

# NADER TEHRANI

## *Between the Figure and Configurations*

SAID Interview

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Nader Tehrani is Dean of The Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture at The Cooper Union and principal of NADAAA, a practice dedicated to the advancement of design innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and an intensive dialogue with the construction industry.

Christoph Klemmt: There is a long list of very creative and beautiful projects that you have completed and among them are many highly complex free-form geometries. However, it appears that your recent work has become significantly more straight and orthogonal. Is architecture's blob and parametric movement coming to an end?

Nader Tehrani: My interest, over the years, has not been in complex free-form geometries, per se, but rather the role of "figuration" in architecture. The presence of the 'figure' can be seen in the Tavolone, in Casa La Roca, or MOMA Fabrications: the first example entails orthogonal elements, the second features ruled surfaces on the garden wall, and the latter is composed of facets which are seen as flat from a certain perspective, but in fact is quite complex three dimensionally. My interest in the figure is three-fold: the ability of form to perform from a structural point of view (Casa La Roca and its serpentine organization), for it to release sematic affiliations (Tavolone and the 'table' as allegorical figure), or for it to establish a critical relationship with representation itself (MOMA Fabrications and its anamorphic projection). To this end, the figure plays on multiple levels of architectural culture, and is not invested in geometry as the sole basis for engagement.

This intellectual project has more recently extended itself into both Dortoire Familiale and the NH House, both of which have clear typological roots, while also transformed spatially, geometrically and morphologically in substantially complex ways. This is also true for the roof of the Daniels Building, whose figure is brought together by the confluence of structural, hydrological and daylighting considerations. Other projects like the MSD suspended studio, Entrelac in Amman, and the Catenary Compression installation in Boston involve complex arrays of figural engagements that fulfill geometric, structural and integrative commitments.

I am not a devotee of the blob, nor parametricism, but both have been absorbed sufficiently into architectural culture to the point that they have become conventionalized, maybe to the limits of banality. For this reason, we need to pose questions of architecture that have a wider and more complex conceptual reach.

As architects we become mediators between aesthetic considerations and our client's needs and budget, while in our education we are encouraged to develop our own identity and style that a building should reflect. How are you managing to achieve this so well in your projects?

I am not certain I agree with your characterization of the dichotomy between professional and academic commitments. I do not necessarily see client considerations of budget or aesthetics as a liability, nor the desire for an architect's identity/style as relevant.

Our process of design engages the particularities of client culture, the local construction industry, and economic forces as a central part of our research – I hope in a speculative way that advances the intellectual project of architecture. For this reason, you

can see many different material explorations, spatial and typological configurations, as well as an array of iconographic commitments in the work. I do not think our work requires a stylistic consistency, or a singular authorship, as such; maybe what comes through is a 'sensibility' that is driven by some of our intellectual biases – the very things that sponsors our research agendas.

If, at the end, we are able to overcome the apparent dichotomies between the professional and academic world, then it might be because we do not set them in opposition to begin with: we see an imperative to construe budgets as the basis for invention, as much as we see the conceptual aspects of academic advancement conversant with the political context within which they become relevant.

What role does contemporary architectural theory play for the profession? Are our academic endeavors still relevant?

There are many platforms for ideas today, and maybe what characterizes theory in this day is the sheer proliferation of ideas, debates and discourses. The academic platform is particularly relevant today because of the means through which individual voices have gained a wider audience through the Internet. Students and young architects have gained unprecedented intellectual range due to their access to information and knowledge, and in turn, they have developed their agency as a result of the very same means. My particular interest is in the way in which material explorations—in the academy—have impacted the means and methods of construction, bottom up, in the construction industry; our ability to restructure innovation in the building industry is a result of this process. We have seen analogous advances in other academics' work, whose research is beginning to impact practice: Laura Kurgan and her work on data research and mapping, David Benjamin and his work at the intersection of biology



and material sciences. To this end, we might consider what constitutes theory today, which theory, whose theory, and what its relationship is to intellectual practices beyond the terms of its own realm.

The dream of Modernism to change our society through architecture is mostly regarded as unsuccessful. Should we stop to try to solve the world's problems and instead concentrate on being an art form and a service industry?

