

Conversation: 001
With: Alex Wall
By: Richard Hall
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Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)

Richard Hall Through which years did you work at OMA?

Alex Wall I joined around '82, at the time of the IBA Berlin projects, until '89.

RH How did you come to work at OMA?

AW I studied at the Architectural Association, and I had Rem (Koolhaas) and Elia (Zenghelis) as my fourth-year tutors. Rem was gone for a good deal of the time, and maybe so was Elia, but it was a very vivid short time with them. I was sort of surprised: 'Who are these guys? Everything they talk about, I'm interested in'.

At that time—and this points towards the drawings—there was a great interest in the Russian Constructivists. Rem had his own interests in (Ivan) Leonidov, and so did Elia. The first exhibition of Russian Constructivists had been in London at the Hayward Gallery several years before and had a great impact. But, Rem infected us all with Constructivism and its ideas, and we all loved them.

That was one input. But there were inputs being brought in by various people. Later on, the Belgians, like Willem-Jan Neutelings, were influenced by the Dutch cartoonist Joost Swarte. Stefano de Martino was making these vivid, colourful pastels, and then later his exquisite line drawings—which became the silk screen triptych for the Boompjes project.

RH How was the office organised during those years?

AW It started in London in Rem and Madelon's (Vrisendorp) apartment. That's where Stefano was working—and baby-sitting also. Elia had an office space in Camden Town. Ron Steiner was working there. That's where I worked. Rem would come by there, but at a certain

point he moved back to Holland and Elia set up an office in Holland Park where I was working with Matthias Sauerbruch—in the early- to mid-80s now—and Rem would come around every weekend and we'd work on Dutch projects and some of Elia's projects there. When the London thing started to die out—when Rem and Elia split—I started commuting to Holland, where I'd stay with Kees Christiaanse for anything from three days to a few weeks.

That's when I became involved in what I call 'the culture of OMA', which was a shared interest in certain kinds of projects, but with people from different countries bringing their own inputs to it. I mean, the Belgians are going to teach you about 1950s Belgian modernism; the Dutch stuff is all there in front of you; I was interested in Italian work from the '30s through to the '50s, all of which would add to the pot of things that were stirred, and out of which the OMA 'look' emerged. Led by Rem's sketches, we influenced each other's drawings, back and forth. They were all identifiably OMA drawings, but also very different.

RH This is a very interesting thing. There is something identifiably OMA in the variety.

AW I remember going to ArtNet in 1978 in London—which is where Peter Eisenman made his first appearance... talking in an extremely complicated way about quite simple things, and Colin Rowe was there too. But the OMA projects that were shown were these characteristic isometrics where the building is pulled into something that's not proportionate at all, but an isometric where you can kind of see in. That distinguished the drawings from other stuff going on in London at the time. But what was interesting was that compared to Archigram—who were probably the stars of ArtNet at that time—the OMA projects, despite being just projects, were also buildable. They had walls and ceilings and courtyards, whereas the Archigram projects required not yet invented technology. I found this comparison quite striking, before I started working in the office.

Preoccupations

RH You mentioned the influence of different people coming into the office. Were there any recurring preoccupations, themes or ideas during those years that span projects?

AW I'll give a bad example to begin with, or an example that caused an eruption: people would sometimes join the office and start copying OMA. They'd begin reiterating things, like a kidney-shaped swimming pool, and Rem would tell them, 'Stop with the fucking kidney-shaped swimming pools'. But Rem's proportional sensibility—what became the sort of Dutch blockiness—that was a characteristic that we all worked with.

I remember for the Checkpoint Charlie project making a book of all of the things we liked to look at: a 'crib book'. None of them would appear in the buildings, but they were things we liked, whether it was balconies or balustrades or women on the roof of a 1920s villa tossing medicine balls to each other.

RH I have been wondering about this relationship between general and specific content in the work. To what degree would you say that there was a repertoire that could be adapted or act as starting points, or to what degree do you think the means were selected or invented in response to the conditions of a project?

AW There's a kind of repertoire—a grab bag of things that could be applied to any project. But I'd say that's only half true, and whatever those were would get sorted out through the development of a project and you'd end up with something that didn't look like any of them or like other office's projects. They became OMA projects. Most often they start with Rem's sketches then proceed in a back-and-forth development.

An interesting thing, that I don't think anyone has done, would be to look at the sketches that Rem would make on A3 tracing paper—the pads that were sold at the Architectural Association—using relatively soft coloured pencils or lead pencil, for all of the projects. It would be

interesting to see the correspondence between those and the office's drawings, because often—as is often the case in design development—someone pencils off something as a sketch and then someone else takes it from there. Many of the sketches would look to non-architects perhaps like a dreadful child's drawing. But architects might say, 'Well yes, quite. That's what was built!'

