

Harvard Graduate School of Design | Talking Practice: Scott Cohen

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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 of Architecture and Chair of the Practice Platform. Thank you for listening.

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Joining me today is Scott Cohen, founder and principal of Preston Scott Cohen Inc. and the Gerald M. McCue Professor of Architecture at the GSD. Scott has been teaching at the GSD since 1989 and served as chair of the architecture department from 2008 to '13. His interests encompass a wide range of topics as diverse as projective geometry, American urbanism, and contemporary practice.

The recipient of numerous honors and awards, Scott's significant projects include the Tel Aviv Museum of Art Amir building, the Taiwan Museum of Art, Nanjing Performance Arts Center, and a recent addition to the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan. His 2018 studio at the GSD examined the future of Provincetown's urban morphology in the face of climate change. We're so delighted to have you here, Scott. Welcome.

SCOTT COHEN: Well, thank you.

GRACE LA: I thought that we could begin by talking a little bit about how you arrived at architecture. Tell me a little bit about your beginnings in this field. How did you start?

SCOTT COHEN: Well, if we were to go back to the very beginning, I was an architect beginning at the age of five years old. And actually, that is important, I think, because it meant that I was as Peter Eisenman would say, speaking architecture is a first language from the beginning. I remember he made this very interesting analogy and saying that in graduate schools, we're often teaching architecture as a second language. But anyway.

GRACE LA: So five years old. OK, tell us about that.

SCOTT COHEN: I would say I was around the five. Well, it's a straightforward story, although it has a little bit of a Frank Lloyd Wright ring to it because it was my mother who I was sort of emulating. She wasn't an architect, but she was very interested in it, and she pretty much introduced me through her own sketching and thinking.

We also lived in a wonderful city, Asheville, North Carolina, which happens to be blessed with many incredibly interesting buildings. The most interesting was the Grove Park Inn, which is a building I spent a lot of time in that the swimming pools were all segregated, and Jewish kids couldn't swim in a lot of the pools.

So this was one that was open. The Grove Park Inn had a pool which you could buy a membership of, and I spent an enormous amount of time exploring this enormous building, which is a kind of HH Richardson-esque giant stone. It's a magnificent building, but it's the inside that I was most interested in.

I discovered an incredibly strange atrium in the building. This is a 1913 building that turns out to have an atrium that's almost Bauhaus-like. Very simple, very abstract, very surprising. And you can only get into it by sneaking in. This was only accessible to the guests, and I found a way into it. Anyway, actually, it turns out later I rediscovered this parallel with that actually the Tel Aviv museum's atrium is somehow related.

GRACE LA: So you studied at RISD for your undergraduate degree. How did you arrive there having obviously been thinking about architecture, breathing it from childhood?

SCOTT COHEN: I perceived RISD as a school in a city school. Of course, it's an art and architecture school. I was as interested in art actually, by that moment, and was open to the possibility of moving into art as well. Anyway, I think probably the moment in school that really alerted me to what I became most interested in was when I encountered those texts of very important texts that, even today, still are of Venturi, Tafuri, and Rowe.

And the discourse that emerged during the time I happened to be at the school really was just so vibrant and intense. I mean, during my years, particularly by the time I got to the GSD.

I think I was incredibly lucky to step into the academy when we had arrived to a kind of critical juncture with respect to reflecting on modernism, the critique of it was still very strong. Probably this was just after it had been at its most explosive was probably in the late '70s, but still, it was intense in these early '80s.

GRACE LA: That brings me to another set of questions. It seems that many of our guests or *Talking Practice* have a relationship between the academic world and the professional world, but you are probably one of the few who, let's say, is most profoundly connected to academia. So academia and practice serve as two sides of the same coin. Can you tell us a little bit about the relationship between teaching and practice for you because I think that it relates very well to this question of you having stepped in to architecture at a particular moment in time? And I think it forms you.

SCOTT COHEN: I think that's really the key piece of this for me. I wasn't really inclined to practice at the beginning. I think probably the way in which the discursive dimension had captured my imagination so much, so intensely, and my own interpretations and experiences of buildings which were the root of my love for architecture. Somehow neither of these were leading me to be a practitioner in the conventional sense of that.

