

The Charlottesville Tapes Revisited

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In the fall of 1982, Dean Jaquelin Robertson of the University of Virginia's School of Architecture staged a two-day conference on the state of architectural practice. Held in UVA's Rotunda, the closed-door conference included twenty-four invited architects. The group, although ideologically diverse, was notably entirely male and overwhelmingly Euro-American. Those in attendance included established and emerging architects Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph, Tadao Ando, Peter Eisenman, Robert Stern, Michael Graves, Frank Gehry, and Rem Koolhaas among others. Organized much like a studio review, each architect presented a single, unpublished project which was then critiqued and debated by the group. The full transcript of the proceedings, was later published by Rizzoli. *The Charlottesville Tapes*, was intended as the first in a recurring series of conferences and publications of "architects on architecture" emphasizing the role of designers, rather than critics, historians, or journalists in establishing the discourse of contemporary practice.

Organized at a critical moment in the early 1980s, the discipline was caught between competing claims and shifting ideological viewpoints on innovation and tradition, history and theory, and modern and post-modern aesthetics. Rather than resolve these tensions, the event intended to explore the pluralistic state of contemporary practice through a series of open debates, a democratic format, further reinforced by the auspicious setting of Thomas Jefferson's Academical Village. Frequently referenced as an early moment of recognition for the younger generation of invited architects, many of the conference's participants later served in prominent leadership roles in practice and academia, receiving international recognition for their work. As a result, the conference has had lasting repercussions for architectural practice and pedagogy, particularly in the US context.

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1982, a conference of twenty-five architects met in the University of Virginia's Rotunda for two days of project presentations and debates that attempted to address the most critical questions of contemporary architectural practice. Their conversations were documented and have subsequently come to be known through the publication of the book, *The Charlottesville Tapes*.

The conference's mythology can be largely attributed to the perceived secrecy around its planning and the prescience of its list of invited participants, a cohort of architectural practitioners whose elevated status in the profession benefitted from their association with one another and recognition gained through events like this. To tell the story of *The Charlottesville Tapes* is to tell the tale of two very different, though influential architectural institutions. This paper will demonstrate how the Charlottesville conference was the culminating event interconnecting the professional, academic, and pedagogical networks of theorist and architect Peter Eisenman and the New York-based Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, and that of Jaquelin Robertson, Dean of the University of Virginia's School of Architecture, orchestrated at a moment when architectural media played a significant role in the emergence of architectural celebrity and the transformation of the field between the late 1970s and early 1980s. (Figures 1-2)

THE ORIGINS OF THE CONFERENCE

Fifteen years before convening the conference in Charlottesville, Peter Eisenman founded the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York City. The organization was an outgrowth of an earlier series of events known as the Conference of Architects for the Study of the Environment, or CASE, hosted by the Museum of Modern Art.¹ Consciously structured to operate in the interstitial space between established academic, cultural, and policy-based institutions, the group of young academics and design practitioners of the Institute coalesced around an interest in architectural history and theory.² The Institute sought a new theoretical basis for the discipline of architecture through critical theory, philosophy, linguistics, and architectural form

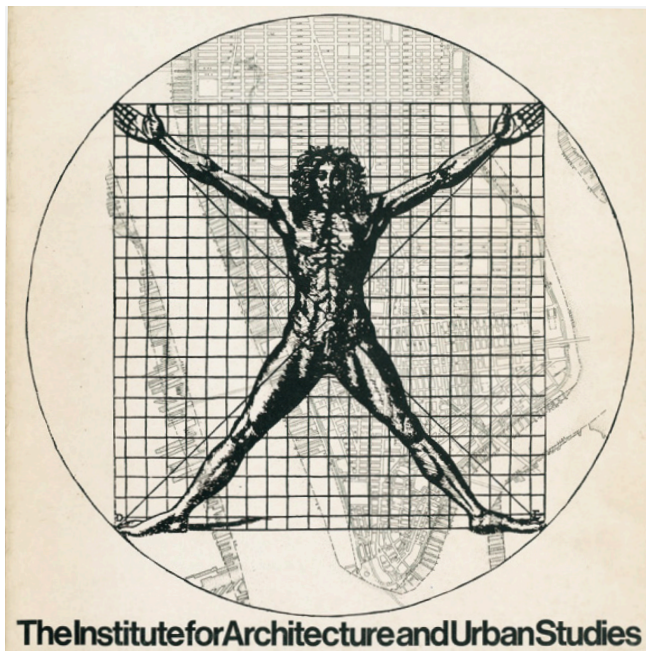


Figure 1. Eisenman, Peter. Poster of the Institute's Insignia: The Vitruvian Man Overlaid on a Contemporary Map of Manhattan. 1968. Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Gift of Eisenman Architects. <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/search/details/collection/object/193399>.

