

## **Laudatio for Reinhold Martin upon awarding him the title of *doctor honoris causa* of the Estonian Academy of Arts**

It is my great pleasure and honour to introduce here today professor Reinhold Martin on the occasion of him being awarded the degree of *doctor honoris causa*. Professor Martin's work has been at the forefront of rethinking architectural history in past decades, opening the discipline to a wider constellation of relations within the humanities and social sciences. He has shown how architects and architectural historians can operate as public intellectuals in the 21st century, contributing to critical discussions in the context of political and economic turmoil. As one of his colleagues has put it, 'he is the social conscience of our field' (Edward Eigen). He is a prolific writer, whose work stands out for the connections it draws between different spheres of knowledge, addressing architectural objects as mediators for infrastructures, social processes, and collectivities. He is a sought-after speaker in professional and public forums, whose talks weave, with extraordinary skill, theoretical abstractions and ideas with surrounding material circumstances.

I

Reinhold Martin is Professor of Architecture at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation and director of the Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture. Also at Columbia, he chairs the Society of Fellows in the Humanities and is a member of the Committee on Global Thought. Trained as an architect first at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, New York, he then earned a graduate diploma from the Architectural Association in London and a doctorate from Princeton University in 1999, with a thesis titled *Architecture and Organization, USA c. 1956*. He was a partner in architecture office Martin/Baxi architects, with Kadambari Baxi, until 2008. In 2000 he founded the scholarly journal *Grey Room*, together with Felicity Scott and Branden Joseph. In 2003 he published his first monograph, titled *The Organizational Complex: Architecture, Media and Corporate Space* (by MIT press).

Analysing the world of American corporate architecture in the postwar decades, the book approached architectural history as media history, bringing together

technical systems of organization, like the curtain wall, with discourses of organization, such as cybernetics, and images that organised vision in new ways, showing how this organizational complex was an aesthetic extension of the power networks of the military-industrial complex.

In 2010, he published *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again* analysing the role of postmodern architectural discourses in the dissolution of utopian thought during the 1970s and 1980s. Postmodernism was shown as a means of naturalizing standpoints that reorganized the field of architecture towards an autonomous withdrawal from politics, closing down certain directions of practice, like that of public housing. At the same time, the phantoms or ghosts of utopia were convoked not simply as past powers, but as active forces shaping present conditions.

In 2016 he published *The Urban Apparatus: Mediapolitics and the City*, a series of theoretical essays that propose thinking about the city through its material infrastructures and discursive networks thereby allowing us to recognize its political, economic and social functioning.

Through his publications and editorial work at the Grey Room, Martin has professed a shift in architectural thought away from the primacy of cultural meaning to an understanding of built works as constituted through material mediations, networks and infrastructure. Architecture is in thus analysed not so much in terms of how it is represented or reproduced in mass media but as itself „one media among many“. Influenced by German media theory, this methodological turn has taken history writing from investigations of media and technology as cultural metaphors towards an understanding of their active role as mediating infrastructures, as preconditions for cultural form rather than simply its effects. As Reinhold has described these mediating structures in an interview, ‘these include but are not limited to the materials from which a building is assembled, the economic factors and systems of production that shape it, the social bodies that pass through it.’ (Thresholds 40, p. 19)

In parallel with his academic writings, Reinhold has authored books and articles that more directly address the changing political relevance of architectural practice in the contemporary world. In 2007 he published together with his partner Kadambari Baxi *Multi-National City: Architectural Itineraries*, an account of corporate globalization in districts of Silicon Valley, New York and New Delhi, alongside their critical architectural interventions. In 2012 he published together with Barry Bergdoll *Foreclosed: Re-Housing the American Dream*, a catalogue of an eponymous exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art NY in 2011, that invited five architectural teams to envision new housing for the suburbs, in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. In 2015 he co-edited (with Jacob Moore and Susanne Schindler) a report on the research project *The Art of Inequality: Architecture, Housing and Real Estate* analysing the ways in which real estate development governs the housing system thereby demystifying the ways in which architecture participates in the process of 'designing' inequality.

This public-oriented work also includes his numerous critical articles in architectural magazines and webzines (including *Places Journal*), tackling subjects like the architect's role in the Occupy movement, the housing question or the spatial setting of the rise to power of white nationalist populism in US.