In fact, I remember not being able to reconcile what I understood practice to be with the ideas that were sort of coursing through everything that really interest to me. It turned out, of course, I did try to practice briefly in New York, and I luckily managed to get into a position of teaching. At that time, Ohio State, Jeffrey Kipnis invited me to teach, and then I went on to the GSD, not long after that.

But I think what I did to resolve this was to do my own work, my own projects at the time, a number of houses with the idea that they were real and possible to build proposals. Some of them did have a client. I didn't manage to complete them with those clients, but the most important thing to me was to find my own way to synthesize the conceptual problems that were interesting to me with what I understood to be the protocols and the realities of these projects.

I put these houses into actual settings. I thought about them through and through as places for people to live. These were not purely abstract exercises.

GRACE LA: From the moment after teaching at OSU, returning to Harvard, and then thinking about the opening of your own practice, tell us more about that.

SCOTT COHEN: Yes, that is the moment when I had to confront the kinds of thinking I had been doing that were purely speculative with regard to how I would move them into actualization, into building. I knew that Harvard was a different kind of school than most others. I recognized its ties to practice, distinguished it.

Now, I was walking in, though to a very different environment when I came back to the GSD. We had then Rafael Moneo, who was very dedicated to thinking through the material side of the equation. He thought architecture is a building in its solitude. It's the air we breathe when a building is in its solitude.

This wasn't about the conceptualization. It wasn't about all of this argumentation. This was dialectically the opposite side of that discussion. What I had to do then was to overcome the many years until then that I had only thought of architecture. Either, you could say in plastic, formal, spatial or immaterial conceptual terms and material terms.

The shift into practice for me was a shift from the conceptual to the material. First and foremost, of course, I had to wrap my head around a whole set of other things to move into the business of trying to run a real office. So that is another story. But I wasn't prepared to do that at all. But that happens because you have to do it.

GRACE LA: In 2003, you won this major competition for the Tel Aviv project. But you were doing essentially these projects, which were not necessarily built a lot of them up to that point. And then this major commission comes. So please share with us, what did that do to you? [LAUGHS]

I believe in some ways, that's a kind of breakout project for you. And it also began to demonstrate a very unusual trajectory of a person who is really deeply rooted in the academy with this kind of potential to build something real.

SCOTT COHEN: Well, if I were to try to trace back how I arrived to the Tel Aviv Museum, I would probably have to say that the culminating project that launched back project would be the Torus House. It was a project that I designed for a very good friend, a painter, Eric Wolf, who had a lot to do with my interest in these very tight interiors.

And the idea that these congested spatial conditions that we also find in Lowe's and a lot of other buildings that I had always been extremely interested in were the basis for inventing very interesting kinds of plans and configurations of space. But this project also took a different direction insofar as the way it was conceived through modeling at the time. That was, let's say, a breakout issue for me to step out of the projective geometry and into surfaces of a different kind.

And that particular project got a lot of attention. It was an important exhibition called The Unprivate House. Terry Riley had a lot to do with what happened because that really just like exploded. I mean, all of a sudden a lot of people saw it. And even though I had not done anything, I was short listed for the museum in Tel Aviv.

And that's kind of extraordinary, I have to say. These people had quite a lot of courage to let someone like me, as opposed to Gison and Guyer or Sejima or the other shortlisted people do this project, someone with no experience. I think, though, that it had something to do with this interest, not only in these formal and spatial investigations, but in the way the buildings are rooted in the city and rooted in certain institutional protocols.

GRACE LA: Well, the *Lightfall* book in which you write very cogently and copiously about the different processes that made that project occur, really do demonstrate that there were even typological issues that you were dealing with in terms of museums themselves.

And again, I think what separates your work from perhaps the kind of formal project that is absolutely hermetic is that you are drawing into the project very disciplinary specific issues, but then also ones which are grounding it into, as you say, the city or into questions of cultural paradigms and things like that, which I think is really important for your work.

