

Harvard Graduate School of Design | Talking Practice: Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee

[THEME MUSIC]

GRACE LA: From Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, this is *Talking Practice*, a series asking renowned designers to provide an inside glimpse into what they do, why, and how they do it. Exposing the ways in which their design imagination is articulated through practice. I'm Grace La, Professor and Chair of the Department of Architecture. Thank you for listening.

We're delighted to have with us today Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee, founding partners in the architecture practice Johnston Marklee. Since its establishment in 1998 in LA, Johnston Marklee has been recognized globally with numerous design awards, including the USA Oliver Fellows for Architecture and Design by the United States Artist in 2016.

Sharon and Mark's projects are diverse in scale and type, spanning 14 countries throughout North and South America, Europe, and Asia. Some of my favorites include the Menil Drawing Institute in Houston, Texas, a Renovation of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and an array of spirited residential projects such as the Hill house in LA and the view house near Rosario, Argentina.

This duo has served as artistic directors for the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennale, and for more than two decades, maintained a strong commitment to education. Currently, Sharon and Mark are professors in practice at the GSD, where Mark Lee is chair of the Department of Architecture. Johnston Marklee's work is widely published and exhibited broadly in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Menil Collection, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Carnegie Museum of Art, and the Architecture Museum of TU Munich. Welcome, Sharon and Mark.

**SHARON
JOHNSTON:** Wonderful to be here.

MARK LEE: Thank you, Grace.

GRACE LA: I often like to start these conversations at the beginning. And in my research on both of you, I've noticed that there's not that much about your beginning. You were both students at the GSD. That's maybe where you met. Can you tell us about that. What is the formation of you and the practice?

**SHARON
JOHNSTON:** We were students at the GSD. We were, in fact, in Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron's studio when we first met, which was maybe midpoint in your time at the GSD, I think, Mark. And that was the beginning of a friendship and sharing a love of architecture.

MARK LEE: Yeah, we started working respectively for different people and moved to Switzerland. I was teaching there. I was working there. And then I decided to move back in 1998. And that's when we decided to start our practice together.

GRACE LA: It was at that point when you moved back, Mark, was that to LA?

MARK LEE: Correct, yeah.

GRACE LA: And Sharon were already in LA.

SHARON JOHNSTON: I was, right.

GRACE LA: So why LA?

SHARON JOHNSTON: Well, that's where I'm from. And I think Mark considers himself an himself and Angelina now, so it was fantastic. It's a city we love. It's also a place that gave us a lot of freedom to begin practicing without too much pressure. A lot of space and a lot of opportunity.

MARK LEE: Well, I consider myself an Angelina even back then, because even before I came to GSD, I already lived in LA for 10 years. So LA was kind of home. I did my undergraduate studies there, worked there for a few years before I came back. I think we bonded in Herzog and de Meuron studio because we had a history in LA. And I never lived in a cold climate before. So when I came, I didn't know what to do with my windshield froze.

GRACE LA: That's very interesting. And at the time that you were in Herzog and de Meuron studio together, there wasn't a talk of a partnership or any such predictions of the future?

SHARON JOHNSTON: No, I think besides architecture, we both shared a love of contemporary art. And then once we were both-- Mark was in Switzerland. I was back in LA. We began some small projects in Marfa for an art foundation called Lannan Foundation. That was really when we started thinking, how we might begin a collaboration. It was very modest, but it brought together all the things we loved to do with art and architecture and interesting people.

MARK LEE: Yeah, we started off didn't have any projects in LA. We have an office in LA. Our first projects were in Marfa, Texas. I think the next one was in Palm Springs. So we used to say that we focus on hot climates.

GRACE LA: That's very good. And oftentimes, our audience of this podcast is very interested in how you got that first project. Where did that come from? And how did you materialize the first project is often very difficult, but at the same time, it's seminal and it starts you on a path? So maybe you can share some thoughts about that.

SHARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, I think Marfa was obviously really kind of hallowed ground, especially in terms of art history. And very frankly, we had a family connection with the foundation. I think what was amazing about that opportunity for us is that in a way, the stakes weren't super high. With the projects, they were adaptive reuse of postwar residential buildings. They were turned into writers in residence studios.

But in a way more important than the projects themselves was the community of people we were working with and around. It was a very rich intellectual community. There was a really important historical lineage of the place. And a lot of the people that we worked with have become lifelong collaborators and friends and interlocutors for us. So that's how I would describe the import of that time.

