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Dalibor Vesely: 1934–2015

David Leatherbarrow

No answer is the term Dalibor Vesely often used to summarise what recent thought had to say in response to one or another of the difficult and decisive questions that face architecture, cities, and our lives within them today. It is also the reply many will give to the question *why now*, why this unwelcome silence from a voice that still had so much to say? *No answer*. Resignation wasn't intended with his use of this term; instead, an invitation to thought, to think again. The questions that motivated his work survive his death, for they were not only his but ours, such was his grasp of contemporary conditions, his penetration into primary issues. Facing his themes without him, resuming the enquiry into the city and its culture, architecture and its articulations, or technology and its mixed blessings, means not only thinking with him but beyond him, accepting the fact that his work is unfinished and ours continues. The answer to his silence cannot be *No answer*. Yes, the conversations he sought so passionately and enjoyed so fully have come to an end. All we have now are some memories and a body of writings, texts now seen anew, all together, because nothing more will be added. Perhaps the questions he asked bear witness to his legacy no less truthfully than the writings.

1 Dalibor Vesely

Prague, the city of his birth, served Vesely throughout his life as an emblem of the continuity of European culture, its heritage, promise, and task. Other capitals fascinated him, too: Vienna and Paris, also London and Berlin, but none of these indicated so clearly what he would have described as the real possibilities for the creative transformation of modern civilisation. Europe was, for him, both an idea and a living reality, the continuance and renewal of which required disciplined reflection, creative expression, and a sense of common purpose.

It was in Prague that he met and attended the seminars of the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka. While widely influential there and elsewhere in Europe, Patočka's teaching career was a painful struggle, one that gave intellectual and moral orientation to Vesely's own life and work. Under the corrosive influence of successive totalitarian regimes – first Nazi, then Communist – Patočka was free from censorship and could teach as he chose for only eight of his forty-two active years. As one of three spokesmen for *Charter 77,* he had argued that political freedom included personal responsibility and an orientation toward the good. Hardly inflammatory principles, but nevertheless ideas that were renounced by the functionaries who sought to implement Brezhnev's doctrine in occupied lands. Patočka's death in 1977 resulted from a brain haemorrhage suffered under police interrogation, preceded by ten weeks of intense persecution. By this time Vesely had already emigrated to Britain. But his teacher's life and lessons remained with him, and not only him. When Vesely introduced himself to the philosopher Paul Ricoeur years later, the very first mention of Patočka's name brought tears to the French philosopher's eyes. No less emotional was Vesely when he told this story.

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Much more promising and no less influential were his teacher's early years. In 1934, the year of Vesely's birth, Patočka read at the World Philosophical Congress in Prague a lecture written by his own teacher Edmund Husserl, also Czech, and founder of the phenomenological tradition, the style of thought Vesely brought to architecture. The mutual respect between the two philosophers was profound. As a sign that Patočka was heir to a rich intellectual tradition, Husserl gave his student a desktop lectern he had received from Tomáš Masaryk, the founder of modern Czech democracy. Patočka's own writings, often circulated *samizdat*, developed Husserlian ideas, together with those of his other teachers, Henri Bergson and Martin Heidegger. When Vesely attended the Patočka seminars he was among artists, philosophers, poets, and playwrights, including Václav Havel, future president of the country. The interrogative habit of mind Vesely exhibited throughout his life was no doubt exemplified by many in this circle, certainly that of its leader. Husserl's reply to Patočka's request to come to Freiburg to study with him in 1933 contained the following condition: that you truly wish to understand and that you bring no preconceived philosophical convictions. Reversing the roles of the clear and obscure – reconsidering what had been taken for granted – was for Husserl philosophy's first step, as it was for both Patočka and Vesely.

Dalibor Vesely's formal education was not, of course, in philosophy; he studied architecture, engineering, and art, obtaining both professional and research degrees. He received his PhD from Charles University, having researched Central European baroque architecture. His early interest in the work of Kilián Ignác Dientzenhofer, Balthasar Neumann, Johann Santini-Aichel, and Fischer von Erlach, and later that of Guarino Guarini and Francesco Borromini, continued throughout his life. A friendship developed over many years with Mojmir Horyna, a profound scholar of Santini-Aichel, was very important to him, as was his long and very close association with Werner Oechslin, to whose annual *Barocksommerkurs* in Einsiedeln Vesely made regular contribution for a couple of decades. In the months before his death, he was assembling and revising his many papers and lectures on baroque architecture, rethinking and enlarging those texts as chapters for his next book. Baroque was not a category of architectural style for Vesely, but one manifestation – perhaps one of the most articulate manifestations – of the richness of European culture. When the organisers of the Central European University sought his advice on their curriculum, he recommended concentration on baroque culture.