making.³ In particular, the Institute utilized its publication venues, the journals *Oppositions* and *October*, geared toward the theoretical, historical, and critical voices of the group, and its monthly newspaper *Skyline*, written for a general readership and marketed to subscribers in architecture schools across the country, to report on the Institute's activities and general news from among its larger circle of participants in and around New York. The Institute also produced events and public debates that engaged the popular press, making Eisenman a widely known figure beyond the discipline.⁴ In acting as the arbiter of the architectural avant-garde, Eisenman used media tactics to extend the influence of the Institute to other architectural and academic communities, making it the center of an exclusive, socially and intellectually defined architectural milieu.⁵ The behavior of delineating groups of architectural thinkers along often arbitrary ideological lines and instigating debates became a hallmark of Eisenman's leadership, defining a position of importance for himself as a thought leader in the field as well as catalyzing the Institute's role in advancing the discourse of architecture emerging after modernism.

By the mid-1970s, the Institute's architectural programs emphasized a synthesis of theory and practice with curriculum engaging real world projects hosted by a number of government agencies.⁶ It was through these activities that Eisenman developed a

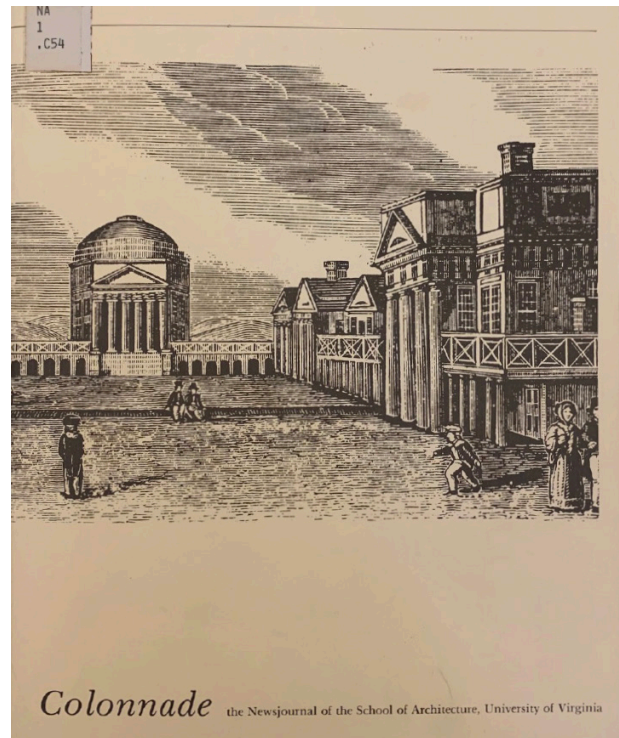


Figure 2. Cover, *Colonnade: The Newsjournal of the School of Architecture University of Virginia* 1, no. 1 (1981): 1.

close working relationship with Jaquelin Robertson, then the founding Director of the Urban Design Group in New York City's Office of Midtown Planning.⁷

In the Spring of 1981, Jaque Robertson was appointed the Dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia. Prior to his tenure at UVA, Robertson, a trained architect, had largely practiced on the scale of urban planning and real estate. The deanship at UVA was a homecoming for Jaque who had grown up in Richmond, Virginia, a member of a prominent first family of the state with lineage associated with the founding of the country.

Although progressive in his approach to urban design and policies, Robertson was a strong proponent of the Neo-classical tradition in architectural design. The influence of this can be seen in the formal and stylistic output of his practice and his frequently voiced reverence for Thomas Jefferson, whom he viewed as the father of American architecture and urbanism.⁸ It was Robertson's experiences practicing in New York and his close association with a core group of contributors to the Institute that led to the formation of the design firm Eisenman/Robertson, a somewhat unexpected partnership that influenced the academic culture and pedagogy that balanced history, theory, and design that Robertson cultivated while in his role at UVA.⁹



Figure 3. Image of proceedings published in Robertson, Jaquelin and University of Virginia. *The Charlottesville Tapes: Transcript of the Conference at the University of Virginia School of Architecture, Charlottesville, Virginia, November 12 and 13, 1982*. New York: Rizzoli, 1985.