MARK LEE: Yeah, I remember when we first started, we said we worked in offices before. We've been exposed to professional practice, but there are a lot of things we didn't know. So we just said the first five or six years, let's just say yes to everything. And there's always a lesson there, not always design projects, but we use those as ways to meet engineers, meet contractors. In a way, these are small-scale projects, but it helped us build up a community where other projects became conduits for future projects.

GRACE LA: How do you separate the roles and responsibilities of your partnership? If you fast forward now, how do you handle the office management?

SHARON JOHNSTON: We're at 20 to 25 people, so it's not a tiny office, but it's certainly not even really a midsize office. And practicing for almost 25 years, our roles have changed a lot, especially when Mark's had more academic administrative responsibilities. And we've also grown with some important senior leaders in our office.

So between Mark and I, it's never sort of formulaic, like you do this and I do that. I think there is generally maybe an ethos of our office. We pass the ball around and see how insight from different perspectives can inform a business development idea or a technical idea or a schematic design idea. I think we find that interesting.

But certainly, I would say in terms of project management and such, I probably spend more time of in the studio and working with teams that are on site than Mark does. I think when Mark's tenure as chair is done, that will probably shift again. We find that the intellectual stimulation of the office is about trying to always see things from new perspectives, not just be formulaic about our process.

MARK LEE: I look forward to get back on the drawing board.

GRACE LA: Getting back to the question of your start and that initial project in Marfa, it seems to have set you up for the relationship between art, architecture, contemporary art practice. That has been something that is really woven through your practice. And so I'd like to learn a little bit more about that. What specifically and how does it invigorate your thinking?

SHARON JOHNSTON: Oftentimes architects are working with a lot of consultants. It's a broad team to do any project really. But I think we've tended to include artists in our discussion because we find that kind of parallel nature of ideas, yet disciplinary difference to be really stimulating. I'm thinking of an example. When we were working on the Menil Drawing Institute competition phase, we brought in a friend and an artist we admire a lot, Luisa Lambri, who thinks about light, very much works with photography.

And I think for her to create our work and think about the role of light and material, it just brought a whole different dimension to how we were thinking about it. And that just goes back to finding new vantage points. To see your work in hindsight is something we methodologically try to do.

MARK LEE: Yeah, I think professionally, we started off collaborating with some of them, sometimes collaborating with them on their installation projects, on their gallery or museum installations, and then later on, it led to other projects that are either collectives of their work or the homes of the collectors. And we also work with young curators. Most of them were our generation.

So eventually, as we grew, they grew also. Some of the young curators became chief curators or became directors or museums. So I think they somehow grew with us. I remember Frank Gehry, I always talked about, growing with his clients and his collaborators. And I think very much it started that way. We're all about the same age with the artist and the curators that were at Marfa. And somehow that network expanded.

GRACE LA: That ring so true. One of my mentors had always remarked that that's why architects practice so long as they mature. 60 is considered still very young for architects. And partly also because your client base is and who trusts you to do that work has also grown. So you do grow together with your clients.

But then on the other hand, one of the things that I find super interesting about your practice is that you are working on these institutional projects for some very sophisticated museums, but then you have house clients. And that can be whiplash for many practices. Again, the sets of concerns are so different. Mark, what are your thoughts on that kind of oscillation between scale type? Because again, I think the house projects probably offer something very special. At the same time, they're difficult to do in their own way, and it's quite different than the institutional.

MARK LEE: Absolutely. I think that's a great question because being in LA, the house type is really a type of commission that one gets a lot because LA are not until, I'd say, the last 20 years, were there any significant public scale architecture. The history of LA architecture was mainly single family houses. So in many ways, that remains a type that there's a lot of openness, a lot of experimentation.

People were, I would say maybe 30 years ago, were interested in modern houses or mid-century houses. Again, for us, it sharpens our sense about scale and habitation so because the house is such an intimate space. And we have had institutional scale clients who came to us on projects that we didn't have any experience with, but they're interested in us because we have done houses well.

They thought because of that, then you can extend that to what's hospitality, you can understand habitation well. So we didn't expect that. There was always just a line of single family house type of projects for us, but that turned out to be quite helpful.

SHARON JOHNSTON: Even our first single family house in Marfa, it was a family that ran the local newspaper. They are musicians. There's always sort of larger cultural footprint of entertaining people that are very involved in political philanthropy who need places to host. So it's house plus. And I think that starts to suggest, like Mark said, a kind of hospitality, but perhaps a kind of in-between scale it isn't purely just domestic.

