Interview with Aaron Betsky*

*Conducted and/or edited by the Volume Editors.

Volume Editors: You've said in the past that architecture does not necessarily need to refer only to buildings; it can also refer to other processes, such as 'unbuilding' or forms of activism. In terms of sustainability, what can architecture refer to?

Aaron Betsky: The argument that I have made is that the most sustainable architecture is not a building. It is the re-use, re-assembly and re-thinking of what we already have. I am not convinced that it is possible to make any kind of new construction that will not use up natural resources that we cannot replenish, and that will not contribute to our pollution levels through the very act of construction, even if, as a result, the building might count as being net-zero or even net-positive. The complexity of assembling materials; manufacturing; the coordination of all of the technology; the use of the site itself all contributes to the problem—we can no longer afford to use up the resources that make these possible. The other issue I want to address is the notion of the city. Just as we reconsider the notion of a sustainably designed building, no doubt outfitted with all kinds of gizmos and recycling devices, made out of low-heat concrete, using mass timber—which, by the way, I think is a questionable idea, as it depends on chemicals and monoculture farming—and all the other elements that go into sustainability, we should rethink our nostalgia for an imagined, dense urban environment. First of all, the jury is still out—there are conflicting analyses—and I don't think you could ever really analyze this—on whether the amount of energy that's wasted bringing people and goods together and getting waste out of cities is larger than if you have people who are more lightly spread through the landscape. We have this notion that the only model for making a sustainable culture is having a place that allows us to engage in the kind of social contacts that, in turn, will allow us to elaborate our humanity, and that this is only possible in a traditional city. I would argue that notion itself is outdated. Trying to cram people into a city is not exactly the most humane or the most sustainable way to create cultural connection. In fact, we should rather be thinking about how we can use the increasingly widespread networks and our understanding of the necessity of local thinking and local production to create relations that do not depend on this incredibly wasteful activity of people commuting every day, giant waste dumps, flying around, and all the other means that we use to create a social network. So I think we need to think beyond new buildings and beyond cities and think of

other forms of connection, shelter and sociality in general. A built culture that is not constrained by buildings and their agglomeration into cities, and not as wasteful as those structures are.

VEs: Does such a society currently exist?

AB: The notion of ex-urban communities is becoming more and more common. Just as large cities are falling apart, because of their very scale, into a series of nodes that have a village-like quality connected to other nodes, so are we moving beyond suburbs that are dependent on an inner core, towards an interdependent, interconnected nodal system. I think that Spring Green and Taliesin, where I currently am based, is an example of such a place. These sites are combinations of rural market towns with small manufacturing bases, and a series of cultural nodes, which include not just Taliesin but also American Player's Theatre, which is very active during the summer. There is a significant population of people who, for various reasons, some of them connected to those nodes, some of them not, are living and working there, and are using modern means of connection. Those kinds of nodes are becoming more and more common, and not just in the United States, but around the world. I'm particularly interested in how those might work out, and how we might want to reconceptualize not just architecture, but also land use. In other words, if we stop thinking about 18th to 19th century models—cities vs. agriculture cultural areas vs. suburbs vs. exurbs vs. nodes—and really start thinking more in the Dutch manner of "spatial arrangement" (a continually changing collage of different land uses, occupancy patterns, and productivity modes), then we can understand that isolating and zoning these objects out is wasteful and arcane, and we need to really think of the whole thing as a much more complex interweaving of these human activities and natural processes.

VEs: What then is the role of planning and planners in these emerging forms of settlement-making?

AB: Nothing. I'm very skeptical of traditional planning in that sense. It's interesting that most planning works in reverse; one of the things that I've discovered decades ago in LA is that the pattern of development there (and later in other cities) has been one in which certain nodes developed, whereupon, after they became expensive and too congested, the edges between those nodes—the borderlands—became the cheapest and easiest to use. These, in turn, become nodes and emptied out the previous nodes, sometimes hopscotching to yet another edge, so that the notion of

planning becomes a reaction and a producer of a negative, rather than a projected activity. And I think that is more common than not. I don't think that you can plan. What you can do is try to project out scenarios and work with the kinds of cycles and layers of activities that exist in the site, and begin to extrapolate or dig through them, either moving outward or inward through them.

VEs: So who are the actors driving the way that settlements unfold?

