INTERVIEW WITH NADER TEHRANI, NEW DEAN OF ARCHITECTURE

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The Cooper Pioneer *sat down with Nader Tehrani, the new Dean of Architecture to ask him questions about the current situation with the administration.*

The Cooper Pioneer: Where are you from? What can you tell us about you?

Nader Tehrani: I am from Iran. I was born in London, grew up in Pakistan, South Africa, Iran, Italy, England and, of course, the U.S. So I come from a heterogeneous background. I've been teaching for more than twenty-five years, in a variety of institutions including the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Georgia Institute of Technology. The Cooper Union has always been among the best in American education, so I knew this was an opportunity I should not miss.

TCP: When did you realize that you would dedicate yourself to architecture professionally?

NT: I knew I was headed this way in high school, after it became intuitively clear that I was not targeting a future in business or in medicine, for instance. I took a course in art and architectural history with a great teacher named Blanche Hoar, who situated the cultural and social backdrop of architecture. For me, that was fascinating, and he encouraged me to apply to RISD.

A short visit to RISD struck a real chord for me because I witnessed a different form of scholarship there than I had seen anywhere else. You essentially see students playing and I couldn't imagine that that could be my future workplace. Right from there, I was hooked.

TCP: Where were you educated?

NT: I attended RISD from 1981 until 1986. After that, I went to the Architectural Association in London for their History and Theory program, a one-year post graduate program. Following that, I got my Master of Architecture in Urban Design (MAUD) from Harvard's Graduate School of Design.

TCP: When did you start teaching?

NT: I started teaching in 1992, at Northeastern University. I graduated from Harvard in 1991, and then RISD the following year, so it just sort of incrementally grew out of that first step. I wasn't planning on being a teacher; I thought it was an exciting step to remain a student. It was an extension of my education.

TCP: I am aware you founded an architecture firm, *Office dA*. Can you tell me about that?

NT: *Office dA* really is an extension of thinking, exploration, and experimentation. At the time I launched my practice as well as my teaching career, the two worlds were seen as very far apart. Practitioners criticized academia for being too insular, and academia thought that the world of practice was too conservative. Meanwhile, there was something in the academic realm that we found was really lacking: a focus on materiality. There was a lack of knowledge about the built environment, and a lack of speculation and theorization of the building industry.

Our early work, both academic and practical, was focused on innovative ways of conceptualizing the means and methods of fabrication. We were looking at radicalizing standard means of construction with new geometries and new structural systems. These became something that we could import back into schools, not as conservatism, but to change the pedagogy of the time.

TCP: Speaking of pedagogy, can you comment on the work of former Dean Hejduk at Cooper Union? What do you think of the pedagogy established by him almost fifty years ago?

NT: The legacy of Cooper is defined by Hejduk in many ways. It is like asking me how I am going to step into Hejduk's shoes, and if you knew Hejduk, you would understand that he was a giant. If I were to occupy his shoes, I would have to dive in there with my whole body. If that metaphor holds, I would say that this is the challenge that I am up against right now.

Hejduk's work as a citizen, as a designer, as an architect, and as a pedagogue was so overwhelming, and so dedicated, that he was not only a beacon just for Cooper, but he represented something we strive for. Our eyes were on Cooper from RISD, and we understood the significance of his commitment from afar. The reason I came to Cooper, in part, was because this is the one place that the discipline of research: of form, of space and of materiality through construction, remains intact, despite the noise that comes from everything around us.

At the same time, I find many aspects of thinking that emerged through the pedagogy of Hejduk can be translated into current terms. Hejduk operated in a world of representation, but he teased it out through construction. We can translate that by extending it one step further into the building industry. Hejduk produced poetic constructions, beckoning us to examine our notion of convention, and we can do that through new leads and methods of exploration.

TCP: How were you asked to be Dean? Who specifically asked you to take the position?

NT: Broadly speaking it was a two-year process. I was contacted on two occasions, and I politely declined on both occasions. I was contacted a third time on a more personal basis, and encouraged to talk and to listen. After a productive an engaging discussion with Elizabeth O'Donnell, I had a turning point. Rather quickly after that I had a discussion with the committee, an open and candid discussion. That led to a subsequent meeting with the then president Jamshed Bharucha.

Photo by Simon Shao (ME '19)

I was aware of the controversies in the air at the time. I was candid with him and he was equally candid with me. We had further in depth discussion, and that led me to the cabinet. That process took us from October through February, and after that is history.

TCP: If there is one thing that convinced you to come to Cooper what would that be?

NT: I have no experience being a dean. It was the opportunity of doing something familiar and taking a big risk. It was taking on an adventure that the stability of my former life could not offer. It offered a space of uncertainty and I think that is the best place to be. In a way, it's like becoming a student again.

TCP: How has it been transitioning to Cooper Union?

NT: I started on July 1, 2015, so I spent the first two months essentially getting my computer and getting situated. Elizabeth O'Donnell has been central to the mentorship process. It's been a time of homework.