GRACE LA: Yeah. And so in terms of the background to support that in the office, how do you manage the support of, again, such a different diverse set of topologies that you're working with?

SHARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, it's a challenge. Frankly, the team sizes are very different. Generally, we try to be quite lean and run small teams just because I think the intimacy of literally how you build your team says a lot about the output of the office as a principal for us. So I would say a lot of these clients, they're all involved in the arts. They're used to a kind of discourse that is part of the ambition of an institutional project. So I think a lot of the conversations are in a way quite similar, even though typologically the projects are different in scale.

MARK LEE: I would say sometimes it's a hit or miss in terms of that client relationship, because for a single family house, you're really in bed with them. You know very intimate details of them. Sometimes there are chemistry that works out very well. And sometimes it doesn't. But once you're in, you're trapped.

But I think that was really helpful for us because more and more, I would say, institutional scale projects, there are fewer and fewer situations where there's a single voice--

SHARON JOHNSTON: On the client side.

MARK LEE: --on the client side. More and more, we see committees, we see teamwork. So talking to a team, making decisions where the team is very different than making decisions with one person or one couple that say that could be decisive. And I find that in single family house projects, that decision making is kind of important as opposed to having a team decide.

GRACE LA: The pace of movement and experimentation can be advanced as well.

MARK LEE: Yeah.

GRACE LA: Yeah, that's very true. There's always this perception in many architecture firms that you need huge teams to do huge projects. And sometimes we find-- and I don't know if you've noticed this in your own practice, but sometimes these very small projects, they actually require huge teams, maybe even rivaling what you might put on an institutional project simply because the level of execution, there's a higher expectation for it.

SHARON JOHNSTON: That's right. I think there's a complexity of needs. And there's an expectation of quality on most of this kind of single family health work we're doing now that is intense mockups, finish expectations, all of those things that are-- and there's time, there's time to get it right. And oftentimes an institutional projects, just one of the factors is time and lack thereof in design and construction phases.

MARK LEE: I would also add that some of the challenges of single family houses is that most of the time, it's a one-off situation as opposed to working with a developer, where constantly there are other projects going on. Even institutional scale projects, although they tend to be one-off. But still the art world is a larger continuum. So you are known, let's say within the art world or within the institutional world, what you can do, what you can't do, or what the type of experience you have.

But I would say single family house every time, it's almost like a first date all over again. And part of the difficulty is also for a lot of clients of single family houses, it's probably the largest amount of money they've spent. Some of them who didn't have that much experience with architects, they have this sense of entitlement that I can call you at midnight if I have a question, because this is a huge thing.

For all of us who have been working on projects, this is one of many projects. So I think managing that expectations could be tiring.

GRACE LA: Right. But I could imagine that is one of the qualities of the architect that is most helpful or useful in those sort of tricky situations, where clients are extremely demanding and you have to figure out ways to, of course, work on those demands, but at the same time, be able to push the project forward. I think that's a very important and maybe undervalued and maybe not spoken about that kind of skill.

SHARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, frankly, with more experience, something we're looking for in the projects we go for, as much as we can, who are those people that were sitting across the table from? Because we think a great project needs a great client-- someone that you is ambitious, but also generous and open and wanting to take a journey with us. And I think that's an essential ingredient that we look for.

MARK LEE: And I think what you just said, Grace, about communicating with the client is important, because I think a lot is about finding common ground. And I think about the case of the Hill House, for example. I wouldn't say that we're completely in sync with the client, but we understand what the client needed in the sense that we were interested in the typology of how sitting on a hill in terms of how it has evolved over history.

I think our client was treating it as a spec project. So what he or they cared about was to build the maximum volume and to save money. So when we can prove that we can build the maximum volume, but save money in the caissons for them.

**SHARON
JOHNSTON:** And save money.

MARK LEE: And save money on the caissons. So that was for them. They care more about that than what we cared about. So it's about finding parallel common ground for us. And I think understanding what the client needed is always something quite important.

**SHARON
JOHNSTON:** Just to say quickly, I think to me that signals understanding how to manage constraints in architecture. And I think that could have been-- the description you just made of the Hill House, that could have been an impasse moment. But we tried to take that limitation and turn it into something.