AB: The problem is that there is absolutely no difference between who has power today and previous capitalist models, wherein the actors are those people with resources. These people are still defining what gets built. Meanwhile there are millions of people who are being ignored. I am especially concerned the immense movement of people, not by choice but by necessity (economic or political) that also empties out and creates new nodes, possibilities and forms of destruction everywhere else. Scenario planning of this sort therefore has to happen not just on the small scale in order to see how we can more effectively use and re-use different areas, but also on a global scale to try to anticipate the effects of both economic and political unrest and, of course, climate change.

VEs: What effect does the movement of people have on the built environment?

AB: The current nightmare reality is that all of our cities and all of our nodes of urban agglomeration will become, in effect, refugee camps, with people moving through there as long as there is a chance of surviving economically or otherwise. On the high end, the model would be the music festivals and temporary gatherings like Burning Man, where you can create temporary communities based around shared interests and desires while using all kinds of technology; they can also be fairly light on the land. One of the great questions, not just for architecture but also for politics, is whether we could use some of the knowledge that is being gleaned and some of the art that is being used to create the kind of Coachella's and Glastonbury's to address the issues of a much more pressing and larger scale.

VEs: It seems as though you're saying that new forms of human settlements in scales smaller than the urban need not necessarily be pointed to moving backwards in terms of our social networks, but through an injection of art, have added values. Is that right?

AB: Beyond the element of art, what interests me about these music festivals is first of all, the technology of tents and structures that people make in all manner of scales, the structures of sociality that are developed, and the way that people organize these structures. The organizers have figured out not only that art and music bring people together, but also where the attendees are going to congregate for food, how many toilets they need and where they should be, and how the access roads should work. They also use gig-based technologies in the services that move in and out of there, ranging from the Ubers and Lyfts, to the security personnel and the waste management people. Those are the kinds of things that fascinate me; they're developed at such a high level because there are millions and millions of dollars involved in these kinds of events. So why are we not using city-making tools that range from the apps that are bring people together and feed them to these events to the fiscal and temporary structures, to service structures, to all the political and service structures? Why don't we analyze and understand how these can be used in an urban sense, in the same way we've been interested, since the 1960's and 70's, in whether we can understand tent structures and other types of temporary architecture, for our forms living, working, and playing. We need to do more of that.

VEs: How much does infrastructure play a role, mobility and otherwise, in these emerging imaginaries?

AB: There's no doubt that a lot of this work is possible because of the construction of new forms of super-mobility, such as high-speed trains. There are growing suggestions of using canals and rivers again as forms of linkages. But of course, there is also the notion that digital linkage, a much more ephemeral infrastructure, with the pop-up of last-mile mobility, could be combined with other infrastructure that could have a lighter touch that either airplanes or trains. Such forms of connection could also not be fixed but be much more flexible. I have no idea what that would look like, but it seems to me that any investment in any fixed-line infrastructure is something that we should question. Just as we are, a hundred years later, looking at the train again, will we, in fifty years, be looking again at the airplane? Can we come up with some ways to make airplane travel more sustainable? If we don't need runways and fixed infrastructure, it would allow for much greater flexibility. These may sound like futuristic dreams, but what underlies it all is that we cannot continue to keep pouring concrete. We have to understand that we should use what we already have and use it as lightly as possible.

VEs: As an educator, how do you distill these ideas into the beginning of an educational journey for students?

AB: We have the advantage when we are, as I am for half the year, in a place like Spring Green. We all live on an organic farm, where 2/3 to 3/4 of everything that we eat is grown here. It is a very different form of urbanism. It's a little bit more difficult elsewhere. But the model of such arts and crafts communities, which are ultimately based on John Ruskin's notion that the industrial revolution would, at some point (as Karl Marx predicted) explode and fracture into self-sustaining communities, is a kind of model that's built into our very education here. We've tried to further that by looking into the kinds of programs that we give and the education that we do.

VEs: Do you think that these discussions are radical enough?

AB: The sure answer is no. Obviously I have a significant number of students who think it's already too late, and they will try to do what they can, but fully expect to be drowned or dead by the time they're fifty. I would like to think that there's more hope, but do I think we're contributing enough? Of course we're not. But I'm trying to find what I think might be productive avenues to explore. For me, these avenues mean pursuing architecture that is sustainable, open or socially just, and—we must not overlook this—also beautiful. If you make or propose architecture that looks like a regulation, or if it seems only good enough for what people could afford, then you are only reinforcing the stereotypes and prisons, both physical and cultural, in which people find themselves. So things have to be beautiful. They have to be transformative; as Wolf Prix used to say, we should aspire to architecture of the open mind, open eyes and open heart.