At the same time, I've been meeting with the individual faculty members, getting to know their agenda and their research. This is what I think I will be doing for the next two or three months: listening to how the school operates. After that point, we will come together to imagine how we will script a future of targeted agendas, while also maintaining the powerful legacy of the school.

TCP: With the industry digitizing, is there a need to change the relatively analog methods at The Cooper Union? If so, in what way(s)?

NT: We spoke about this in the faculty meeting today. At Cooper, making is a source of inquiry and the production of knowledge. Understanding the instrumentality of tools is what's important, and understanding the ideas that form architecture is part of the intellectual project.

The shift from analog to digital should not be scandalous. In fact, at Cooper, it should be relatively seamless. Everything built digitally has many analog interfaces, and vice versa. If anything, my agenda for Cooper will be to find creative ways in which the digital may become the repository and source for research, for creative ways to think about form, space, and materiality, for engaging the construction industry, and most of all to think creatively about those tools, and think of them as intellectual, not technical tools. The transitions must be complex, it must be critical, and it should pose a cultural benefit. We're not in it as a technical school.

TCP: What specifically would you like to see added to the Architecture computer lab?

NT: This is not a discussion of the computer lab, per se. If you think about it, there is a symbiotic relationship between the generation of form and the output of form through fabrication.

Whichever way we do it, we're looking at a dual platform through which we're producing things. On the one hand is the representational world, which remains very powerful in helping you think through drawing. On the other hand, there's the parametric world, a world of scripting and code, where data is numerically controlled in order to produce unprecedented iterations of formal solutions and ways of engaging a problem. We will begin to invest in discrete hardware that prompts good questions. The larger issue that remains is how to make digitization fundamental to Cooper, not as the support, but as the core of its intellectual project to speculate on making things.

TCP: What are the immediate challenges faced by the school of architecture?

NT: The school of architecture has a great opportunity in redefining the boundaries of the discipline. Both on the molecular scale of material sciences and at the scale of geography, of programs that manage cities and regions, you begin to realize the traditional scope that define architectural studies has had a predefined length both macroscopic and microscopic. "How do we redefine the lens of Cooper with respect to a shift in media?" is our challenge.

The second is, of course, in redefining our boundaries we come to terms with the fact that what we previously thought was the center of architectural studies is maybe peripheral. "How can architects become better engineers, artists, activists, urbanists?" This is open for recalibration. We have the opportunity where architecture, art, and engineering at Cooper can step into the frontline of how we redefine the culture of design in much broader terms. It's the possibility to make designers out of engineers, and to demonstrate how metrics are liberating for a designer.

TCP: What are the immediate challenges faced by students upon graduating?

NT: They're going to enter a workforce that is fundamentally different from my generation. Architecture is not just a practice—it's a way of thinking. Architects are directors; they synthesize many fragments of information to produce unexpected and unprecedented alliances. One can do that not only in designing a car, a sophisticated piece of furniture, a room, or a building, but also a block or a city. I believe that the students today will come out equipped with an interface on the environment at large that is much more complex and powerful than when I entered the practice decades ago.

All of this access to software and information has democratized the general public's access to design. Part of their challenge is how to translate the significance of design to the broader audience, and raise the stakes: that the idea of architecture is the synthesis and integration of it as a performance. A materially and spatially smart piece of work is one with a layered narrative that synthesizes all of the fields that characterize architecture.

TCP: Characterizing the field of architecture as a "synthesis" speaks to the schools of Cooper needing to come together more. In what ways would you like to see greater cooperation within Cooper?

NT: This is something I think that we can handle from above and below. I think the deans need to come together and collectively imagine where we can institute intellectual collegiality. From the grassroots level, from the trenches, all it takes is a student who is interested… an engineer who is interested in design, or an architect who is interested in the behavior of materials and geometries. Braiding those two together, one can imagine a joint course that spans boundaries.

Those begin to plant seeds, so that the marginal courses of today become the legacy courses of tomorrow. When we look back on today's questions in twenty years, the notion of such strict disciplinary compartmentalization will be humorous.

TCP: Do you intend also to step into a teaching role while you are the dean of the school?

NT: I am here to teach. I am not teaching this semester, but I will be on all of the reviews of the other faculty, and I will contribute to some lectures here and there. Starting next semester I will be teaching studio probably every semester. I also hope to contribute to courses on tectonics, the theory of construction, or other courses dealing with the contemporary history of architecture. We will see how it balances with my administrative work as we move forward.

TCP: To cap it off, what do you like to do for fun in your personal time?

NT: I don't know how humorous this is, but unfortunately I'm an athlete: I run, I bike, I swim. Sadly, I am very injured right now, so I'm hobbling. I do a lot of that, just hobbling around.

I love the movies and I love travel. With travelling, I can double-dip. It's a good way to not only study architecture, but also to taste foods of different cultures, which is another hobby of mine. ◊