SCOTT COHEN: I think the thing that would encapsulate that would be, for example, early on, I was always interested, as you may know, in the idea of distortion, because any form is recognized through distortion in a very distinctive way that brings consciousness to it. And distortion is also, I thought, somehow in architecture, normally caused. It's not a voluntary thing as it is, for example, in art where one can just voluntarily and peculiarly make something be distorted.

It is inherent. It is somehow born in a problem. And I discovered early that there were a number of buildings that were forced through the site, and predicaments and contradictions to be-- you can argue distorted. And I had been seeking examples of that for years, and one of the main ones was a house I found in Belluno, in Italy.

What happens in the case of Tel Aviv is that owing to the contradictory desire to have flexible and normative galleries and on the one hand and on the other, a very dramatic and spectacular even experience for the public to encounter one another in the realm of the museum. There were two opposing paradigms in play. You could say the Bilbao paradigm and the Museum of Modern Art paradigm, something like that.

And when you're dealing with a small city like this, where these buildings serve many more functions, this is as much a kind of building for education and a lot of other activities as it is a museum.

Anyway, there were contradictions inherent to this type of museum, but also in the site which demanded this very strange overall configuration and discovering a way to solve this, resolve this, or synthesize this. You could even say, motivates this peculiar atrium that's contorted under pressures, as it were. That's what interested me to discover what motivates architecture. Always that has been of interest to me.

GRACE LA: That requires, if I may say, that the kind of observational prowess needs to come first as a kind of baseline condition, to analyze the city and the problem, to understand what it is that is the challenge in any particular given situation. Because you, again, are one of these few people who've really connected academia and practice. How do we teach observational prowess? How can we?

SCOTT COHEN: This is an interesting question. On the one hand, I think you have to draw people into it by what I call reading buildings. That means deeply analyzing them in terms of their typological composition, their spatial sequentiality. And the problems, the inherent contradictions that I've always focused on between, let's say, a demand that the building have a certain hierarchy which isn't possible to execute owing to another demand that it be repetitive and egalitarian.

The hierarchy is needed in some way to move people toward, let's say, a very significant part of it from another part. Whereas the repetition is needed for distributing the resources in the building, the spatial resources in a way, which is fair, equitable, and so forth, whatever. There are a number of pressures that can set into motion, demands that only we can solve with spatial instruments.

But anyway, I think it's about getting inside and really looking at what buildings do and helping people to understand how conceptually exciting it is and how you can actually think the building as the unfolding of, you could even argue a narrative. A relationship to its historical origins and its movement into the present as we understand ourselves today, to recognize that there is something at stake in the arrival to the situation we find ourselves in, and that the building is somehow a testament to that is exciting for students to understand.

As far as the city, first, we have to draw them into the experience of theorizing and articulating thought through the medium of architecture. That, I think, is essential. And as far as recognizing how the city participates in this, it's very much the same for me. The configuration, maybe I am something like Albertine in this sense, because the city is already like architecture in so many ways.

The street is a corridor, and the blocks are all of those spaces that are hidden from view. I mean, just crudely setting this out, the analogy that, of course, Colin Rowe made in collage city. But I'm looking a little bit beyond that when I start to describe, for example, the way in which I find really interesting the problem of architecture when it comes late to the process.

And what I mean by that is if we have a master plan that pre-conceives what will transpire, that this building will go here and it will have this FAR and these numbers of entrants and just the scope of each building has been predetermined, and the master plan absorbs that. That's one thing. And architecture takes its place and correctly participates.

But what I have learned so much from, and maybe it's a good heuristic strategy for teaching, is that there are many examples when a building is needed at a point when a master plan has turned out to have evolved to have, let's say become to some extent obsolete, another plan has come about a greater density has been introduced and the prior plan is not really compatible with the current demand. That's what happened in Bogota. That's what happened in Tel Aviv. That's what happened in the Goldman Sachs canopy project.

I can honestly say probably at least half of the projects we've done have been buildings that were placed within a plan which no longer can govern or properly accept the building that we're being asked to put there. And so we have to reshape the urban context with our building. It becomes catalytic in transforming, even in some of them the infrastructure that's immediately surrounding the building. Certainly the spaces around it.

And it's this rereading or this reinterpreting and this altering and reconfiguring or distortion you could argue of the current urban configuration that the building brings about that makes it so participatory for me. And it alters the way the people are experiencing the city in that place.