THE CONFERENCE

While the archival record related to the origins of the Charlottesville conference are unclear, it is known that in late summer 1982, Peter Eisenman's role as Director of the Institute abruptly came to an end.¹⁰ The conference was originally intended to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the Institute and a perceived "new order of things" as architectural practice emerged in the 1980s. In need of a new venue to host a gathering, planning shifted to Charlottesville as a more "neutral site."¹¹

Private invitations were extended by Eisenman and Robertson to a group of practitioners that included Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph, Tadao Ando, Michael Graves, Frank Gehry, and Rem Koolhaas. This group represented both an older guard and a younger generation of designers who were directly or indirectly associated with the Institute through its activities, exhibitions, or publications. Although Robertson addressed the sense of secrecy around the event as a means of protecting those who were not included, this tactic was another of Eisenman's media manipulations, an illusion of "anti-publicity", as the details of the conference including the full list of invitees was published in *Skyline* less than a month after the meeting.¹²

Given the connections between the Institute and UVA, Charlottesville and the Rotunda specifically, was more than a location of convenience at Dean Robertson's disposal. Perceptions of UVA's "remote" location in relation to New York as an architectural epicenter contributed to the sense of exclusivity desired by the organizers. Occupying Jefferson's Academical Village, long exulted as the architectural "source" of the nation and understood as an embodiment of democratic ideals, also appealed to Robertson's own architectural agenda.¹³

The conference took the format of a design review, with each attendee presenting a previously unpublished project for critique by the group. (Figure 3) The choice reflected both the desire to instigate debate among the individualistic stances then emerging from practice as well as a latent critique of what Robertson and Eisenman deemed "the hegemony of the writer."¹⁴ Historians and critics were explicitly excluded from the conference for their perceived influence over the reception and interpretation of meaning in design, emphasizing the conference's premise of architects on architecture with agency to dictate the state of the field directly.¹⁵

Although the group was ideologically diverse and the range of work presented was broad in its scale and programmatic intentions, several recurring themes arose during the conference that reflected the major veins of post-modernist architectural theory of the time. A major division emerged between those in favor of a conceptual approach to architectural form making, a position framed by Eisenman's stance toward architectural autonomy, and those engaged in "contextualized" practice represented by Jaque and his advocacy for architecture which engaged history, landscape, and urbanism. A growing interest in generating and interpreting architecture through the analytical strategies of linguistics also split the conference participants into distinct camps. Those in favor of a syntactic or autonomous architectural language debated their position in relation to those advocating for a semantic architecture relying heavily on formal and compositional strategies of association which arose from utilizing historical architectural forms to create meaning.¹⁶ The latter position was reflected in Jefferson's designs for UVA which strategically utilized semantic references to Greco-Roman and neo-classical French and Italian architectural forms, legitimizing a distinctly American and democratic architectural agenda for the new nation through the associative cultural significance of these historical architectural sources. This stylistic analysis, however, fails to acknowledge the strict social hierarchy the spatial arrangement of the university upheld, a characteristic with parallels in the spatial enactment of the conference.

New York Times architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable had profiled Jefferson's design for the university during the celebration of the nation's bicentennial in 1976, describing the built assemblage of architectural, educational, and political ideologies as "a kind of paradox: at once didactic and free, monumental and humanistic, aristocratic and pragmatic, romantic and rational, formal and hospitable" where "unity was found in variety, part to whole relationships, monumental design tempered by humanistic order."¹⁷ To meet by invitation only in the most public space of the university lent the conference's proceedings their own paradoxical character, adding a sense of symbolic importance to the architectural discourse that emerged from the meeting's debates while also isolating the event from the larger intellectual community of the university including its architectural students and faculty. This planning aligned with many of the self-promotional strategies Eisenman had previously employed to form the boundaries of an architectural elite literally and figuratively.¹⁸

Embedded in the architectural fabric of Jefferson's project were also implicit parameters for participation. Belonging within the Academical Village was predicated on tightly controlled socio-cultural subjectivities, specifically white, male citizenship. Despite near parity among the Institute's faculty and students between male and female members and the organization's active research agenda critiquing the ideological formation of architecture and its social and professional implications, the group gathered in Charlottesville was entirely male and predominantly

