

Site Visit: A Podcast about Architecture Everywhere

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Site Visit is a podcast dedicated to engaging architecture everywhere. Site Visit is interested in locating the site of architecture itself through meaningful conversations with architects, designers and educators. To do so, each episode of Site Visit begins with a visit to an architectural site chosen by the guest and follows with a discussion centered on the experience and the guest's practice. The podcast offers a broad audience of listeners insight into the way architects look at the world. Each Site Visit takes place in a public building or space that listeners can also directly experience. While each episode of Site Visit is focused on a single building or site, the interviews inevitably bring to light each guest's understanding of the built environment. The podcast's tone strikes a careful balance between fresh, earnest conversation and critical commentary. The following podcast episode was recorded live at the ACSA 2019 Fall Conference. The transcript of the conversation printed here has been edited for length and clarity. The original recording is available for free on iTunes and at sitevisitpod.com.

Ashley Bigham: Thank you all for joining us today, this is the Site Visit live experience, so welcome! If you're in the wrong room you can leave now. Hello and welcome to Site Visit, a podcast dedicated to engaging architecture everywhere. Erik and I are both assistant professors at the Knowlton School of Architecture at Ohio State University, and we're the co-directors of Outpost Office. Erik, what do we do on this podcast?

Erik Herrmann: We visit a site, and then talk about it.

AB: Exactly – each episode of Site Visit begins with an architectural site, chosen by the guest, and follows with a conversation centered on the experience. Today's episode is being recorded live in front of an audience at the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture's Fall 2019 Conference, hosted by Stanford Architecture and the Yale School of Architecture. Joining us for today's episode is one of the co-chairs of this year's conference, Sunil Bald, a Louis I. Kahn Visiting Assistant Professor at the Yale School of Architecture, and partner at the award winning New York-based practice Studio SUMO. Among Sunil's many interests, his work on academic campuses, both locally and in Japan, has led him to rethink the role campus architecture plays both urbanistically and as an icon for an institution.

For Today's Site Visit, Sunil took us to see the McMurty Building on Stanford's Campus. Designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfo, the building's generous open spaces, circulation scheme and specific use of materiality attempts to unite the various disciplines that share the building's state of the art facilities. We began our conversation by asking Sunil to describe the building, and why he chose it for today's Site Visit.

Sunil Bald: Basically, it was the building of choice because it was the building that I was taken to when I came to Stanford to start planning the conference. For a campus like Stanford, where everything has been so controlled – I think as an institution, Stanford chose this as the first contemporary iconic building, or at least that I can think of. It has entered into the tradition of American universities getting a sort of brand building. I should also note that, I worked on a building here twenty years ago, that is built just around the corner by Atoine Predock, and you might not have noticed it.

AB: When we were on the visit you mentioned the Predock building. Because of that experience, you know a few details about campus requirements that might also apply to the McMurty building. Tell us a little bit about what you know about Stanford's architectural code.

SB: Yeah well at that time—I think it's obviously loosened up since we did the competition for the engineering building in 1994—all buildings had to have a mansard roof; all buildings had to sort of approximate a certain color; and also, all buildings had to have a vaulted portico. That that has gradually become somewhat unraveled because all these buildings are maybe one step away from that. The mansard roof that we did was framed as an airplane wing and now these buildings have a similar sort of roof and then the roof, I mean, doesn't really exist in the McMurty building. Also the color is there but the interesting thing I think about the color there is they just throw in a bunch of other colors too so you don't really identify it as the yellow building – its just that yellow is one of the colors.

AB: The McMurty Building uses a lot of different materials; that's one of the things you notice when you approach it. One, is a very vibrant bright orange which you see as you walk into the building's inner courtyard. You can enter that courtyard from all different sides of the building and you walk under

bridges that span across. The orange color leads you into that space, which I thought was quite striking.

EH: I thought it was a reference to the terracotta, in a strange way, like with all the orange, it seemed like a way they were playing with it. So, if we could talk about the building broadly, it has two wings around a central courtyard and it stitches together a number of programmatic elements. It includes elements of art and also art history, a library is found at the center, and it also connects several existing circulation paths. So, maybe we could talk about some of the more memorable moments because we had an opportunity to walk all through the building.