GRACE LA:

So let me get into the weeds a little bit on the trajectory of a particular project in the lifespan of its design process. Many projects today undergo a series of value engineering moments, really difficult and tense kind of contractions of either the program or the budget or any number of things. And of course, then you're also working overseas in several of these projects.

So I would love it if you could tell us how do you manage the development of the project when it is under so much pressure to conform to all of these issues. And so I'd love to hear in practical terms, how does one do, especially given the formal ambitions of your work and the kind of formal complexities that you are interested in executing.

How can you manage this? I think this is something that would be very helpful to our audience to hear, because I think that in many ways, your practice is not operating in a corporate model of practice, and yet you have to take on these projects, which tend to go to larger practices. So I'd love to know how are you managing these kinds of moments of friction to realize the projects at the level at which your ambitions desire.

SCOTT COHEN: Well, I think in many of the projects we do when a lot of the best architects do and the value engineering, we obviously set those priorities. We know the thing that matters most, we relinquish certain things, et cetera. But rather than describing it that way, which absolutely is the model that I would suggest for everyone to begin with, I think it would be better to try to explain how we are doing it now.

My partner in the office, Carl Dworkin and I have talked a lot about how the pressures of the budget and the scope are as essentially determinative as the conceptual issues that we begin with. So the variational or the permutational nature of the work for us permits a constant revision in our minds of the possible ways to think the project.

So, for example, when we worked on the Taubman, or now as we work on the synagogue for Beth Shalom in Overland Park, Kansas. These projects have taken many forms, assuming different possible overall scope configurations based on what the constraints of the budget might be. But none of them are compromises. They are different manifestations of the number of interesting contradictions in architectural predicaments.

They all have a particular kind of sequential question. They all have a problematic relationship with the ground that interests me that comes from the theorization that I called successive architecture. They all deal with these questions of projection and distortion. They're all immersed in that. Every version of these projects, we don't see a more limited scope as in any way negative. It's a different project, actually, when you drop it down to a different scale. And that scale has its own questions and opportunities.

GRACE LA: I think that's very fascinating, because you're talking about the kind of philosophical frame of mind with which you need to address these kinds of pressures of choices and framing the problem. When that kind of process needs to recur over and over again. It burns the fee dramatically, and all of a sudden, you find yourself also reworking contractual arrangements in order to support this level of investigation.

And that's a very big challenge. That's the part of practice maybe many of us do not enjoy. But I'm curious to know how the professional side of this assists you in the process. How does it enable this kind of design methodology?

SCOTT COHEN: This is an interesting problem. In terms of this variation on scope, of course, ideally this happens during a conceptual design phase during the fundraising for many of these institutions where we will really jump around and represent to them these different versions of the projects with different scope and so forth.

And it leads to totally different siting strategies or different sequences and forms. There are quite some profound differences between the projects when you're looking at these issues of change in scope now, later when we are dealing with value engineering during the actual design schematic stage. First, let me say, though, that we absolutely insist on getting a cost estimation underway extremely early.

We have pushed to the greatest possible extent to obtain the information as early as we can on all matters that will lead to problems in escalation. We have trouble with that. The field seems to have a kind of intractable issue here, which is that there is a kind of drip, drip of information that's coming along the way. This has something to do with how all of the services of the consultants are delivered over time.

This is sustaining these practices. And of course, for us this is detrimental. We have learned to anticipate a lot of that too. We will jump ahead. We will sometimes announce that we know where we're going to go. We can see the probable outcome of a number of things that normally unfolds in time.

That sometimes can alarm both the client and cause some friction, because people would rather just proceed pleasantly through this process. And we sometimes will just do a design in the middle of everything that short circuits even pre-value engineering, I would argue. And we've had many debates about this. We've had different clients respond in different ways.

Some people think I'm giving in too early. Sometimes I've thought I have done that. I have revealed early my cards. I have said, look, we're heading in a direction where I'm going to have to relinquish this or that, or we're going to revert to another scheme and someone says to me, no, don't show your hand because I think we can fight it out and win the battle with this scheme here, and there will be more money than they're telling us there will be or whatever it is. Hold on, hold off.

