnant because it implies a kind of control over development and moralistic positions that I find difficult to defend. The director has some power in choices, undoubtedly, but if the daily life of discussions and production at the institute is in some way hostage to what I think, I would regard myself as having failed. Nor would most of the people coming here take kindly to something that was structured like that. I see myself as a catalyst. The director has the power of choice, with a little money behind it. How that power is exercised is the real issue.