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Introduction: architectural lineaments — adventures through the work of Peter Wilson

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This special issue of *The Journal of Architecture* has its beginnings in a symposium that was organised jointly by Drawing Matter and the Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, and held in Edinburgh between 9 and 10 April 2018. Recent accessions to the Drawing Matter collection had included drawings and sketchbooks by Peter Wilson, such as his 1998 *Eurolandschaft — A Dérive*, drawn in a Japanese concertina sketchbook,¹ and it seemed an opportune time to linger with his work. The aim was to take a long view, revisiting the drawings, texts, and projects in order to explore continuities and transformations across them, and to examine, with a new closeness of attention, their force and consequence. Considerations thus spanned from Wilson's early speculative projects through those developed during his long-standing collaboration with Julia Bolles, which started in 1980 and that led, with the award of the competition for the New City Library in Münster in 1987, to the establishment of what would in due course become known as Bolles + Wilson, as the practice continues to be called. While the symposium — and this is reflected in this special issue — was especially interested in questions of drawing, it was so in their connection to architectural thinking and the way that graphic techniques inform and shape processes of design. The intention throughout was to reflect upon the interrelationship between Wilson's drawings and writings, and the designs that he has developed both individually and collaboratively.

Born in Australia, Wilson studied at the University of Melbourne before travelling to London in 1971 to join the Architectural Association (AA), which he entered the following year — a period explored in the first part of the extended interview printed in this issue. Although the school was in a precarious state, in the grip of a funding crisis that had threatened its independent status, this was, at the same time, a significant moment of transformation that released great energy. Wilson's arrival in London had coincided with the appointment of Alvin Boyarsky — whose celebrated unit system was introduced at the start of Wilson's second year at the school — to the newly established role of AA chair.² Studying with

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Dalibor Vesely, and then Elia Zenghelis and Léon Krier, Wilson subsequently acted as a teaching assistant to Zenghelis, before going on to lead his own studios — first in the Intermediate School and then through his influential Diploma Unit 1, whose work was documented in AA publications such as *The Clandeboye Report* and *Informing the Object*.³

Even as a student, Wilson exerted — especially through his drawings — a significant influence upon the culture of the AA, one that had a visible effect on other teachers and units and that would, in time, be exported to other schools. Although Wilson tended to describe his earlier work in terms of a Bachelardian-inflected project to remythologise architecture, and in a sense established an image of what that might look like, what seems striking is the degree to which it absorbed, and was responsive to, diverse — and perhaps even conflicting — discourses circulating within the school. On the one hand, it was clearly invested in typological ideas (one reason why bridge and ship came to such prominence within the work, for example, was surely because they could both be thought of as simultaneously type and metaphor); on the other hand, these were filtered through an interest in the contingencies of situation and context, a tension that in turn seemed to echo through the way Wilson developed his thinking around abstraction and figuration, and what he described as ‘frame and adjacency’. Certainly, Wilson’s earlier projects tend to be recognisable and coded in typological terms, while at the same time being made particular through their intimation of some immanent narrative, a sense often provoked by the depiction of modes of abandonment, destruction, or incompleteness. This was work that unfolded within an allegorical atmosphere. We recognise that in the Bird House, as well as the first Villa Auto project, which is sited within the ruins of the Neoclassical Powerscourt House in County Wicklow, Ireland. But it is also there in a number of the ‘bridgebuildings’ and ‘shipshape’ projects collected in the AA box folio publication of the same name, and in the *Gesamkunstwerk*-like Blackburn House in London, completed in 1980 with Julia Bolles under the name The Wilson Partnership.

The success of the practice’s entry to the Münster competition led to a phase shift in the work. Two years later, in the wake of the library commission, the two architects moved to the city, founding the Architekturbüro Bolles-Wilson. These years also saw the beginning of a period of intensive engagement with Japan, fostered through AA circles and figures such as Toyo Ito, Arata Isozaki, and the architectural writer Akira Suzuki, whose house Wilson would come to design. For Wilson, this included the celebrated winning entry for the 1988 Shinken-chiku competition, the Suzuki House in Tokyo, and a number of unrealised projects, as well as the design of a folly for the 1990 International Garden and Greenery Exposition in Osaka, all published in the influential AA monograph *Western Objects Eastern Fields* (1989).

Since then, Bolles + Wilson have, from their Münster base, won more than thirty first prizes in competitions, realising buildings and major urban planning projects that include the Luxor Theatre, Rotterdam (1996–2001), the Falkenried Masterplan, Hamburg (1999–2004), Monteluce Quarter, Perugia (2006–

present), and the recently completed National Library of Luxembourg (BNL). Some have remained unbuilt, most notably their 2001 competition-winning design for the European Library of Information and Culture (BEIC) in Milan. Bolles + Wilson's ongoing work in Albania, where they are acting almost in the role of municipal designers, is a remarkable and perhaps unique contemporary instance of urban design across scales, which ranges from colour and signage to urban landscape, architecture, and city planning.