You have to make the judgment about where you want to end up and how to call the shots, whether early or late. This is not ever predictable how all of this will turn out. But I have sometimes learned that an early shift. I don't know what you want to call it when you preemptively concede is very useful. And on other occasions, I have regretted, actually, that I prematurely was willing to compromise.

It's an interesting process, but what we want to avoid is the conventional value engineering, where we're cutting into every aspect of the project and you're just seeing a decline in the overall effect.

GRACE LA: So I want to go back to your days as chair of the Department of Architecture, and in particular, one of the last lectures that you delivered as part of your chairmanship, the Gropius Lecture in 2013. And that was actually just before I arrived. So I was not in the audience, but I've studied the lecture. It was entitled Successive Architecture, and I was struck by your extremely cogent summary of the incredible challenge of contemporary practice, what you refer to as vertical secession.

And though that lecture you said was really not about tall buildings per se, you stated that tall buildings are the instigator of many of the problems that we have and that we see now. I thought you could clarify this because, for example, you did mention some of the characteristics of this, the one after another, the non-sequential accumulation. These kinds of challenges that are, again, typified or that we see through tall buildings. And at the end of your lecture, you leave the question a little open. Where are we going? What are we doing?

SCOTT COHEN: I have to tell you something personal. I remember wishing when you arrived to the GSD just after this, that you had been present at the lecture because I wanted you to see it. And so I'm glad you've been able to look back at it. As I understood this problem of succession, it goes to really many of the most fundamental problems we all deal with.

But if I were to look at it more in historical terms, I would say that many of the observations Koolhaas made about the introduction of the elevator are really at the root of this. And that for me, it's not only that, of course, it allows this kind of stacking all of the sectional and all of the vertical movement and the hierarchical diminution as we rise and move laterally, horizontally if you look at a Beaux-Arts plan.

All of those things are canceled and replaced by this utterly repetitive, relentless kind of spatial articulation. But then we have nonetheless these exceptions. There is still the ground floor, there is still the top, and there are these remarkable kind of problems having to do with the fact that the envelope represents that the building is a single entity, while the interior is, of course, a multitude.

I'm interested in reorganizing our thinking around all of those radical differences that it has brought about. And even when we look at short buildings, two, three story buildings, we of course, still have the elevator. We have to have a means to gain access. Accessibility is as significantly transformative. And of course, you know that the ramp Le Corbusier and Wright foresaw to be so significant.

Yeah, it's something many people have been interested in for quite some time as a means to make us experience the communication between spaces that can occur vertically.

GRACE LA: Do you think it's problematic this abolition of hierarchy? The project of architecture delivers a kind of abstraction and non-authorial voice. We see this as a present condition that's quite ubiquitous.

SCOTT COHEN: Well, when I say non-authorial, I think what I mean is that both the technologies and the morphology of this kind of space of stacking of levels is a given. We are required to enter into this, something like a language that we ourselves haven't invented. And to characterize that to give it to draw out its essence in some ways at certain points, or to recognize the problems that it brings to bear on how it should be manifest. This is what we're trying to tackle.

There is a way to analogize this even to certain present day things. I mean, let me reflect on how you just put it when you said that the non-hierarchical nature of it is so deeply problematic. It's the spatial version of the accumulation of images and the arbitrary relationship between the total system through which we recognize this accumulation, or by which this accumulation is delivered to us, the media. The media and all of its particles.

This is the physical, the analog version of that, the skin of the building, which is in an arbitrary relationship or the city in many regards to what is in there in that building. The constant inquiry into how to resolve this, whether it was Le Corbusier's attempt through the 5 points, which, as I have argued, he only really had four, and the fifth was his answer, which was the ribbon window for synthesizing all of it.

That was his idiomatic and distinctive answer to the paradigm that the 4 points represented. The 4 points are a kind of pedagogy by which to understand successive architecture. He's the pedagogue of this paradigm that we're confronting now and then Koolhaas takes the step of understanding it in another way relative to surrealism, relative to what he argues is this idea of the culture of congestion, and so forth.