Euro-American. The framing of the conference and its secretive invitations to participate reflect the persistently exclusionary tendencies of the architectural profession, especially along the lines of gender and race, still deeply entrenched in the early 1980s. In the introductory essay later published with the conference's transcripts, Jaque Robertson acknowledged the lack of diversity among the invited practitioners and the reality of a "boys club" mentality among those who showed up. The decision to exclude historians and critics from the conference was as much a position supporting Eisenman's insistence on architects having agency to dictate the terms of architecture as it was a means to further limit the conference's guest list as many of the women involved with the Institute and its broader media apparatus held expertise in history and journalism. Susana Torre and Diana Agrest, both prominent, practicing, female architects deeply involved with the Institute, were notably excluded from the invitations.¹⁹

Ultimately the conference's planning and spatialization of belonging expressed itself in the physical arrangement of the event, demonstrated in the hierarchical assemblage of select individuals around a common table in a place of architectural significance, as well as in the intangible re-inscription of the boundaries identifying those worthy of promotion from within group of architects orchestrated by Eisenman over the previous fifteen years.

THE LEGACY OF THE TAPES

By the time Rizzoli published the documentation of the conference as *The Charlottesville Tapes* in 1985, the Institute had already officially ceased to exist which may explain why Robertson and not Eisenman had authored the book's introductory text. (Figure 4) To some, the conference and its exclusivity have lent the proceedings mythic status, however, the importance of the event is itself a bit of a paradox. While we can acknowledge the debates held in Charlottesville reflect a critical moment of disciplinary divergence, the longer legacy of the conference imprinted itself across a network of architectural institutions and several generations of architectural faculty and students. The planning behind the conference also reflects a profession deeply entangled with the complications of the cult of personality, especially represented by Eisenman and his leadership at the Institute.

A second iteration of the conference was organized by Stanley Tigerman in 1986. (Figure 5) Co-hosted by the University of Illinois at Chicago and the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, the conference's sequel was both similar and different from its predecessor. The second event was described as "more democratic and less secretive" in consciously extending invitations to women architects and an expanded group of practitioners less centered on the New York architectural scene. Of the twenty-four architects who attended the Chicago conference, nine, including Eisenman and Robertson, had previously

attended, and all “had taught architecture either part or full time”, more directly reframing the potential for the pedagogical impact of the event to filter back into the various home institutions of the participants. Like Charlottesville, documentation of the conference was also made public through the publication of a book. Although it was intended for these meetings to continue with some level of regularity, the Institute’s waning influence contributed to the conference series ending in Chicago.

At UVA, Dean Robertson had consciously raised the profile of the School of Architecture through hosting the Charlottesville conference, taking advantage of the piqued interest of the larger architectural community in further advancing his ambitious development and restructuring plans of the school under his leadership. The case for interdisciplinary design expertise debated in Charlottesville spurred Dean Robertson to establish the Program of Advanced Studies in American Urbanism at the UVA, a first of its kind cross-departmental design concentration, as well as advocate for the formation of the Mayors Institute under the National Endowment for the Arts whose annual conference was hosted at UVA for a decade.

Although the UVA School of Architecture community was not included in the conference’s proceedings, Dean Robertson’s close relationship with Eisenman’s circle had lasting impacts on the architectural discourse among UVA’s faculty and students, with conference participants giving public lectures, participating in symposia, taking on visiting faculty appointments, and winning several major architectural commissions at UVA in the ensuing years of Jaque’s tenure. Many of the conference’s participants also went on to serve in high level academic leadership positions at other institutions, including Cesar Pelli and later Robert A.M. Stern’s respective appointments as Dean of the Yale School of Architecture, and Rafael Moneo’s tenure as Dean of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, among others.

While there were clear exclusions and missed opportunities in the planning and execution of the Charlottesville conference, the conceptual arguments formed and debated at the event trickled back into the profession via academic institutions associated with the conference’s participants, influencing design pedagogy at the intersection of history, theory, and practice for the next 40 years. There is still much work to do in drawing connections between the participants, projects, and particularly the content of the debates held in Charlottesville through a closer discourse analysis of the transcripts, however, I would argue that contextualizing the event within a larger network of institutions and within the conditions of the architectural field in the 1980s reveals the more lasting importance of the Charlottesville conference in that it captured a moment when architecture was both succeeding and failing to redefine itself and the stakes of the discipline after modernism.