And when Mark described our first projects like on the one hand, we were super ambitious, but we also had a sense of measure, sort of knowing where the project is and going for that, and finding something intense through maybe narrowing the frame of what the design problem is. That's an important thing for young architects to realize that you don't have to include everything in every project. But the art of finding the problem is, I think, a key part of especially early practice.

GRACE LA: I love that phrase, the art of finding the problem. I think that's absolutely right to spend some time to discover that. Mark, prior to your arrival at the GSD as chair, prior to that appointment, I remember there was a talk that Iñaki Abalos held about design techniques. And you had mentioned at that moment that one of the techniques that you employ or that you think about is the way in which again could maximize a certain expectation, as Sharon has just described, a developer's expectation for square footage or cost.

But the one thing that you really felt that you needed to pay attention to, the one thing, it's windows. You shouldn't cheap out on the windows. Could you just elaborate on that? Because to me, that was a very revealing moment. I mean, I think, in my practice, we feel the same way. So I was like, oh, ha, here's somebody speaking that. And so I'd love to hear your thoughts about that.

MARK LEE: Yeah, I think it started off when we first started our practice. I remember there was this moment when Sharon and I was flipping through a book about contemporary projects all around the world. And I remember we could tell which is an American building, which is a European building, without looking at the captions, just based on how thick the window mullions are.

So when you can see paler window, OK, this is an American project. So we're just trying to use it to understand the context where we're working. And we're thinking, well, is there a way we can be liberated from paler windows. So I think that's how the whole thought about, can we create posts? Can we create depth? Or can we push the frame to the edge? What can we do with very standard practices that can slightly transformed that window? I think that was the impetus of it.

I think the other aspect that points to, I would say, quite a consistent technique that we've used is about how does one distribute both design energy and design budget. The analogy is if a client comes to you and said, I have \$500 a square foot, a contractor would say, for \$500, you can afford this hardware, this window. For 300, you can afford this. For 700, you can afford this.

And we always thought, no matter how talented you are, at the end, it will be a \$500 per square foot house. So the trick for us is, how do we put \$1,000 in 10% of the project? And then the rest of the project is \$350. But I think this dynamic distribution always have to-- for architecture of certain quality, you always have to have that moment. The trick for us is that the area that we spend \$1,000 are quite hidden, so it doesn't scream out at you.

And for us, these are the moments that ingratiate the entire project. How do you have 90% of a blank wall, but just when you puncture a window, put some care in that puncture where it's placed in relationship to the entire wall? We thought it could change that wall. So it's a bit of maybe acupuncture approach. But this has been something, I think, since we started at the outset when our projects were quite challenging budget situation.

So how do we distribute certain things? Like in the sale house, it's really a stucco box. How do we make the opening slightly larger so that we have to stagger the column? But that slight largeness for us creates certain surrealness about the weight on top, very small and subtle things. I think this was we learned a lot. We kind of cut our teeth through those projects, early projects that had challenging budgets.

SHARON

JOHNSTON:

Just to follow up a little bit, Mark and I talk a lot about qualities that we aspire to and work that has a kind of dynamic equilibrium where you feel it's stable, yet certain times, it almost feels like you really expect a column there. And I think because many of these early projects were in LA, where obviously the ambition is to have as much fluidity between inside and outside as possible, we're always trying to have an interest in structure, but dematerialize the wall because that interest in climatic porosity and fluidity of space.

So that was a pretty productive set of problems to get into because we had budget problems, we had spatial ambition. And so reconciling those was, I think, a productive early part of our project. We were thinking a lot about that.

GRACE LA:

Yeah, it's a kind of rob Peter to pay Paul methodology, but put it into practice and find a way to in a sense, almost systematize that across the body of work. But what that results in is an incredible maximum sense of design capacity, but with a sort of minimum means, which I think is a really wonderful quality about your work.

I'd like to turn for a moment to the exhibitions. You've been doing a lot of different kinds of exhibitions. Sometimes the exhibitions are both of you, as curators, sometimes you've been doing installations or interventions with institutions, with museums, and furniture installations or collaborations. Tell me about the exhibitions. Why do them and what do they mean to the practice?

MARK LEE:

I think we love exhibitions because typically we collaborate with others. We either collaborate with an artist or couple of artists or we collaborate with the institution. So I think for us, it's always about creating something haptic, something that you can experience. That's very different from reading a book or looking at something through the screen.

