

Conversation: 011  
With: Matthias Sauerbruch  
By: Richard Hall  
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*Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)*

**Richard Hall** Through which years did you work at OMA?

**Matthias Sauerbruch** I joined them in 83. I was working in the London office, which Elia Zenghelis was running—for a while there was also a Greek office in Athens but both disappeared basically when the partnership between Elia Zenghelis and Rem Koolhaas fell apart. As you know, they had started off as a ‘foursome’ in the seventies: there was Madelon Vriesendorp and Rem Koolhaas, Elia and Zoe Zenghelis. This was in the United States, and I don’t think there was ever any kind of formal assembly or disassembly or anything like that. It was just that things developed in a way.

So, the whole thing fell apart and, in 88 I think it must have been, the London office at Clarendon Cross was abandoned. We moved the remaining works over to my house—basically my living room and kitchen in London—and in 89 the Checkpoint Charlie project, that I was working on, was completed. This project was the sole fee earner in the London office and with its completion the London office was closed, by default.

It must have been from 83 to 89, actually, to answer your question in a more focused way!

**RH** How did you come to join OMA in the first place? What attracted you?

**MS** Well, I graduated from the AA (Architectural Association) and the Berlin University of Arts at the same time, in 1983, and I joined them in the same year. The open question for me was whether to go back to Berlin—I had been at the AA for only two years, just at Diploma School—or to stay in London. I was looking around and interviewing a little bit here and there, and I went to see Elia Zenghelis as well. He looked at my portfolio and said

‘Well, we’d really like to take you, but we haven’t got any work. We have worked on this IBA (Internationale Bauausstellung) project at Checkpoint Charlie. You would be the right person to carry on here, but we haven’t got a contract.’ So, I asked him if I could possibly help and he was obviously pleased by the idea.

I contacted IBA, where I knew a few people because of my connections to Berlin and I ended up doing a kind of preliminary planning application for their project. With the successful conclusion of that, OMA basically had a preliminary planning approval and a project. I came back to London and automatically became the leader of this project—which in a way was all just lucky coincidence. We started the project and the whole thing was meant to be over in three years, but it took six to complete—as things go in architecture.

**RH** So, you were primarily working with Elia during those years?

**MS** Yes, I was. Rem was in London only about every second or third weekend, and his input in the project was limited to various reviews every month or so. He was never part of the team. But, at the same time, we were also running a number of smaller competition projects—in Paris and elsewhere. There were also small Greek projects. Rem was acting as a critic on those really. So, Rem was there every now and again basically. Elia was there all the time. Alex Wall was working there most of the time as well. Stefano de Martino wasn’t working there anymore. He and Rem had fallen out with each other and that was that.

Who else was there? Dirk Alten and Reni Keller—two Germans who helped on Checkpoint Charlie. Georges Heintz was there for competitions—people from Rotterdam were sort of dropping-in every now and then. Likewise, I went over there now and then. We had only a very small office space, basically, and so it remained a small team in London. Checkpoint Charlie was really the main project for us.

## *Checkpoint Charlie*

[Checkpoint Charlie, painted perspective – OMA]

This is an image which is mostly by Zoe. As you pointed out, there's a sort of shared authorship in almost all of the drawings. In this particular one, obviously, all the kind of technical and architectural information is a product of our normal design process—we also had large models made, some we made ourselves, actually—and we fed the information to her. I can't remember who did the base perspective. I don't think that Zoe would have set it up, so we would have done the drawing, but Zoe was in charge of the painting in the end.

[Checkpoint Charlie, 'checkpoint iconography' isometric – OMA]

This is a sketch of mine, actually. It was really inspired by Elia. Elia had this very clear concept already, before I joined the office. This idea of stacking modern housing types into one building, that is sitting on a piece of artificial ground above the installations of the Allied Forces was already there. It was a representation of the everyday condition of the divided Berlin, if you like. That was Elia's concept.

I'm not sure whether you're aware of the kind of prehistory of this project? OMA was taking part in two major competitions of the IBA. One at Checkpoint Charlie, run by Rem, and there was another one at Lützowstrasse—which is near Lützowplatz in the West—and that was run by Elia. Elia's project consisted of a series of housing slabs, headed by small high rises that were tilted against the urban grid. A very nice project which actually got a joint first prize together with the proposal of Vittorio Gregotti. Rem's scheme—which was presented in fantastic drawings by Stefano de Martino—was this kind of single and double-storey 'mat' next to the wall at Checkpoint Charlie. His proposal received a special prize, because they broke all the rules and thus had to be treated separately in the competition.

But anyway, as a result of those two successful entries in the competitions, Josef Kleihues—who was running the IBA—promised them a job. They were given a few choices, and Rem insisted on the site at Checkpoint Charlie.