I am not sure it is productive to argue for architecture as an art form, nor a service industry. Invariably, the discipline, and its practices bring both into conversation, among a range of others issues, which involve community engagement, the redefinition of the public realm, the infusion of invention (from the academic realm) back into practice. The question is not whether we should 'dream to change society through architecture', but the fact that it is inevitable: the conceptualization and construction of our environment is a central aspect for what forms our consciousness as beings, and in turn, it is also the very phenomenon that has led us into the age of the Anthropocene. If we begin to accept our accountability on the one hand, and gain our agency on the other, it can only thicken the plot of what it means to be an architect.

In a lecture of yours at the University of Cincinnati you talked about the development of ornament and structure in traditional Iranian architecture and how the ornament lost its non-aesthetic functionality over time. What do you think is the relationship between structure and ornament in architecture today?

In my lecture, I mapped out the transition between structure and ornament from the Seljuk to the Safavid and the Qajar periods. By the Qajar period we witness the emergence of tile work, which is completely dis-engaged from the structural core that we see in the prior periods. Though unrelated, by extension, what is maybe the most radical shift in recent history is the evolution of the 'rain screen' system of waterproofing, which has effectively disengaged the elemental functions of roofs, drainage systems, walls and sills from their traditional vocation of having to repel water in varied ways. In the rain screen system, all the technical function is suppressed to the realm of an underlay, such that the expression of the outer skin may play out its tectonic representation in accordance with alternative narratives, outside of any faithfulness to their discrete function.

Once we are able to 3-d print varied materialities in a thickened wall section—effectively to overcome the laminar wall section that currently characterizes the discrete differences between insulation, sheathing, vapor barrier, and external skin—we can yet imagine a completely different conceptual approach to the question of structure and ornament.

The question of structure and ornament remains somehow relevant if seen against the backdrop of a certain ethic in architecture: the reciprocity between the interior and exterior, the representational commitment to integration, and the discipline of part to whole thinking, all of which produce substantial challenges to the architect. But without this type of 'friction', I would say the relationship between structure and ornament becomes somewhat of a moot issue.

In our highly globalized society, what role does an architect's cultural background play?

Neither our local or global identity can guarantee the relevance of our instrumentality. The architect's ability to channel irreducible forms of intelligence we bring to the equation is what is at stake. We tend to see things from a different vantage-point, to the extent that forms of representation, or generative thinking, can visualize different types of questions that cannot be posed through words alone. That is the cultural backdrop we bring to society—something that others cannot.

You are not only very successful as a practitioner but also in academia as the Dean of Cooper Union's School of Architecture. Do you think our education does justice to the needs of the profession and to the continuous development of the building industry?

Insofar as education can provide for a space of learning that is speculative, critical and open to transformation, we can continue to imagine the function of a school to achieve more than preparing students for skills that are on the verge of obsolescence. Our relevance can be measured, in part, on how our agency becomes central to the evolution of the policies that guide our environment. For this reason, I think of the educational environment as a space of play, to some degree, to tease out ways of thinking, such that we may pose questions of the world that others may not be able to visualize. The building industry plays only one small part of that equation.

You mentioned at a lecture at the University of Cincinnati how you struggled at the beginning of your career to start your architectural office. What are your recommendations for today's graduates that find themselves in the same situation?

Today's graduates have a very different environment from which to launch their careers. Technologies of varied kinds gives them an entirely different reach as basis for a launch. My recommendation for graduates today might be to define their 'project' with clarity, and then have the courage to take a risk for it.

When we launched our careers, we did not have the financial stability of a back-up system. Nor did we have any special cultural connection to the United States. We had the wealth of education, and just enough confidence to allow failure as basis for the launch.

I was curious if you would like to recommend to our readers an architect, an author, a musician or similar who you value highly but who you think is not recognized as much as he or she should be?

Protagonists of various kinds come and go in and out of focus, and some come back again for reconsideration. My current preoccupation is with Italian architect, Luigi Caccia Dominioni (well known in Milano, but lesser known internationally), with the writings of Robin Evans which remain as relevant today as when we were students, and the emerging work of composer Suzanne Farrin.