While the articles in this special issue are generally arranged chronologically in relation to the material with which they deal, this sequence is bracketed by two papers that take their cue from Peter Wilson's *Some Reasons for Travelling to Italy* (2016) — a book which is part picture gallery, part memoir, and part anthology of stories that have themselves become possessed as memories through their absorption and retelling. The opening piece by Izabela Wiczorek offers 'Some Reasons for Talking About Peter Wilson', giving us what she describes as a 'transversal reading' of an array of preoccupations and motifs that underlie the work and reoccur throughout it. On the other side of the collection, Kurt Forster gives us the wonderful characterisation of Wilson as a traveller-collector, suitcase brimming with acquired shadows — an image that resonates with Wilson's painting *De Chirico's Suitcase* (2011). In this, the artist's scenes appear as miniatures painted on blocks, as if remade by Wilson himself, nestled within a map-lined interior that depicts the Alpine crossing over which, according to Wilson, De Chirico carried the shadow back to Italy.⁴

Beginning (and, in a way, ending) with one of Wilson's drawings held in the Alvin Boyarsky collection — 'Auto' Windows (1980), a drawing involving cigarette papers, whose origins seem to lie in the project for the burned-out Powerscourt House — Nicholas Boyarsky sets off on the trail of correspondences between Wilson's Villa Auto projects of the late 1970s and the conditions of self-representation and play with masks that animated much of his work in the period. Following this, Adrian Hawker explores the 1985 Accademia Bridge project for Venice through a close reading that examines both its evolution and its position in Wilson's work, and stresses the complex relationality of elements as articulated through the particular conceptual vocabulary developed by the architect. Next, Mark Dorrian considers the Japanese projects from the second half of the 1980s, using Wilson's entries for the 1978 and 1988 Shinkenchiku competitions to theorise the transformation in his work across this period. We stay in Japan for Annalise Varghese's paper, which focuses upon Bolles + Wilson's folly for the exposition in Osaka in 1990, reflecting on the relation and tension between the notion of 'emptiness' that motivated the project, and the way it was photographically represented. Next, we join Lars Lerup in the Netherlands, who leads us around Bolles + Wilson's Luxor Theatre in an urban perambulation that moves between land and water, velocities and viewing positions, site histories and developments in Rotterdam in the wake of the devastations of World War II. From there we pass to Albania, where Elisabetta Terragni — architect of *The House of Leaves: The Museum of Secret Surveillance* in Tirana, located in the former headquarters

of the Sigurimi, the state secret service agency — uncovers, in a witty and delicately poised yet powerful reflection, the ‘file’ of Wilson’s recent activities in the city.

These are all ‘adventures through the work of Peter Wilson’, as the title of this special issue has it. The presence of the word ‘adventures’ here marks a kind of limit, but at the same time an absence of one. While, on one hand, a limit exists because this is in no way an exhaustive or complete survey (and makes no claims to be), on the other, precisely because of this condition, it has, at the same time, a porosity and open-endedness. These adventures are things that are, ultimately, perhaps not so much encounters or explorations *of* the work than *with* it. Taken together, the contributions to this special issue offer a series of diverse and eloquent demonstrations of the power of Peter Wilson’s richly articulated and complex productions to grant places, opportunities, and occasions for thought.

Notes and references

1. See Peter Wilson, ‘Eurolandschaft Dérive’, *Drawing Matter*, 1 April 2018 <<https://drawingmatter.org/eurolandschaft-derive/>> [accessed 15 June 2021].
2. Igor Marjanović gives a useful account of the circumstances around Boyarsky’s appointment in his introduction to *Drawing Ambience: Alvin Boyarsky and the Architectural Association*, ed. by Igor Marjanović and Jan Howard (St Louis, MO: Mildred Lane Kemptner Art Museum, 2014), pp. 23–57.
3. Peter Wilson, *The Clandeboye Report: Contemporary Options for Clandeboye, County Down, Ulster*. Projects by Students at the Architectural Association, London, 1983–85 (London: Architectural Association, 1985); Peter Wilson, *Informing the Object: Projects from Diploma Unit 1, 1981–5* (London: Architectural Association, 1986).
4. Peter Wilson, ‘To Re-Import a Shadow’, in *Some Reasons for Travelling to Italy* (London: Architectural Association, 2016), pp. 170–71.