Drawings

RH There are certain drawings that one thinks of as being absolutely bespoke. For example, the isometric of Checkpoint Charlie which is kind of flipped open or the planimetric drawing—which I think you made—for Parc de la Villette. It seems that most projects during that period contain at least one drawing that could only really exist for that project.

AW Yeah, that's an interesting point. The Checkpoint Charlie drawing explains the overall concept: the very active ground floor with the allied checkpoint facilities is revealed underneath the housing slab. Perhaps like an 'exquisite corpse' sketch of the domestic life of an apartment block set over a Cold War checkpoint.

[Parc de la Villette, 'The Pleasures of Architect' poster – OMA]

But the drawing for La Villette, which I did do, was based on very definite sources and some of that got adopted by other colleagues. Of course—although I've not thought of this until now—it was no gigantic leap if you were familiar with those Belgian cartoons. Willem-Jan Neutelings would always draw these little cartoons for the buildings he made, certainly when he opened his own office.

The other inspiration was a painter in Chicago named Roger Brown, who made these tip-up paintings—all his scenes were using that perspective—and he was influenced by Italian 13-14th Century painting. In other words, before perspective, all the temporal episodes of a story are shown together. Sometimes even the most important element in the story of some biblical character—which happened to take place in the desert, far

away—would nevertheless be depicted bigger. So, it's a system that's focused on content and delivery to unlettered people, rather than a technical drawing system bound by fixed rules.

There was a fair amount of screaming in the office about 'inaccurate' drawings being made. But in Stefano de Martino's drawings—like his drawings of Boompjes—quite often you see these wonderful views inside the building, and it would take you a few moments to realise that basic rules had been broken. For example, things that are supposed to recede don't recede, or things that should be shown above going into the distance are below at hand height because otherwise, it would spoil the information being conveyed. Stefano introduced me to Futurist painting from the later Futurism, where there was an astonishing painter—whose nickname was Tato—who would make a painting from the view of a dive-bomber, as if you were swooping down on the city. Stefano made some of the drawings like that.

These kinds of drawings were going on at the beginning, but a really important input was the paintings of Madelon Vriesendorp and Zoe Zenghelis. That input can't be discounted. Zoe's expressive forms and Madelon's finely depicted storytelling. You're already walking into a kind of representational party. So, what can you bring to it?

RH Some of the drawings, like the one you did for La Villette—much like the earlier paintings—are kind of emblems for each project. They convey the core ideas, supporting—but at the same time partially liberated from—the rest of the design material in a particular project.

AW Yes, I would argue that the tip-up drawing—which looks like a lot of nonsense to some people—more-or-less faithfully follows the central part of the plan and if you look at the black-plan for la Villette, there are pieces tipped up in that drawing already. The argument at la Villette of course was the experience of crossing from one band to another. It's about the border, while once you get to the playing field or tobacco field or whatever, it's

generic. That was a drawing that could convey that, especially if you added figures.

La Villette was followed very quickly by the Expo Universelle for Paris in 1989, which at the time was floundering and going to be dropped by the Ministry of Culture. So, they asked Rem, 'Could you do something in two weeks?!'

The drawings for that were a mix of collages in very strange projections. I guess the Expo was the peak of all those drawings. Some of it reappears from time to time: there are drawings for Lille (Euralille) that are like that...and then I wasn't in the office anymore, so I don't know how things carried on.

RH Are there any other memorable drawings that you were responsible for?

AW Well, for one of the projects for the Greek island of Kefalonia that Elia Zenghelis produced in 1984, I actually used that technique in black and white in four versions to dissuade the clients from doing something, by overcooking them. So Elia could then say: 'But, here's our last one, which is very simple'.

I tended to generate lot of material at the beginning of a project, and if some of those things take, then they find their way into the project, that's great.

[De Brink Apartments, isometric – OMA]

There was a project in Groningen (De Brink Apartments) that started out as three little towers on a triangular lot, eventually changed to two. I worked on some of that with Stefano, but I really think most of my input into the office was in the early part of projects. Stefano could make drawings to die for; he could make exquisite plans and colour drawings. Ron Steiner was the perfection draughtsman and modelmaker, and I was involved in a lot of sketching and the development of projects. I made collages, and terrible models for the Paris library competition (Très Grande Bibliothèque). But mostly sketches. I was interested in trying to understand projects

in section. I sketched a series of sections that influenced how Euralille was developed.

Colleagues

RH Who else was making an important contribution in terms of representation and ideas while you were there?

AW Well, among the colleagues I worked with, Willem-Jan Neutelings and Xaveer de Geyter were quite instrumental in very different ways. They each very much had their own style that they brought to their projects. As I was leaving, Yves Brunier, the landscape architect, really had an impact. The outrageous model made for (Ville Nouvelle) Melun Sénart, made of nails and whatever—which infuriated the jury—was a result of Yves Brunier working outside of every normal representational system. That was a big influence.

Ron Steiner was an inspirational draughtsman and model maker. If you paid a firm an extraordinary amount of money you'd get a professional model, but Ron made models that actually imparted the sense of the project—all those things you're talking about in drawings—in the models. They were shockingly beautiful and done with his care.