SB: For me, I think it is a very interesting building – just sort of thinking about this interest or play in circulation giving formal possibilities, especially formal sectional possibilities. It is something that, you know, Diller Scofidio, in particular has in mind in its work, and then how that kind of collides both with an almost, boxian-type way of thinking about program and then the desire to make some kind of exterior space that is claimed by the volume of the building. In some ways it is maybe more of an internalization of Richardsonian vaults that create outdoor space for exterior, but then kind of cobbled up into this oculus interior that we all experienced yesterday. It was animated by the performance, which I think yesterday I said something like, (half joking, but half true) that it did make me like the building better just to see it animated and occupied because the other times I've been there it's been less so. But I tend to come here on weekends, or when school is not in session.

AB: Yeah, that is an interesting aspect of campus architecture in general. Your experience of the campus will change vastly based on when school is in session or if there is a football game or not. This weekend school is not in session, so there aren't that many students around. Could you describe what happened at the performances yesterday in the courtyard of the building?

SB: Well its interesting describing it to all these people that know it—need some audience laughter here—but, basically it was the result of a collaborative course between two professors (one in dance and one in architecture) and the intersection between pedestrian movement in a space and dance, and trying to conflate those two things together, and so it took place in the central space, the oculus. So there it was like a theater in the round, a result of occupying the perimeter of that space, with the sky coming in from above, and it was beautifully staged in a site specific way. Also, I think it pointed to the potential successes of that building, and I think it also points to the possibilities of campus architecture in general. I know this just from my own work on campus architecture, that its often the exterior spaces or making spaces on the exterior where you actually can create, sort of animate, a spatial experience.



Figure 1: McMurtry Building, architect Diller Scofidio + Renfro, Photo by Erik Herrmann, 2019.

EH: Yeah, the McMurtry is clearly trying to do that because its taking the courtyard typology, which would typically be closed off, and using the vortex of circulation to open it up as you mentioned with a lot of sectional moves. I'm kind of curious – you've spoken a lot in your work, about how working on Japanese campuses, where things do tend to be also very inwardly focused, and your projects tend to try to change that in some way. Can you talk a bit about that ambition, and also how you introduced that idea in your projects?

SB: Japanese campuses are very different than American campuses. Japanese campuses tend to be much more technocratic; academic buildings are really just more about housing classrooms with double loaded corridors. Even the notion of the campus in Japanese life is different because most campuses are commuter campuses. We've recently finished a student dormitory in Japan, and that is a very unusual typology. Usually dormitories are done for companies as employees get shuttled from city to city. So, we were working with a both spatially efficient and economically efficient building type, which does not necessarily allow for a section, where the idea of an animate section is basically a luxury. Trying to convince someone to take up space by opening things up is a luxury. So, the place where one is often able to create a dynamic spatial



Figure 2: McMurtry Building, architect Diller Scofidio + Renfro, Photo by Erik Herrmann, 2019.

condition is in the exterior, or how a building object shapes itself around exterior space in order to create a community. I think, at the McMurtry building, the most successful parts of the building are its exterior spaces. Those spaces are formed by this collision of the formalization of movement and the formalization of program.

EH: One of the things that we really respect about your work is this programmatically driven exploration that ends up getting expressed in very specific material and tectonic ways. For example, you had one project where there's a programmatic requirement of introducing privacy between adjacent spaces. So, the windows are shifted in a very interesting pattern to avoid students looking at each other to build up privacy. Could you speak a little bit about the way your practice weaves together these kind of programmatic concerns which are more behavioral and time-based, and these very ingenious material solutions.

SB: In Japan, you know, there's this super intense and high pressured educational experience which is about getting into a university. And then, once you get it you get into university it's sort of just accepted that for four years you just kind of goof off and then you enter into the corporate world and you have

this other intense experience of meeting deadlines. So, the university time is a period where you can actually let your hair down and be free. So, university people are really concerned about the bad behavior of students during this period of time. So, that's where there's the idea of trying to mitigate the worst type of student behavior becomes a programmatic concern. And I don't know if that happens at universities here. We did one project where there's a little lip on an auditorium, for instance, and everyone was freaking out about the possibility of students skateboarding off it and falling down. Actually, the dormitory building has a screen, and recently I just heard that a kid left his keys in his fourth floor room, and then suddenly scaled up the building because it's made of louvers. So, the way that students occupy architecture in Japan is really interesting. So that does become a programmatic concern in terms of thinking about adjacencies and material durability dealing with vision. Just in the same way that say something like that McMurtry building is about creating a communal, interdisciplinary way of thinking about the arts through adjacencies, our experiences have been as much about dealing with student issues rather than say, disciplinary issues.