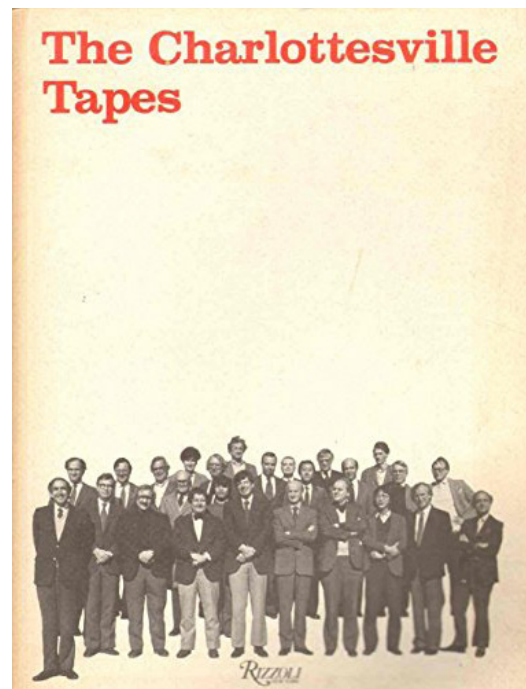


Figure 4. book cover, Robertson, Jaquelin and University of Virginia. *The Charlottesville Tapes: Transcript of the Conference at the University of Virginia School of Architecture, Charlottesville, Virginia, November 12 and 13, 1982*. New York: Rizzoli, 1985.

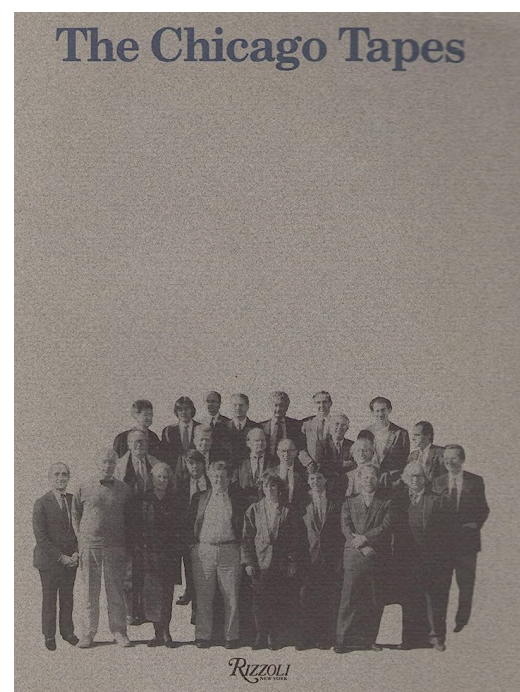


Figure 5. book cover, Tigerman, Stanley. *The Chicago Tapes: Transcript of the Conference at the University of Illinois at Chicago, November 7 and 8, 1986*. Rizzoli International Publishing, 1987.