Although, it was clear that the concept Rem's team had applied to this particular site could never be realised. In fact, this competition had been won by (Oriol) Bohigas from Barcelona with a postmodern thing—more or less a block closure with large gates at either end. This was ultimately never realised but in terms of mentality, it was the total opposite of what Rem had suggested. So, in a way, it was now a task to find a compromise between the block mentality and this kind of radical idea of a low mat, which took the height of the wall as a reference point. The mat idea was a typical Rem provocation. It was basically one hundred percent the opposite of IBA's official strategies, and he was sort of showing a finger to Kleihues.

Now, basically, what Elia came up with was trying to mend the damage and it was a very poetic, beautiful concept, I think. The Allies had requisitioned the site after the war and were ready to hand it back for potential development under the condition that they could continue to maintain all the facilities that they had there. Basically, they were using this site as a car park and a stop for buses, which took allied soldiers from West Germany into the east for 'military tourism'. There were also a few minor facilities like changing rooms and a kitchen and so on and so forth.

Anyway, this drawing was showing the relationship of what, since La Villette, we labelled as 'confetti'—namely small pavilions and installations, which were really temporary, and—in this instance—were mostly to do with the border installations by the wall. A solid building would fill the gap between two existing structures.

[Checkpoint Charlie, 'sandwich' isometric – OMA]

This was the so-called 'sandwich drawing', which just basically showed what we're doing on the ground floor. The ground floor was like a stage, filled with a beautiful choreography of moving people and vehicles that were accompanied by minimal spatial 'plankton' like signs, lights, colour surfaces etc.

This, installation, unfortunately, survived only for approximately half a year because we handed over this lower part of the building on 1 November 1989. Eight days later the wall fell and the whole thing became an instant remnant of history! Ironically, in our report, when we were handing in the scheme, there was speculation that one day the wall would go and then this space—which was designed for military purposes at that moment—would turn into something useful like a supermarket. This is literally what we wrote at the time. It's difficult to imagine today, how unthinkable it was at the time that the wall would disappear in the near future. The unification really came as a total surprise. Our design move was meant to be a provocation against this idea of continuity—against Aldo Rossi and the German sub-variations—and unexpectedly the provocation became fact. Actually, since the reunification the ground floor has been used by several different supermarkets! It has been totally overgrown by commercial use. It's a little bit sad, the reality is a kind of 'over-fulfilment' of that prediction. A bit like in the story of the sorcerer's apprentice.

### *Products*

**RH** The 'sandwich drawing' is a very well selected type relative to the ideas you're describing. Why is it cavalier isometric?

**MS** As you are probably well aware, this was a projection angle that was used a lot in early OMA. If you think of, for example, the drawings that Stefano did of the Panopticon prison, one of the early works. I think the drawings were mostly made for the Biennale into which Rem had elbowed his way... they had made this kind of street installation in Venice, where eight or ten architects—I mean people like Michael Graves, (Aldo) Rossi, (Stanley) Tigerman, all these kind of postmodernists—they each had a booth, and the booth had a little facade. The facade was meant to be a kind of statement on the future of architecture. As I say, Rem literally elbowed his way into it because, at the time, OMA was an insignificant office—they had caused a lot of stir in terms of media attention and lectures and so on, but they hadn't built anything.

They also had only relatively few substantial projects. It was mostly *Delirious New York*.

So, at very short notice, they got a booth, and they filled it with a few very large pastel drawings, amongst which the Panopticon prison in Arnhem was shown. Those drawings were all made by Stefano de Martino. Martino is a really super talented draughtsperson. He is fantastic and—I wasn't in the office at that time, it's only hearsay—apparently, they had someone with a Hoover standing next to him the whole time removing the pastel dust while he was working. It is not easy to work with pastel. Especially at that scale.

To come back to the drawings at Checkpoint Charlie: we needed to transfer our ink drawings onto watercolour paper. All the fantastic watercolours required the proper paper, otherwise it's totally hopeless. So, there was a printing method called 'true to scale' printing, which came from only one printer in London, in Holborn, where you can transmit from tracing paper onto watercolour paper, at any size. It was a totally toxic process. Everybody was using them—Peter Cook, Mike Webb and Zaha (Hadid)—it's the only way of dealing with the right paper. So, the sandwich drawing was also translated into a colour drawing. I think it is at DAM, the German Architecture Museum in Frankfurt, if I'm not mistaken. The drawings were made because we loved drawing, but also of course for publication and eventual exhibition. They might have been conceived by me, but they were probably made by various members of the office. We also always had a number of students working there. I can't recall exactly every single person who was involved.

**RH** I understand there was always this process of making retrospective drawings, especially for publications and exhibitions?

**MS** Yes, often. We had the first publication of the project in the German magazine, *Bauwelt*. They gave us a whole issue, which was fantastic really. We made these drawings for such publications.