AB: I'm also curious about the cities you work in. When you're working on a Japanese campus it's in Tokyo which is an incredibly specific type of urbanism. You live in and work at studio SUMO in New York, and you teach in New Haven at Yale's campus. So in your daily life you're having these really rich experiences of architectural environments. How do you think those different cities - Tokyo, New York, New Haven - have influenced your work?

SB: I think that New York probably is more of a separate experience and where it's just the sort of day-to-day getting on the subway going to work. But the campus experience has been very interesting. Also, both of my parents were professors, so I grew up on the University of California campuses. For me it was always a very familiar place, and so just seeing the difference in both a West Coast campus and now being on this strange East Coast campus that is Yale, and then the Japanese campuses which are some way in some ways like non-campus. They are campuses but they don't necessarily try to foster campus life in the same way as here, and that has been very helpful for us to bring lessons learned in each place back to the other. I think I mean obviously since we're not building buildings at Yale there's not that crosscurrent. I often think, 'how can architecture in the most simple way with the limitations that we have be something that even momentarily creates some kind of campus life in places, and how do you architecturally accomplish that on a place where that's just not part of the tradition?'

EH: That to me was really interesting because you talk a lot about limits and opportunities and one thing that really resonated with me in a lecture about your campus in Japan is that you mentioned a lot of these projects have started as very

different programs and in the end meeting very different situations. And you've mentioned that there was an expectation for the architect to serve more of a role conceptualizing from the beginning. Can you talk about working within the context and the agency the architect has in it and what lessons you've learned from them?

SB: Yeah. At least in our experience, we've never been given a program, and we've done, I guess, five buildings in Japan ranging from say seven thousand square feet to 70,000 square feet. So it's something that just kind of has been developed and there is this idea that the architect will be part of the programming process as well. I had worked on campuses for other offices and it was very, very different. There were university standards, there are material standards - there was just a lot more control. I think that the McMurty building and the other buildings are very obviously trying to work and subvert those standards. You know, some incredible creativity comes out through subversion as it does to just have an open slate, but that the idea of the architect as expert, or the expertise of the architect is something that is relied on in Japan is very different. In Japan the campus that we have done most of our work on is now 55 years old and basically every building has been built by one construction company in the last 55 years. This company called Kobayashi has been around for 150 years. It was started by a guy who was a kimono maker who liked to fix temples in his spare time in Kyoto and is now one of the biggest companies in Japan, not just construction companies, but one of the biggest companies. So there's this way that I think institutional partnerships or even corporate partnerships happen between big companies and institutions in Japan, it's probably quite different from here.

EH: And do you think any of that is translatable or is it just too culturally specific?

SB: That way of working?

EH: Yeah

SB: Oh no, I do think it is translatable. For instance, what you see in architectural practice in general—I don't have to tell people in this room this—just how much collaboration there is now between design architects and all the different collaborators. One thing that I don't think yet has translated to the same scale in this country is the idea of design build at a bigger scale. This is essentially what happens in Japan whether it's a small foreign firm like us or, I don't know, a Toyo Ito or Sejima building. Drawings are done by the architect and then the construction company redraws all the drawings themselves. So that idea of the CD set that you pass on to the contractor for bidding doesn't really exist.

AB: Towards the end of our conversation, we opened the discussion to the audience for questions. Our first question came from an audience member who asked us to talk about The

Yale School of Architecture's Rudolph Hall, where he currently teaches, and how that building may have shaped our understanding and perception of campus architecture. Sunil, you're in the building more than we are these days...