So I think in the Chicago Architecture biennial, I think for us the scale is important. How do you experience the scale of architecture that you cannot encompass from looking at an image. So having spaces that you can walk into, having things that tower over you, I think having that type of space that is larger than an object is important. So these are like experiments that we have done that test out certain things that we could try later on in buildings.

**SHARON
JOHNSTON:**

Yeah, I think CAB in Chicago was a chance to use the exhibition format of a biennial, which pretty much inherently has a lot of voices involved, and think of it as a platform for discussions. It was a pretty global group of architects, and I think the kinds of projects mark was describing, for example, the tower project, the vertical cities we called it, or horizontal city, where we tried to create very simple frameworks, whether it's a typological question of the tower or the question of the interior, and put that forward as a chance for architects to look at a similar problem and exchange ideas.

I think that it's probably related a bit to teaching, too, just that we're professional architects, we want to build, but we also want to have exchange. I think the exhibition format is a really temporal, exciting, dynamic a medium to do that.

GRACE LA:

You've also done exhibitions like inside LACMA or with other collaborators. When you are the designers of that exhibition, as opposed to the curators. Tell me about that.

**SHARON
JOHNSTON:**

I think we have in case of institution like LACMA or MoCA with Takashi Murakami, I think it's a chance to really get into the mind of an artist or an art historical, nonliving artist and talk with curators and think about ways to embody art historical ideas in an environment. There's something fresh and distilled about that. We're not making buildings, but we're making environments to think about ideas embodied in art.

I think it's just straightforward. But again, going back to the many dimensions to a practice that gives it energy. Somebody can spend six weeks on an exhibition and five years on a museum. I think that difference is important to an intellectual community.

MARK LEE:

Well, the fun thing about Takashi Murakami project was that his installation for the rest of his show was about superflat wall drawings, loud pop, really in-your-face type of installation. And then we designed this room for his commercial products, like his keychains, his soccer balls. And we did the reverse. We made it very zen, very low lighting, a little bit dark. We used a simple grid.

And then they all have different depths based on the object that they're. If it's a keychain, it's very shallow. If it's a soccer ball, it's very deep. So it's an interesting way to create an eye amongst a hurricane or a storm. And then the installation that we did at the MCA Chicago was a way for us to challenge the grid.

Joseph Paul Kleihues was so insistent upon this presence of his grid, even in the bathroom. So we're also interested in where the grid fails. If we directly map that grid in a finer grain, where does the mismatch happen? It's a little bit inside of baseball. But for us, it was also interesting to see those moments while creating an overall installation.

GRACE LA:

Yeah. As I look at your work, it seems to me-- again, I'm guessing about this and would love to more-- it does seem to also give you a way of being close to interiors, to the atmosphere of that interior in a different way. And maybe in some ways, I look at your exhibitions and I think of them as meditations on the interiors, and again, the objects of those interiors and/or the way one might move through those interiors.

So I think it's a wonderful typology to have in a practice. And maybe this isn't a critique of-- I've noticed with many of our students that the kind of sensibility or tactility for the interior is not always innate. And how do we cultivate that? And maybe the exhibition is a type that could do that.

SHARON

JOHNSTON:

Yeah, I think that's a really interesting observation. And it has been a subject of study in our option studios. And it has been pretty fascinating to talk about the interiors and architectural problem and the way in which architecture and interiors can be thought of within a similar language.

And I do think CAB is probably the largest example, but in many cases, we were trying to think about exhibition environments that had a very direct relationship to the kind of lineage of the building itself, which was historically a library. And so that's part of how we think about the exhibition environment. It's not just content, but the context is important.

MARK LEE:

If I may share, one of the strongest experience of art that I've encountered was this project named the Stumbling Stones. And it was done by a German artist, where he located all the addresses of the people who perished in the Holocaust. And they found the address. And in Berlin, the sidewalk is made out of cobblestone.

And if there were three inhabitants in that address that perished in the Holocaust, he would take out three cobblestones and replace them with bronze cast cobblestone, with a name, their birth date, and the date they were sent to camp. I didn't know of this project. This was the project, I think, done over 20 years or so.

I was in Berlin. I was waiting for a tram. I just noticed that four shiny stones. So I just walked over. I looked at it. It was the name of a man, name of a woman, and then two others. I looked at the date. I knew right away what it was about. And so the man is like in his 30s. The woman is this age. And then I looked at the other, and I realized they were children, as chills down my spine.

