



Sylvia Lavin

**CONVERSATIONS  
OVER COCKTAILS**

On 12 March 2004, Alejandro Zaera-Polo gave a lecture at UCLA, formidable for the sheer number of projects shown. When, after two hours, Alejandro realized the audience had grown fatigued with the relentless appearance of yet another new project, he concluded, putting his PowerPoint on *organize* to give us a behind-the-scenes glimpse of how much he was *not* going to show. The quantity of work was staggering, impressive and numbing, and Alejandro offered the audience a series of metaphors as a way to organize this massive oeuvre: the filmstrip, the palm tree, the bullet wall, and so on. In fact, with typical acumen, he suggested that FOA's rapid expansion into corporate professionalism turned out to involve not the typical problems of how to make money or invent new structure but rather a problem of discourse: how to talk to clients. Alejandro's answer was by means of metaphors that clients can grasp and that architects can use as a shill, distracting the

client's attention from the real work of the project. Oddly, however, these supposedly purely instrumental metaphors remained the dominant feature of his discourse to the UCLA audience composed not of clients but of students, peers and colleagues. What had apparently begun as a matter of expedience had become the thing itself, and I pointed out during the Q&A what I thought was at least a category mistake. Alejandro has given this lecture at other institutions, other critics have responded and a conversation on this issue has since developed.

My particular discussion with Alejandro has continued in a series of e-mails, of which my first to him (in part prompted by his unnecessary apology that the lecture was 'messy') was as follows: 'The lecture was fantastic. The work is impressive, some of it profound. My comments about the issue of metaphor were not a criticism but a provocation. For me, it is important both

**Quaderns : CONVERSATIONS OVER COCKTAILS :**  
Sylvia Lavin

88  
APRIL 2005  
245 : Q 5.0

theoretically and in terms of allegiance with our generation, that moving into significant production not be perceived as a turn away from theoretical investigation. You did not suggest that you rejected the field's theoretical turn of the last 20 years but nor did you exactly admit to the fact that practice hardly evades theory but rather enriches and makes extraordinary new demands of its capacities.

The question of metaphor is particularly thorny in this, let me say, post-theory context. I agree that the new pace of production and the demand to sell practice must be confronted. And I even see how analogies, metaphors or perhaps, better in today's parlance, branding, might be serviceable instruments for talking to clients. Yet neither the fact nor the impact of metaphor's association with an older and outdated model of signification should be minimized. For you to use a metaphor today is an act of recuperation, however cunning

or ironic you are in this recovery. And in my opinion, metaphors aren't useful enough – they are inadequate pretexts for driving or justifying a project – to compensate for the appearance of retrograde, sentimental attachments to meaning, to the logic of identity and to the regime of appearance they bring, at least for now. Moreover, while only marginally useful in practical terms, metaphors remain powerful traps that lure one into believing in the transparency of language such that, particularly when instrumentalized, metaphors camouflage their role in rhetoric to falsely colonize the realm of truth. Anyway, these were thoughts that I hoped might intrigue or help you – but they were certainly not meant to make you feel that I hadn't appreciated the lecture or you.'

A critic must fall in love with her subject and I, obviously, found Alejandro's metaphors to be something of a turn-off, not quite intellectually seductive or aesthetically

exciting. And while a critic is not a client, most architects would like their clients to love them, again and again, so the allure of architect-speak is of both critical and professional urgency. Since moving from the realm of abstract invention to material realization – a practical turn taken at high speed by FOA but a turn that belongs to their generation as a whole – is a theoretical problem rather than a natural development, the turn pivots on the need for seductive speech. In this sense, my failure to be seduced is a symptom of the field's need to develop new modes of speech that can work within rather than against the contemporary exigencies of advanced practice.