SB: I think it operates on a number of levels. Maybe this is going sound too much like a pitch, but in terms of just the culture of the school. You know, of course, the building has an incredible section. I think about that section a lot in terms of how it never allows us to hide from each other. So we cannot, at least as faculty, avoid each other. And so it definitely creates a real collegiality in the end. I think it creates a lot more; there's just not distance. The dean's office doesn't have a door and it doesn't have a ceiling; that openness is really incredible. And then I think also just in terms of the results of students drawing sections. I find how it does really begin to influence the design process as well.

EH: Yeah, I think it's interesting because I think it overlays something you're talking about program where there's one way to look at it in terms of just conceptualizing these kind of bureaucratic boxes which organize space adjacencies and make way for the studios, but then through its sectional moves and also little idiosyncrasies like stairs that tie together only a couple of levels, I think it's able to approach program from top down and bottom up in a really interesting way. So, the experience of the building and its diagram are not the same thing and that's what I really appreciate about the experience in that place.

AB: Another thing that comes to mind is the way Yale's building shapes the student culture and student life through the exterior spaces. At the McMurty building there are amazing terraces with cascading open staircases, and you start to think that is only possible because of the California weather. But even in Connecticut, the use of the terraced levels on top of the Yale building are also pretty incredible. The students just bundle up and use those spaces throughout the winter. As a social space of the school it operates a little bit in the same way that the fourth floor review spaces operate. A review becomes a big production where you might stand on the fifth floor and look down to watch reviews on the fourth floor, and in some ways this social life is mirrored on Friday evenings on the roof terraces for happy hour. There are many ways to overlook spaces, but also be part of the scene.

EH: Yeah, although it's a little inverted from the McMurty, where the kind of spaces where you'd expect to hang out are a little panoptic, whereas at Yale, that center space is good for the reviews but I wouldn't really hang out there. I would retreat to the roof or some other corner away from view.

AB: Finally, our last question came from an audience member who asked Sunil about his take on the idea that campuses are oftentimes seen as spaces of elitism, and if acknowledging this perception in academic architecture can help campuses become more open and inclusive to a broader range of users.

SB: My own educational experiences were on two very different campuses. My undergraduate degree is from UC Santa Cruz which is just kind of like a non-campus; it's a camp, I guess. And then my graduate was at Columbia which was walled basically, a fortress. So my experience working in architecture other than working for other architects has been on Japanese campuses where in some ways I think the fortress is at the architectural scale as much as it is at the campus scale, and the campuses themselves are actually quite fluid within the culture within Japan. What's been interesting about Japanese campuses and even Japan as a society in general is it's now finally sort of facing up to the challenges of diversity. This is partly because you have a declining population and the place where that diversity often enters the country is at the university level. So most universities are in crisis mode because there are just not enough students for the seats. So, the university that we work with has something like 75 sister universities around the world that bring in people from Asia or Eastern Europe or the United States. So what is interesting about campuses in Japan is they are the most diverse environments in almost all the country, and you don't have as much economic inequity in Japan as you do in this country at all. So for us, working at the architectural scale, there are opportunities for things to open up more. But, I may be skirting your question a little bit. Within campuses like Yale when you're within the architecture school you're not really quite within the campus. I don't know if you're familiar with its location of the rest of the campus, but it was very much at a corner of two city streets. So it's not very isolated. It took me two or three years teaching there to actually go into the actual campus.

I was working for architect Antoine Predock when I got out of school and I worked on the building here [at Stanford] and the other building I worked on was actually the music school at UC Santa Cruz. At Santa Cruz, the issue was less about social inequity but more of environmental imposition. It was a time where just the thought of building was an act of violence, especially on that particular site. So, that was a kind of ethical question and as someone who both grew up there and went to school there, and it being the first thing I did out of school, was sort of like a moral dilemma of actually working on something or a on a site that I grew up with.

AB: Sunil Bald, thank you so much for taking the time to bring us to the McMurty Building and for joining us in this wonderful conversation. Thank you to ACSA for facilitating an incredible conference, and allowing us to record our first ever live episode of Site Visit. To see pictures of the buildings of the McMurty Building and the other buildings we discussed on this episode, visit our website (sitevisitpod.com). For Erik Herrmann, I'm Ashley Bigham – thanks for joining us.