And it was a very powerful experience because it was a very singular individual experience. Life goes on around me. People are walking by. And it was this strong experience than any Holocaust Memorial I've been to a museum because my mind was not prepared for it. So it was a very visceral and direct and intense. I looked at the building and it has this eerie feeling. Life goes on. But now you realize that intense moment of history.

And I think these are moments we try to capture. When we did the interior project at the Chicago biennial, it was so different from the towers because towers was one experience, architecture in a distracted way. And the interior project was the diorama was really about looking in. And at the end, you block out the whole world. It's just you and that interior space. So these are things that we can try out at exhibition scale, like this notion of the interior that is maybe manifested in a more subtle way in real projects.

GRACE LA:

Yes, Sharon, Mark and I just came from a meeting in which we were discussing certain bodies of work and shocked to see that Rafael Moneo would describe an architect as having someone with great sensitivity. And that somehow that was not disciplinary. And I thought, oh, that's really interesting, because I also realized that clearly, we are in a moment in time where also the expectation of certain sensitivities of what we expect of people attracted to this discipline is changing. And we're all involved in education, too, so we're watching this real time.

And I do think that is a very cultivated sensibility that you're describing. Somebody else might have walked just by those cobblestones and not paid attention. So it's quite a specific kind of also training, I think, that we are hoping to inculcate in our students.

MARK LEE: I think that's a great point, because you also talked about the difference between the academia and practice. Earlier when we talked about the windows, I think one could say if we look at it in academia, let's say within purely disciplinary angle, one would say, like, Alvaro siza is about doing windows or punctures, whereas the generation after him, Souto de Moura, is about frames.

We can look at it purely from a disciplinary angle. But also if we look at it from a practice angle. Cesar was doing projects for the Communist Party, low-income housing projects after the Salazar regime. So he had to do walls. Souto de Moura was at a time when he was designing bourgeois houses, they had the budget to do steel. So it's not purely a disciplinary decision. The forces around you or the type of the project, the nature of those projects pushes you to one direction or the other. And I think that's an important perspective.

GRACE LA: Yes, that's very helpful to hear that. In your recent lecture, Mark, that you delivered the Gropius lecture at the GSD, you talked about history. It was one of the subjects, one of the five footnotes. Beautifully constructed lecture because it gave us a kind of insight, a panorama into some of your preoccupations, which was just wonderful.

And I'm curious, Sharon, when you heard Mark's lecture, what did you think of it? Are you in sync on this? How did you receive it as somebody who's obviously working so closely with Mark?

SHARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, I would agree it was a beautiful lecture. And I think what was amazing about it was that it was-- of course, those thematics are coursing through our work for the 25 years we've been practicing. But what was powerful was the chance to go deep and explicate it in a way that I think in the busyness of practice. I mean, of course, those issues and ideas are there, but I think it was an incredible distillation of those things.

And maybe that's just to say that I think having a practice that's between academia and practice, there's not as much time for writing and taking the time to articulate things at the level I think Mark did in that talk. And so I mean, nothing more to say than I think it gave him the chance to get those ideas down. And that was incredibly articulate as a representation of issues that we're thinking about and that Mark's leading in the office.

GRACE LA: Yeah. And in your mind, the question about history, one of the things that I thought a lot about after hearing Mark's lecture, specifically on the questions of let's say, the speed of architecture relative to the speed of culture, for example, the way that we can quite frankly make anything now. And what is its relationship to history.

I was curious to wonder how for you-- again, because you're in a partnership practice, how is history invoked for you? And what are the ways in which you think about that as you're pursuing work?

SHARON JOHNSTON: And one just very immediate level, the idea of precedent is incredibly important to our work, how we think communicate with our team. Our office is as much computers and models as it is books. So I think it's a language that we use to share ideas with our team, to maybe expose young architects in our office to thematics that interest us, is through looking at works through history and contemporary work as well.

And I think it's also about methods of working that help us see works in history in new ways. And I think we're all re-examining history with different lenses today than we were even 5 or 10 years ago. And I feel there's a sort of invigorated and maybe different critical lens that we're looking back at this work.

And so I think there's both a very practical way that history is invoked in our making of buildings. I think Mark's lecture really made the case for the intellectual project. And so I feel it works across some different sort of measures, if you will, of implementation in our office.