ENDNOTES

1. "Letterhead for the CASE 8 Conference Held at MoMA in New York on May 21-22 1971," 1971, Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Gift of Eisenman Architects, <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/search/details/collection/object/470743>.
2. More on the early establishment of the IAUS, its engagement with urban policy in New York, and its resulting influence on the formation of architectural theory during its 17 years of operation can be found in Lucia Allais, "The Real and the Theoretical, 1968," *Perspecta* 42 (2010): 27-41; Esther Choi, "Life, in Theory," in *Radical Pedagogies*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, n.d.), 146-49.
3. Margot Jacqz and Kenneth Frampton, "The IAUS at 15," *Skyline*, December 1982. Published from 1979-1983, the front matter of *Skyline* includes a month-to-month accounting of those not only included in the editorial activities of the publication but an updated list of Advisory Board, Sponsors, and Trustees to the IAUS.
4. Eisenman was also widely known as part of The New York Five, or The Whites. Deemed the inheritors of high modernism, the formation of the group was another strategic product of the Institute, as was their oppositional camp of traditionalists known as the Grays. The Museum of Modern Art, ed., *Five Architects: Eisenman, Graves, Gwathmey, Hejduk, Meier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Paul Goldberger, "Architecture's '5' Make Their Ideas Felt," *The New York Times*, November 26, 1973.
5. Belmont Freeman, "The Moment for Something to Happen," *Places Journal*, January 13, 2014, <https://placesjournal.org/article/the-moment-for-something-to-happen/>.
6. Peter Eisenman, "Letter from Peter Eisenman to Erik A. Svenson," March 7, 1969, Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Gift of Eisenman Architects, <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/search/details/collection/object/455874>; Jacqz and Frampton, "The IAUS at 15."
7. Paul Goldberger, "Jaquelin Taylor Robertson, Architect and Passionate Urbanist, Dies at 87," *The New York Times*, May 13, 2020, sec. A; K. Edward Lay, *History of the A-School: A School Built Upon the Foundation of Mr. Jefferson's Principles of Architecture* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia School of Architecture, 2013), 39.
8. More about both Peter Eisenman and Jaquelin Robertson's views on Jefferson and the architectural significance of his designs in Virginia can be found in the interview transcript found here. Barbaralee Diamonstein, "Peter Eisenman and Jaquelin Robertson," in *American Architecture Now II* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 75.
9. Evidence of Dean Robertson's influence on the shift in intellectual and design culture of the school during his eight years as dean is demonstrated in the annual reporting of public events and guest speakers found in the School of Architecture's newsletter. *Colonnade: The News Journal of the School of Architecture University of Virginia*, vol. 2, 1, 1985.
10. The change in Director at the Institute occurred between July and September of 1982 and was reflected in the listing of Institute Leadership titles in the newspaper's front matter. The change was officially acknowledged along with the announcement of changes to newspaper and its intent in Suzanne Stephens, "Editorial Byline," *Skyline*, October 1982.
11. Jaquelin Robertson and University of Virginia, *The Charlottesville Tapes: Transcript of the Conference at the University of Virginia School of Architecture, Charlottesville, Virginia, November 12 and 13, 1982* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 6.
12. Robertson and University of Virginia, 6; "Hot Line," *Skyline*, December 1982.
13. Ada Louise Huxtable, "Thomas Jefferson's Grand Paradox," *The New York Times*, March 9, 1975, sec. X.
14. Robertson and University of Virginia, *The Charlottesville Tapes*, 6.
15. Jaquelin Robertson, "Postscript," *Modulus* 14 (1981): 111; Robertson and University of Virginia, *The Charlottesville Tapes*, 6. This choice may also have to do with the disagreements among the leadership of the Institute, including with historian Kenneth Frampton, who had frequently challenged the Eisenman and later took over as Director following his departure.
16. More related to the syntactic vs. semantic linguistics of architecture and in specific relation to Eisenman's practice can be found in Mario Gandelsonas, "On Reading Architecture: Eisenman and Graves," *Progressive Architecture*, March 1972, 68-87.
17. Huxtable, "Thomas Jefferson's Grand Paradox."
18. This tendency for gatekeeping has been acknowledged by Eisenman himself and commented on widely by his critics, for example in the following: Peter Eisenman, "Letter from Peter Eisenman to Thomas R. Vreeland Jr about the Conference of Architects for the Study of the Environment (CASE)," January 9, 1968, Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Gift of Eisenman Architects, <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/search/details/collection/object/492670>; Michael Sorkin, "A Bunch of White Guys (and Three Japanese) Sitting Around Talking or The Three PPP," in *Exquisite Corpse: Writing on Buildings* (New York City: Verso, 1991), 166; Freeman, "The Moment for Something to Happen."
19. More can be connected between Susana Torre's advocacy related to American female architects and her work supported by both the Institute and the Architecture League of New York in the late 1970s. Susana Torre, "Introduction: A Parallel History," in *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective* (New York City: Whitney Library of Design, 1977), 10-14.
20. The Institute's exhibition catalogs, newspaper *Skyline*, journal *Oppositions*, along with the monographs of many of the practitioners associated with the group were designed by Institute member and collaborator Massimo Vignelli and published by Rizzoli, making the choice of designer and publishing house the obvious partners for documenting and later packaging the transcripts of the events in Charlottesville as a book.
21. Robertson and University of Virginia, *The Charlottesville Tapes*.
22. Stanley Tigerman, *The Chicago Tapes: Transcript of the Conference at the University of Illinois at Chicago*, November 7 and 8, 1986 (Rizzoli International Publishing, 1987), 7.
23. Tigerman, 7.
24. Jaquelin Robertson, "From the Dean," *Colonnade: The Newsjournal of the School of Architecture University of Virginia*, 1985, 1.
25. Lay, *History of the A-School*, 40; Robin Dripps, "Reflection: Robin Dripps, T. David Fitz Gibbon Professor of Architecture," In Memoriam: Jaquelin Taylor Robertson (1933-2020) Dean, UVA School of Architecture (1980-1988), May 13, 2020, <https://www.arch.virginia.edu/news/in-memoriam-jaquelin-robertson/>; "About: Mayors Institute," Mayors' Institute on City Design, accessed July 8, 2023, <https://www.micd.org/about/>.
26. "1985-1986 Lecture Series Announced," *Colonnade: The Newsjournal of the School of Architecture University of Virginia*, 1985.