Kees Christiaanse of course led on some projects. The housing project in Amsterdam Noord (IJ Plein Masterplan) also had some very interesting, very simple drawings. Both for Amsterdam Noord and the Boompjes, many simple line perspectives were made. For Boompjes, Jaap van Heest made around sixteen of them as if from the back window of a car. As you drove up to that building the road would make a left turn and then a right turn, so the building would be moving around in your mirror. Jaap drew those perspectives as very careful, simple line drawings. People were calling up the office, 'Can you tell us what computer programme you used to make those perspectives?! There was always a line drawing finesse that was expected, although I never had it.

When the residential buildings started to come, Kees started to take those on, which also paid bills. Kees was

there very early on and did one of the gardens in la Villette. Matthias Sauerbruch came a little bit later. He really came in to work with Elia on Checkpoint Charlie then went off to start his own office. He had a real '50s thing in his projects. The French architect, Georges Heintz, brought a French cartoon culture to the office. He made little cartoon type drawings that also used collage. The wildest thing I ever saw was Xaveer de Geyter doing some line perspectives, putting them on the wall and then getting bits of fabric, wood or glass and slowly applying the materials to the drawing. Three-dimensional drawings! I mean, it was those days when people spent too much time—an uneconomic amount of time—teasing a drawing along to find out what was going on in a project.

Of course, there was a short period when Zaha Hadid sent an electric charge through the office, but she was such a strong figure that she couldn't stay. That was in the very beginning, working in London at Rem's house.

Value

RH In retrospect, what do you think is the value of that work—or that way of working—today? What can we learn from that period of OMA in your opinion?

AW I think it has to do with communicating. With making pictures of architecture, making pictures of a project. Once I was working with the London architects, Trevor Horn and Tom Heneghan, and we were in a competition of six teams to make a new town centre in Thamesmead. There was a rumour that the developer wanted Will Alsop, but in any case, the projects were to be exhibited in the six communities that made up Thamesmead at that time, enabling local citizens to see these six possible visions for their future. So, I said to Trevor, 'Should I make one of these tip-up drawings?', making a simplified caricature of the various buildings with figures doing what happens in the buildings and showing how the roads come in and where you park etc. We did, and Trevor told me that the communities voted six to one for our scheme, despite the competition going to Will Alsop. So that kind of convinced me that all these drawings we were making at OMA were

more graspable to a lay person than more technical drawings.

Nowadays, however, something else has happened in the attempt to make images accessible. But these photorealistic renderings lack curiosity. They're full of people on skateboards, walking around with Fendi shopping bags and people flying kites and everything. I think for some people, the OMA drawings created a narrative pull that draws you in. But that's a highly opinionated comment from my side.

RH Perhaps a nuance in OMA's work is the desire to not merely communicate a proposal, but to communicate ideas?

AW Yes, and I think in Elia's drawings of the Hotel Sphinx—or Madelon's drawings where the buildings become characters in themselves—that's something beyond normal representation. Maybe that's about being drawn into a world. Certainly, in the paintings—the Captive Globe or the Floating Pool with New York in the background—it's really a kind of myth. Some of the earliest reviews of that first OMA work in the press were really picking up on that. But of course, the Constructivist architecture was also based on myths and stories: there's going to be a new Soviet man etc. For that short, brilliant time those young architects could invent.

I also discovered that a lot of Italian architects in the '50s made drawings not far from OMA at all—projections, columns, slabs, something going on with the roof, similar colours.

RH Although this might not have been an influence at the time, I've noticed an uncanny resonance between early OMA drawings and the way Lina Bo Bardi was drawing. Precision and myth.

AW Precision and myth? Wow, that's a very interesting combination. Yes, well the other big influence was Brazilian architecture. I don't think we were aware of Lina Bo Bardi's work at that time. I mean none of us were like Zaha with her collection of books on the work of Oscar

Niemeyer and Kazimir Malevich in her apartment, but yes, we knew about Brazilian architecture. There is a language of elements of course, coming from Le Corbusier on one side, but on the other side from Mies. A kind of 'mélange'... and I'm sure you could find lots of people who'd say OMA were a little bit mix and match—make it a little bit funky and so on—but it did have all these inputs. It wasn't a quick pastiche; it was worked through.

Shortly after I left, Rem cleared his office. It was to keep people from doing clichés, from getting too comfortable. Sometimes clichés could become a negative influence on a project. I know for the national library in Paris, two projects were started. One, a flat slab on pilotis with objects set on it—like a Niemeyer type building, incorporating a number of clichés—and a second project, in the form of a cube. Rem knew he wanted to do the cube because, although the flat slab was beautiful, he saw it as a cliché. How do we get out of this?

Counterintuitive thinking was something I learnt at OMA. Counterintuitive thinking can unlock a concept.

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