GRACE LA: The role of history though-- and Mark mentioned this in the lecture. You said there's just a huge amount of data and imagery available, but relatively short attention span. So I thought that was an interesting comment because it perhaps calls for us to find the anchor, to find a way in which as Sharon suggested, those precedents come alive.

And so I'm just curious if you could tell us a little bit more about how that actually becomes operational for you. Because I do think that is something that differentiates your work as a contemporary practice maybe from others. And it is something that seems to be writ large. And at the same time, it's not overt. So maybe you could tell us a little bit more about that.

MARK LEE: Yeah, when I think back to my undergraduate days-- I studied architecture at a time when postmodernism was waning at the tail end. And it became extinguished very quickly. But I caught a little bit at the end of it. And I had a sense about how history was used, but used for me, quite an oppressive way. It's almost like you have to do. This means something important. You have to do this. You have to add value.

And I remember the late Dave Hickey, who taught here at the GSD for multiple occasions, recalled his time when in the 50s, how important for him as a youngster, seeing someone like Jackson Pollock on the cover of *Life Magazine*. And he mentioned it was the message that Pollock sent out was that it is OK to drip now, what used to be outside of the rules and now in the rules. It's OK to trip.

But he was shocked. He said maybe 10 or 15 years later. When he became a teacher, he went back to the school. And our teachers were saying have to drip. If you don't drip, you have no soul. So I could see. I think I caught the end of when history became oppressive, and I want to make sure that doesn't happen again.

I feel history nowadays to the younger generation is something that provides meaning at a time when there's so many information out there. It gives them a structure and understanding of how these things are connected. So I think for us, it helps us understand our project within a larger context.

So for example, when we did the house in Hawaii, the hot house or the sale house, we looked a lot at courtyard example, courtyard houses from the Roman courtyard houses to the Mediterranean courtyard houses what the courtyard does. We tested a few in the house scale projects. And then later on when we did the Menil Drawing Institute, the courtyard came back again.

I think we benefited a lot from studying the courtyard. Historical examples of studying the precedents in the house scale projects that helped us look at the cloisters or the courtyards in the institutional scale projects much better.

GRACE LA: That's a great example. The idea also that the architect does benefit somehow in terms of a kind of delayed sense of time. Again, you had mentioned in the lecture this notion that time for architects-- well, of course, projects take years to complete. So you can have an idea one year, but it's actually not executed three years later. And you gave a couple of examples of this. Siza, for example, who has maybe benefited from a delay.

Siza is also one of these architects that, in my opinion, has an incredible mastery and control over technique. And deploys, for example, even the understanding of structure to his advantage to make these really quite innovative works. Sharon, as we were walking over here to the studio, you and I were talking about structure.

And whether or not our students are as interested in nerding out in that way and what you see in students now, again, given your background and your teaching of option studios, what are some thoughts about that?

SHARON JOHNSTON: We love buildings that have techniques to solve multiple problems with singular solutions. So for us, structure is exciting because it can often engage-- maybe dumb structure can bring an economy of means to a project, because it can solve opening problems through redundancy or something like that. So I think maybe the typical architecture student isn't so aware and facile with the tools of structure.

But I think for us, we find bringing the language of structure into design studios is really exciting. And I think even in our own studio, within our projects, with our consultants, including mechanical engineers and plumbing engineers, it's very important we're not making an envelope to stuff stuff in. We bring those folks to the table. In concept design, we're putting out ideas might become the generators of a conceptual lineage in a project.

And I'm thinking of the Drawing Institute with Gee. We were thinking a lot about how to make this very thin but long span structure. And that led us-- eventually, we moved from timber to a plate steel structure. And that was the whole issue of thickness and thinness. And the structure was really the conceptual underpinning of the project.

So again, I think it's like going back to what the problem is and then figuring out the toolkit you have to execute it. And structure is a really key part of many of the projects that we're working on.

GRACE LA: And then speaking of structure columns, Mark, what kind of columns should be in the office of the chair? Now that you are departing, what shall we do?

MARK LEE: I like this sound studio idea that you have, Grace. Much better sound insulation would be

GRACE LA: Great. But no ideas on what columns next? So again, for our audience, there are two existing columns in the office of the chair. One is round, does a lot of work. Its structural column. The other is a smaller round column, but it has been encased in a square sheetrock housing. And then Mark added a third triangular column, which is glass. Now, everybody is speculating what should we do? This is a department wide dilemma.

MARK LEE: I have to say, you find the triangle column very useful because it's a nice mirror.