## II

At this point, I want to pause to note Reinhold's connections with our academy, where his professional activities mix with personal historical trajectories. In fact, it was Reinhold's father, Reinhold Ilmar Martin Senior, who in the late 1990s first made contact with the Academy of Arts. Born in Tallinn in 1923, he had lived here till 1944 when their family left the country first to Hamburg and then to the United States. Back for a visit in 1997 he found his way to the Academy building in Tartu, looked up the architecture department on the 3rd floor and started a conversation there with the then dean of the faculty, professor Veljo Kaasik. Discovering soon that both of them had graduated from the same high school, Tallinn Reaalkool, Reinhold Martin Senior in 1942, Veljo Kaasik in 1957, Martin Senior also told Veljo about one of his sons, who was an architect and who he wanted to have contacts with Estonia. So in Veljo's subsequent visit to the US, he

made contact with Reinhold Martin Junior, resulting in a study trip with students from Columbia to Tallinn in 2000. These first relations with the Academy were followed by many more in the 2000s, when several architectural historians from Tallinn found their way to Reinhold's office in Columbia University, including Mart Kalm, Martin Melioranski, Epi Tohvri, Ingrid Ruudi, Maros Krivy, and myself; returned by Reinhold's visits to Tallinn, including a talk at our open lecture series in 2014.

Thus, while preparing for the 2018 European Architectural History Network conference in Tallinn with the conference scientific committee, we could not imagine a better person to invite to give the concluding keynote than Reinhold, whose unprecedented speech at the event contributed greatly to the conference's success.

In this closing speech, which exemplified his skill at bringing together local materialities with abstract ideas, he spoke among other things about the position of the discipline of architectural history in the contemporary world. According to him it is a minor discipline compared to other disciplines, 'tiny compared to the legions of other humanists' or social scientists, whose writings contribute in significant ways to architectural debates. 'Still, there are advantages to working in a minor field. For, I would suggest that as a whole, and despite its periodic conservatism, architectural history in its current form is an insurgent discipline, a discipline with very little to lose, and therefore able to take certain risks that, if navigated carefully, promise abundant rewards.'

Which brings me to my final point, why we are here in the first place.

Although the practice of granting honorary degrees has been part of university traditions in Europe for centuries, the Academy of Arts awarded its first honorary degrees only in 1999, while celebrating its 85th anniversary. The factual reasons for this decision remain for future historians to discover, but it in many ways reflected the growing competitiveness of higher education, which demanded universities to compete for ever-greater visibility in the global academic market. But I want to believe that it also indicated, in turn, a growing need to position

oneself in the field intellectually, not to say ideologically, a means of taking a stand – by who we chose to honour – counter to circumstances that increasingly favoured fast-paced technical skills rather than critical thinking or reflection.

Among the first honorary doctorates of the Academy was Ilya Kabakov, a Russian artist best known for his total installations, but who started his career in the 1960s illustrating popular-science magazines and children's books, using this medium later as a platform for his own conceptual drawings. The other person given their degree that day was professor Boris Bernstein, an art historian and theorist who had come to Tallinn in 1951 from Leningrad, as it would have been impossible for him as a Jewish person to find professional work there. Bernstein became a leading art theorist in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s combining semiology and communication theory in his studies on art typologies and the art world. What I find interesting however, is that both these figures could be seen as minor – in a sense how Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari speak about minor literature (and I believe this is also in the background of Reinhold's understanding of minority) – Bernstein, as a Jewish person living in Estonia and writing on (often ideologically unorthodox) Estonian art in Russian; Kabakov, interpreting children's illustrations and drawing conceptual albums in coloured pencil in the context of the traditional hierarchies of the Soviet art system. But it was precisely this minor position that allowed them to revolutionise their field – to 'take certain risks' and to reap 'abundant rewards'; thereby changing the canon of their respective fields in fundamental ways.

Standing here 20 years later, when many of the afore mentioned pressures on higher education have only intensified – to which must be added mounting nationalism and populism – the critical positioning of oneself in the public is even more urgent. Awarding new doctorates today, it is then not only our honour but also our responsibility to take the work of the recipients seriously, commending those who teach the means of excavating power, for example, by 'breaking specific buildings and spaces open, [by looking] inside the walls as well as between them' (RM, *Texte zur Kunst*, p. 76) and stand as public intellectuals, resisting a comfortable retreat to the private sphere.

It is my privilege to present you for conferral of the degree of *doctor honoris causa* of the Estonian Academy of Arts – *Eesti Kunstiakadeemia audoktor*, professor Reinhold Martin.

Andres Kurg

31 October 2019