

Conversation: 017
With: Elias Veneris
By: Richard Hall
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Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)

Richard Hall Through which years did you work at OMA?

Elias Veneris I started in late 1979 and the whole thing lasted about nine years. I was an AA (Architectural Association) graduate, then I returned to Greece to do my army service. At the same time, I started working in a small architecture office. Elia Zenghelis asked me if I was interested in joining his OMA Athens branch. Of course, I willingly did—with great pleasure. That’s how it started. The first project we did was Hotel Therma.

RH Did you work in the London office? I know that you’re credited on the Dutch Parliament Extension.

EV I did, yes. I’m digging into my past now! I was a fourth-year student when they started doing this competition and there were dozens of people interested in participating. I was very glad that I was accepted to participate in this competition.

RH Did you study with Elia and Rem Koolhaas?

EV Yes, of course. I did my fourth and fifth years with them.

RH So, you basically worked on that one competition as a student, then you went back to Athens after studying, worked for a bit and then Elia approached you again.

EV Exactly. Yes.

Athens Office

RH There is not really much information around the Athens office. Could you please describe a bit about how that office came about, how it was working?

EV Okay, it’s been forty-five years now! But like I told you, it started with this project for the Hotel Therma. Our first office was housed in Katerina Tsigarida’s apartment. It was me and her, and occasionally Ron Steiner and Alex Wall were visiting to give us a hand with our work.

Soon we moved to another building. From that point on, I took charge of the office. Elia was coming and going, commuting to the office in London. He was staying in my house. We were very close friends.

Then the Kefalonia project started. Elia had met the Minister of Environment, and that’s how we were given these four projects. These projects are published in *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* in an issue dedicated to OMA.

Later on, we were joined by Stavros Alitheris, who was also a graduate. But basically, the work was done by myself. I mean draughting and looking after contracts with the ministry. Things like that. It was like a one-man show, you know?

It was not easy because the conditions were really hostile in Athens. I remember when I presented the project of the Hotel Therma in the Ministry of Tourism the guy there told me, without knowing anything about it, ‘This is bad architecture’. It was really, really depressing.

Years later, we got a client from a place in in the middle of Greece. He was a wealthy man, and he had a traditional house and a big plot that he wanted to refurbish. We did that until we got the permission. Then he went bankrupt. So, it stopped. I remember we designed a beautiful pool. And because he did not want to annoy the neighbours, he filled it in.

Another project, which is very interesting, was the competition for the swimming pool complex in Athens. We did that with great difficulty because the main building was elliptical. Just think, at that time there were no computers or anything. So, everything had to be done manually. We had to improvise all sorts of apparatuses to draw. Can you imagine, to draw elliptical shapes with

seats reducing in size. It's almost impossible. But we did that, and we got fifth prize.

[Koutavos Bay, planting diagram – OMA]

This is a drawing of mine. I don't know why, but it became a famous drawing. I remember when I produced this, Rem saw it, and he wanted to put it as the cover for the *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* issue. But eventually, he put the Netherlands Dans Theater in the Hague instead.

RH The drawings that were being produced in the London office and in the Athens office have certain correlations. You can recognise certain traits in the Rotterdam office also. But the lineage between drawings made in London and Athens seems quite a bit stronger. One imagines this has something to do with the influence of Elia and Rem respectively. Do you think there's any truth in that?

EV The thing is that I was very closely related to Elia and the London office because I was visiting there. I only visited Rotterdam once and that was it. At that moment, Ron Steiner was working there—perfect draughtsman and a very good friend.

You see most of the drawings for London and Athens, were initiated in London by Elia. A whole lot of preliminary sketches were produced there. Then he was coming to Athens, and we were finalising.

RH How were drawings used in the design process between Elia and yourself—between London and Athens?

EV Well, Elia was working on basic ideas about these projects in London. They were making tonnes of sketches. Some of them you can find reproduced in the AA issue I mentioned, mostly done by Alex Wall. Then he was bringing the whole package to Athens. We were transforming all this information into actual drawings. That's why I have to say once more that Elia is to be credited for all these projects.

Authorship

[Dutch Parliament Extension, general elevations – OMA]

On the Dutch Parliament competition, Rem gave me the elevations to do. I remember specifically we were all working in his house in London. I was doing drawings of the elevations and Rem came in and I said, 'What do you think?' He said, 'It's your drawing. You do what you want.' So that was a big boost!

RH That kind of anecdote relates strongly to what I was suggesting at the beginning, with multiple authorship, accommodating others in the process—making parts. It's a very particular process. Especially on a project that must have been very important to them as a demonstration of their intent.

EV Well, I suppose that Rem felt confident with the work that all this team was doing. So, he simply felt relaxed about this job. He felt confident that it would be done in the end. I must tell you, all of this group, we were totally committed to our work. I mean, work, work, work. Nothing more.

Ideas

[Koutavos Bay, general arrangement plan – OMA]

RH Could we talk a little bit about the relationship between drawings and ideas in OMA's work? Even in a drawing like this, things are drawn—which some architects simply wouldn't draw—strictly to convey an idea.

EV Every project was a challenge for us. We were always trying to improvise new ways and methods of depicting ideas. Successful or not? I don't know. I think most of them were.

RH I would agree. What was the impetus for that? Why did you need to improvise new means to represent the ideas?

EV Because if you have an idea, you have to convey it somehow. It's not always a straightforward procedure. Like the planting drawing you showed before. It started almost accidentally. I wanted to find a code—at the time we were very interested in dealing with the plants architecturally—so, I started to codify plants so we could organise them. It was almost accidental.

RH I suppose what you're saying is that the kind of ideas that were being dealt with couldn't quite be communicated with the standard conventions of architectural drawing? So, these methods were being developed because the ideas didn't fit the standard repertoire.

EV Yes. Absolutely.

Value

RH Looking back at the period of time that you were working in OMA, what would you say is the value of the work? What was special about it? What might my generation learn from this kind of work?

EV I would say, in one word, improvisation. But also, a search for ideas. Every project was based on some very concrete idea, like a scenario. That was the basis on which all design and production took place. I'm not sure I use the right word, but it was a thrill working like this at OMA. All this freshness. I think this is lacking nowadays in architectural offices. Contemporary work is not rich in ideas.

Maybe I'm obsolete, but I think drawing by hand is very important for this. At least I felt like that. That it was like ideas were growing out of your hands, you know? It's not these sterile computerised things that are produced now. I mean, right now in this office, we're doing it all on the computer—we cannot go back, it was a different period. But I found it very productive and fulfilling to work like that. I still remember the joy of participating in OMA.

RH Do you think some of it has to do with other pressures that we have in contemporary practice, compared to that time? Or demands from clients that are more precise?

EV Yes, definitely. I remember we were doing a villa—a detached house—and we were working on it for two years. Elia was very persistent: every time doing details and details and I was really fed up. I mean, I have to admit that I just wanted to go ahead and do it! I remember even talking to Rem. I said, 'I've had enough of this'. You know, every project has to stop and then to get built. You cannot go on designing and designing forever. But unlike today, we had time. Then we had a lot of time.

Elías Veneris (Chalkis, 1953) is an architect based in Athens. He has participated in many prestigious international competitions and designed a series of ambitious residences in Greece. Since 1992, in collaboration with Alpha Bank, he designed and supervised around 300 branches and office spaces, including 150 in Serbia and the Balkans.