GRACE LA: So we should keep the triangular column. But then one of our colleagues, Andrew Holder, pointed out that there's no room left. So there's no space left for an additional column.

MARK LEE: There is. On the left hand side, you can build it even bigger column.

GRACE LA: OK, so last question then, where are we today when you think about this next generation, obviously, because both of you have this long relationship to teaching to the academy and at the same time exemplary, a dedication to exemplary practice? So when you think, what do we need to do for this next generation in terms of the pedagogical framing of the academy? What are some of the things that come to mind?

I mean, for both of you, I'd love to hear your thoughts. This is like a pressing question as we move on. And as also-- again, you're stepping down as chair, Mark. So both of you have a strong relationship to the GSD. You will never leave us. Your thoughts.

MARK LEE: I remember Mark Eisenberg talked about his own education. And he said, at that time, it was not a very theoretical. It was a very technical. And he said, if there's a student with a Roland Barthes book on his desk, that person is like over the head of everyone else is. And how that has changed a generation later. It made me think about the different preoccupations, whether right or wrong, of each generation of students.

So certainly, there was one period when-- maybe the time when we were in school, theory was very important. Everyone had to read Deleuze. It's de rigueur. Later on, there was a generation that software was very important. So when another generation was so entrenched in software, certain things were lost that maybe what previous generation had read as law.

So I'm curious not only what are the students preoccupied now, but what is the common denominator that ties all this together. And for me, it's really the building-- the scale of the building, the construction of the building. So no matter what disposition, it ends up in the building. And somehow I feel now it's a moment of returning to the building for a while.

We had certain excursions to certain worlds. That's very beneficial. And how can we harvest those speculations, but it needs to be ground back to the building. I'm not saying other mediums are not important, and certainly a lot of other mediums are doing much better work or much more effective work in a much quicker way than architecture. But I think for us, this is the foundation of our métier.

SHARON JOHNSTON: I think in a way my answer would be somewhat similar, but I was going to reflect on a sort of mode of teaching that I've been doing for the last couple studios, which is a collection of buildings across a site. So everybody works on their own building, M there's time in the studio where we're shaping the space between the buildings. There's a sort of urbanism about the result.

And I think what's kind of fascinating about it is that of course, we're all working on some shared themes in the architecture. And I'm in this moment with the students now where I'm asking them to zoom out and meet and talk about ideas that they share across buildings, their understandings of the site, and manifest that in some sort of an urban plan.

And I think the students on the one hand are uncomfortable with it. They say, I've never really thought about that space outside of my building. But the chance to project an architectural idea at a slightly different scale to engage their neighbor and their classmate, where do they have shared values, I think it's incredibly important.

I think there's oftentimes and maybe there's something about professional practice and media that we always want to separate ourselves from each other. We want to know where we are different. And I think the chance to talk about ideas and where we share and what is common and what we can learn from each other in the course of the academy, and even in practice, I think it's incredibly important.

And I observe the students find it really reassuring that they're finding shared values is something that can actually really reinforce their own confidence in the potential of architecture.

MARK LEE: And we may just add to that. I mean, we're in a school where we're three different departments. I sometimes like very simple and maybe at the risk of being simplistic definitions of what actually these different departments-- I think, for me, architecture is about buildings, landscape is about the space between the buildings, and urban design is about a collection of buildings and space between them. Simplistic as it is.

But I think it helps really define what you do best, not to say that we can't be engaged with the others, but I think that gives us a very strong foundation. I think that's the foundation for collaboration. You need to be very strong in what you do that you can contribute to other disciplines or other departments.

GRACE LA: That's very helpful to hear you articulate that. And I think that it is among the many qualities that we have been privileged to have both of you in our context here at the GSD. It's a real pleasure to have your insight in architecture, your grounding, what you bring to the project of architecture, which is actually so felt from the ideas of technique to the sensorial. And I appreciate that spectrum so much. And so I'm really grateful that you would spend this morning with us. Thank you so much.

MARK LEE: Thank you, Grace.

**SHARON
JOHNSTON:** Thank you, Grace.

MARK LEE: Yeah, it was fun.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

GRACE LA: I'm Grace La. And you've been listening to *Talking Practice* from the practice platform of Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. Today's episode was produced by Maggie Janik. Platform research and support was provided by Victor O'Heaney and sound engineering by Jeffrey Vilade of Harvard University's Media Production Center.

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