But I wanted to get at it in another way, architecturally, to see how within it there are problems that have not been mined that architecture actually is continually trying to resolve.

GRACE LA: I guess the question moving forward, if we identify this as a predicament-- a current issue, where will this lead us?

SCOTT COHEN: Well, I have had some thoughts in recent years after the emergence, for example, of the self-driving car, which, of course, is somewhat now in question as to where it's going about the role of transportation in all of this, because actually, the way the city is scaled and the way it's infrastructure is driving, the way we engage with the buildings that are set out in it and the landscape, we are reframing how succession operates.

Because, for example, one of the key ideas in the argument of succession, which in the 5 points [INAUDIBLE] addresses, is the way in which the ground floor is not really the first in the stack of levels. It's actually horizontally bound to the entire site. It is part of the landscape and part of the city.

So if this ground floor is open, accessible, we move laterally through it and it's connected to the context. It has a great deal to do with the way we move vehicularly, for example. So I am interested in looking at what will happen when the way we move about the city vehicularly is altered significantly, if that is going to happen.

The other is this question of sea level rise has spurred me to perceive some other radical changes that may be about to happen, which have to do with the fact that buildings will literally be lifted off the ground, whether temporarily or in response to storm events that could occur.

GRACE LA: This is the subject matter very close to my heart, partly because I believe the exploration of the ground plane, as you know, I'm very interested in Terraform and the question of moving laterally, partly because it is inherently public and it codifies the idea of civic space or civicness, which I think is so important in conversation in our current time, in our political challenges at the moment.

But this dimension of your thinking, which now is transferring over to, for example, the question of Provincetown and the sea level rise and how one moves or transforms the urban morphology in relationship to climate change, for example. This is a fascinating direction for your work to imagine. And you recently taught a studio about this. Maybe you could tell us a little bit more about it.

SCOTT COHEN: In that particular situation, we were looking at how to rethink the morphology of a very specifically shaped city, which is deeply historical and connected to its context. And that becomes, again, a heuristic strategy for students to learn that city and then to have to decompose it and reformulate it under the condition that we now could see that some of the land would be giving way. And the whole setting, which is now a continuous landscape will become a series of islands. It will become kind of an archipelago configuration, and we will have to find a means to reconnect.

We have a long way to go here. We did, I think, arrived to some pretty interesting speculations on how to actually deal with water, the actuality of it rising. But this is just the beginning of a very interesting new direction of exploration. I will mention, though, that when you talk about where we are and where we're going, some of these things I think have been going on, or they have been happening in other ways for a long time.

Even for me personally, it was funny that someone said to me, it looks like you're right back in those houses you did at the beginning. They happened to have been in Florida-- those first houses I did. They were on the West Coast. The house called House on Longboat Key. And there's another one on Siesta Key. And they both are raised one level off the ground with the anticipation that there could be flooding.

And already at that time that was required. And the articulation of that, I resisted at that time, this idea of artificial rolling hills that were masking the reality. And I wanted them sitting right on the ground very classically. And this, by the way, was not well received in those developments where there was a desire to, as I said, camouflage the impending crisis with this picturesque landscape.

This goes to a fundamental question, do we really desire to make everyone confront this reality, or do we develop alternative forms, which are haunted by a more romantic idea of the relationship between architecture and nature? I'm fascinated with both of this, but obviously, probably more guilty of tending toward exposing the problem to people making that part of the work.

GRACE LA: I want to thank you so much for joining us this morning. It seems like we've come full circle talking about your early days, your interest in teaching and the deep connection that these disciplinary issues infuse your practice with a very special kind of translation. I think one that we don't see-- we don't see a lot of practitioners able to sustain this level of academic inquiry at the same time to realize projects in our built environment. It's just been a great joy to have you on *Talking Practice*. Thank you, Scott.

SCOTT COHEN: Thank you so much. It's always a pleasure.

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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 Ronee Saroff and edited by Maggie Janik. Platform research and support was provided by John Wang and sound engineering by Jeffrey Valade of Harvard University's Media Production Center. To hear other episodes in this series, and to find out more about programs and events at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, visit us online at gsd.harvard.edu. Thanks for listening.

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