After his academic training in architecture, Vesely worked with a number of the leading Czech modern architects: Josef Havlicek, Karel Honzik, and Jaroslav Fragner. Much later, he would return to these figures and this architecture, also that of Pavel Janák, in a paper that reassessed the nature and meaning of what is commonly called Czech Cubism. In his early years of professional work in architecture, he also practiced stage set design, examples of which, he once admitted, had appeared in some operatic productions. In 1962, he continued his academic work in Munich, where he had contacts with the art historians Hans Sedlmayr and Hermann Bauer, key figures in the study of baroque and rococo art and architecture. While there he also studied with the great humanist Ernesto Grassi, who had been one of Martin Heidegger's students. 1962 seems also to have been the year of Vesely's first lengthy publication – at least the earliest that has appeared in English – a study of Czech secular buildings, usually called castles, from the time of the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. That text ended in a way that anticipated much of his later work, particularly the theme of continuity. He offered a critique of so-called 'purism' in restoration practices: erasing historical accumulations in order to simulate original appearances rendered the works themselves lifeless.

Vesely's deep concern for art in its several forms was not only academic, nor did it begin with his formal study. His father was a leading painter among Czech modernists. Late in life, he fondly recalled hours in his father's studio. Surrealism in both its Czech and wider European manifestations remained a lifelong preoccupation, one that coupled fascination with critique, the latter a matter of principle for him because the encounter with reality, always bitter for Andre Breton and the poets and painters he promoted, was, Vesely maintained, inescapable in architecture.

After Munich, he spent extended periods in Paris. While there in 1968, he met with members of the Situationalist Group. His set of colleagues called themselves the Continualists. With that name in mind it is not surprising that the title he and Mohsen Mostafavi chose years later for the summary catalogue of architectural work they had guided at the Architectural Association School in London was *Architecture and Continuity* (1982). Between 1962 and 1968, Vesely also visited London on a few occasions. In addition to curiosity about the architecture being developed there, a more personal concern motivated the visits: his younger brother Drahosh, with whom he was always close, was a postdoctoral fellow, later a physics professor at Oxford University. After the end of the Prague Spring in 1968, when a return to that city became impossible, England became the permanent home of both brothers. In the years before the Velvet Revolution of 1989, his distance from Prague was a source of deep regret for Vesely, however of which he mostly kept silent.

London held the promise of a stable base of operations. Among the colleagues he first met there were two with whom he collaborated in different ways for several decades: Joseph Rykwert and Alvin Boyarsky. Rykwert created and led a new course in the History and Theory of Architecture at the University of Essex. Vesely and Rykwert co-taught the seminar from its earliest years to 1980. Boyarsky was Head of the AA School where Vesely led a diploma-level studio during the same ten-year period. These were intensely creative and productive years of teaching. The Unit system at the AA allowed Vesely and a sequence of teaching colleagues to pursue design work at the urban scale in several London locations, while the Essex programme – the seminars of which were mostly held in London in various locations – allowed him to pursue his work in the philosophical and historical dimensions of architecture. Dawn Ades, a specialist in surrealist and dada art was also at Essex. Their friendship and collaboration continued for many years, the most influential outcome of which was the exhibition titled *Dada and Surrealism Revealed*, held at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1978. A widely-read issue of the magazine *AD*, titled *Surrealism and Architecture* and guest edited by Vesely, was another influential outcome. In the early years of this decade of teaching, he also developed collaborations in architectural practice, with figures such as James Stirling and James Gowan.

Vesely believed that advancements in thinking and understanding depended greatly on dialogue. Intellectual preparation seems to have been somewhat less important than cultural background; but most important of all was a double commitment: to the expression of

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one's own point of view and a corresponding willingness to listen and learn from another person with similarly strong convictions. Vesely was particularly good at expressing his own point of view, but that didn't prevent him from listening to – and later selectively adopting – alternative ideas and interpretations. Among the conversations he started in those years several continued and remained important to him for decades. The interlocutors included: Kenneth Frampton, Alan Colquhoun, and Robert Maxwell; slightly later, Robin Middleton and Peter Carl. His students from these early London years took part in comparable discussions, a number of whom also remained in close contact: Daniel Libeskind, Alberto Pérez-Gómez, Eric Parry, Robin Evans, Homa Fardjadi, Mohsen Mostafavi, Helen Mallinson, and the author of this obituary. Such lists could be extended at some length, for Vesely's teaching was no less welcoming than challenging for a very great number of people.