The field needs a new book of rules – not *Robert's Rules of Order* but *The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr Right*. The first rule for how to successfully hook a client might be to take him/her out for a drink. The public and

# Quaderns : CONVERSES ACOMPANYADES DE CÒCTELS : Sylvia Lavin

89  
ABRIL 2005  
245 : Q 5.0

journalistic attacks on the obscurantism of architectural jargon, once something to be resisted as evidence of anti-intellectualism and misrecognition of architecture as discipline, should now be understood as warning signs that architects have misjudged what is potentially a new audience and a new ally. As it turned out, '1776' won the World Trade Center, not Libeskind. If, in other words, professional practice is not the obvious solution but the difficult problem, then architecture must consider learning the new vulgate, turning Alberti's Latin into contemporary Spanglish, as one of its most pressing, immediate, theoretical and self-advancing concerns.

So when you're drinking with your client, rule number two would be: Don't serenade them with metaphors and poetry or you risk turning into Libeskind (whose metaphor may have opened the door but only onto what for him turned out to be an empty

room). Equally risky however is the language of data and analysis (since calculations are always vulnerable to interpretation and, worse, falsifiability). Seduce them with appealing images of truth that have no logic of verifiability, or truth, or even of use. Some examples might include the theme building at LAX – it has no particular theme and stands for nothing; what Boullée called the architecture of shadows, which used the murkiness of monochromia to produce the evanescence of feeling-states; or Andy Warhol, who disdained calling his *Shadows* paintings, insisting rather that they be understood as 'disco décor'.

Seduction depends on this kind of loose fit between the aesthetics of a project (its harnessing of the affective sensorium in both speech and design) and its intellection. Without it, speech is neither expedient nor seductive but rather only justificatory and hence prey to both the false convergence of

meaning and form claimed by metaphor and the false verifiability claimed by the 'real'. When Alejandro describes the windows in the police station as being 'like bullet holes', his language causes the abstract pattern of apertures to look like a spray of bullets. And while there may be some irony in suggesting that the police station is a target, the holes, when forced through this metaphor to resemble windows, only achieve the faintly ridiculous verisimilitude of a toupee. There may be good hair and bad hair, but toupees – which are like hair, they are metaphorical hair – are by definition unappealing and against all rules of seduction. The Tenerife Tower might have first been called a Palm Tree in order to encourage the client to appreciate its novel skin, but the metaphor became a self-fulfilling prophecy that overwhelmed the design with the will to identify and the project now looks – well, like a palm tree. Talking to your clients indeed

## Quaderns : CONVERSATIONS OVER COCKTAILS : Sylvia Lavin

90  
APRIL 2005  
245 : Q 5.0

requires a new type of conversation, but a return to symbols, meanings and metaphors (a structural counterpart to charts and datascares and graphs) doesn't add to the ecology of either the discourse or the design: somewhere, a frog becomes extinct when its palm tree turns out just to be another classical column in disguise.

Metaphor-mongering is cheap rather than loose talk. Looseness of fit is essential to seductive conversation because it permits the possibility of difference between the speaker and the auditor (whether the dialogue taking place is between architect and client, architect and critic, or architect and self.) The scene of love, according to Badiou, is the space of two. And while conversations over cocktails can be just as pleasurable with a client as with a critic or with oneself, they are always at their best when they don't observe distinctions between evidence and speculation but rather harness extreme

rhetorical form to make even the most baseless rumor seem not true but plausible. FOA's intelligence and professionalism is enough to whet any critic's appetite and I admire their deadpan hyper-rationalism in particular. These assets give FOA the keenness to understand that new forms of imageability must be invented but it also obliges them to avoid old forms of iconicity. I'd like to think that the Tenerife Tower will not inevitably become a monumental palm tree in the skyline and will instead start behaving like a fishnet stocking, something never looked at directly but only glimpsed, and that the building will harness this illusive oscillation between object and image to offer a highly effective and always seductive performance.

**Quaderns : CONVERSEES ACOMPANYADES D**  
**CÒCTELS : Sylvia Lavin**