The theme of sharing, not just of ideas in dialogue but of all that we value in life became an important theme of Vesely's teaching and writing. The topic had one manifestation in his rather early embrace of ecological thinking, on the premise that scarcity and poverty are not overcome by abundance but by justice. An even more striking evidence of his commitment to the principle and ethos of sharing was a topic that appeared with increasing frequency in his writings: communicative space. Similar themes had, of course, been taken up in the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas. But the thinker whose work exercised the greatest influence on this dimension of Vesely's writing and thinking was Hans-Georg Gadamer, the principle proponent of philosophical hermeneutics. Vesely established both a working relationship and warm friendship with Gadamer over many years, as a result of frequent visits to Heidelberg University and the philosopher's private home.

The Essex course and AA teaching were followed by Vesely's engagement with the University of Cambridge, where he taught from 1979 until his retirement. He was attached to Emmanuel College, where he served as Director of Studies and was later made a Fellow of the College. An equivalent to the Essex course was established in the Department of Architecture at Cambridge, again by Vesely and Rykwert. It was called the Graduate Programme in History and Philosophy of Architecture. After Rykwert's retirement from Cambridge and move to the University of Pennsylvania, Peter Carl collaborated with Vesely in the development and teaching of this course. Wendy Pullan joined them and succeeded Vesely as co-director after his retirement. Throughout his two decades of Cambridge teaching Vesely also led design studios, sometimes in collaboration with Peter Carl, other times with younger co-teachers, who themselves developed under his guidance. Thus at Cambridge, as at the AA, Vesely not only taught architecture students a practical and intellectual discipline, but also taught teachers, and did so as Aristotle recommended by example. He also taught outside of Europe. In the 1970s and 1980s he was a frequent visitor to Penn State University. In 1976, he taught courses at Princeton University, where he developed friendships with both Anthony Vidler and Michael Graves. He also had a regular commitment at the University of Pennsylvania, running a seminar in that university's PhD in Architecture Programme. While there he resumed contact with Rykwert, who had in those years moved to Philadelphia. At Penn he met and had several enjoyable exchanges with Karsten Harries, who often visited there from Yale University. He also collaborated occasionally with Marco Frascari and very closely with this author.

When Vesely's major work, *Architecture in an Age of Divided Representation: Creativity in the Shadow of Production* was released in 2004, it was announced as a long-awaited book. Its genesis and development were concurrent with his Cambridge teaching and echoed that coupling of the productive and philosophical dimensions of architecture. Many of the book's key concepts – human situations, the tension between embodiment and articulation, communicative movement, and so on – were equally apposite to project making and historical-philosophical study. It was a well-received book, also widely read. Vesely was particularly pleased to see it appear in Czech translation.

Among the many awards and honours he received throughout his life, a few were personally very significant. In 2005, he was recipient of the Bruno Zevi Book Award granted by the International Committee of Architectural Critics. One year later, the Royal Institute of British Architects honoured him with the Annie Spink Award for Excellence in Architectural Education. And in 2015, he was made an Honorary Fellow of the RIBA.

Vesely expressed pride in the fact that he was raised in a Catholic country, although he never practiced that religion in his adult years. He once asked this author if he believed in God. Limiting the ensuing pause to no more than a few moments he answered his own question with the observation that a world as rich and beautiful as ours makes one wonder... While the subject of transcendence, or what he called primary order, occupied his attention for years and was addressed in a number of his writings, he was no less concerned with secularisation. The shelves of books in his large personal library that were dedicated to religion and myth were aligned with those that addressed the history of science and the philosophy of technology.

Despite his lifelong dedication to urban culture and both the principle and practice of dialogue, Vesely was a man of great personal strength who enjoyed solitude. Only half-jokingly he often reminded his friends of Pascal's injunction against leaving home. Music, mainly from the baroque period, was a much-loved companion from the time of his youth to his last years. Strings were his passion, with an obvious preference for the violin over the viola, if that's a fair inference from the fact that the violin case was generally left open in his workroom. For a number of years he was a member of a quartet that met irregularly. Mostly he played on his own, he said, but every now and then for one friend or another, giving the performer and listener equal pleasure.

Vesely left behind a large literary estate, a considerable portion of which remains unpublished. He is survived by his brother Drahosh Vesely, also by three former wives, Blanka von der Becke, Jana Vesely, and Efrossyni Pimenides. What might be called his extended family numbers many colleagues throughout the world, also many former students, and still more readers. Those whose lives were enriched by knowing him personally will never forget his exceedingly acute mind, surprising memory, great learning, and disarmingly delightful wit. His jokes and riddles always left those who heard them with a smile, and fairly often *no answer*.

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