[Checkpoint Charlie, model – OMA]

And here is the famous model. It's a model that was made in the office. Because we were constantly lugging models around, I had the idea of making the base foldable so that it could fold up and become a transport box. I think it's in Frankfurt too, in the museum there. You can remove the building from the base to see this ground floor idea of the drive-in political indoctrination. There's a kind of little pavilion in the centre which has a spiral form. The idea is that the bus drives in on the left—where the arrow is on the model—and soldiers get out of the bus and go into that spiral. Then, while they are having their lecture about the Western and Eastern blocs and the Cold War and everything else, the bus drives around and waits the other side. On that side they would exit, get into the bus and drive off. The little thing on the very left there, the concrete wall with the little holes in it, that's the entrance into the housing. Then there's this kind of hovering little box that was a minimal office for the German customs. From there they had a viewpoint, like a tennis umpire, looking onto the Checkpoint, seeing the traffic going by. The kind of hyperbola plan thing on the back, provides accommodation for the soldiers who are on duty, with toilets and rooms for breaks and so on. So, for each allied party there's one small resting room and a joint kitchen on the ground floor.

Anyway, the model was supposed to be made by a student who wasn't such a great modelmaker as it turned out, but he played an even more unfortunate role later on: Rem was once sued by a student, and that was him, actually. He claimed that Rem had copied a design that he had made at the AA—in Alex Wall's unit—and that Rem's scheme for the Kunsthall in Rotterdam was a copy of his diploma project. It's a totally unlikely and ridiculous claim, but it went up to the High Court in England. Because the student was on legal support, he didn't have to pay any legal fees. So, these lawyers took the case up and up and up and spent a lot of money. There was a court hearing where this model played a major role because we used it as evidence of his inferior skills. But it backfired: they were saying, 'This guy made this wonderful model, so he cannot be hopeless as you describe. Isn't this a great piece

of work?'. I had to testify, 'Yes, but it had to be put together by his colleagues because he was incapable of making precise components!' Anyway, there's a story with everything there...

**RH** In the archive in Rotterdam there's literally rolls and rolls of drawings for this project. All kinds of working drawings; all of the production drawings. Some are super nice, like this isometric of the lobby.

[Checkpoint Charlie, lobby isometric – OMA]

**MS** Yes, we spent a lot of time on that actually—also together with Elia. It was a fantastic space. Now it has been turned into vending point for street food! Any generosity is being taken out of the building and is being put to the market.

**RH** Also, incredibly idiosyncratic detail drawings, like this.

[Checkpoint Charlie, metalwork detail – OMA]

**MS** A detail for the communal staircases which unfortunately was never realised. Yeah, we made a lot of drawings!

*Parc Citroën Cevennes*

[Parc Citroën Cevennes, aerial perspective – OMA]

Oh, this is Zoe! That's Parc Citroën Cevennes. That was an interesting project—one of those French competitions. But the painting was made afterwards. I can't remember even whether we had the base drawing at the time of the competition. It was very, very chaotic and we just about made the hand-in. The drawing was made afterwards.

[Parc Citroën Cevennes, model – OMA]

This is the other model that this student made! He made this one quite well... because it's simple. There's no three-dimensionality involved.

We made all these little projects for it. You can see there's this kind of swimming pool and athletic club with a little tower and stuff. Elia was really designing all of this down to the detail, while we were trying to just get the hand-in organised! It was crazy! We were working with these French landscape architects, and they were trying to get the submission to work. But it's a very nice concept again—very Elia.

### *Value*

**RH** What do you think is the value of that period of OMA? Of the work that was produced, the ideas, the way of working.

**MS** For me, it was a fantastic time because—as I guess for anybody—everything you learned in theory in university, really only comes to life once you're trying to apply it somewhere and you get the experience first-hand of all the practical things: the dialogue and conflict and things that happen on building sites. This was my first major project and for that reason alone it was already exciting.

But to work with Elia was a real privilege because he's a very clear conceptual thinker. He was also making very good drawings. With Rem it was really mostly text, but Elia did make drawings. He had a little A4 drawing board and he would reduce whatever he needed to say to that scale and that format, and would come up with these very meticulously, beautifully drawn, hard-line ink drawings about the concepts. For this project, there was also one such drawing at the very beginning. To see that, to just witness it and to be in dialogue with him and the whole discussion around everything—also with Alex Wall and other people in the office—it was probably the moment in my education where I learned more than ever before.

The Checkpoint Charlie project was also very significant for Berlin in a way because it opened doors. It built bridges to the modernist tradition in Berlin. It brought back a discourse that was neglected in this postmodern context. The project was also dealing with the unfortunate history of the separation, the Cold War and everything else in a sort of, not quite positive, but a neutral way. This

was new for Berlin, where everything was politically charged.

In terms of drawing: it has to be said that there was a kind of general appreciation of drawing at the time. The IBA had an exhibition—it must have been in 85 or something like that I think, it was held in several venues—where all the IBA projects were shown as drawings. They were obviously not computer drawings at the time, and some of them were very beautiful. There was a refined culture of representation—so, there was also a lot of competition for OMA.

Now, if you ask, 'What is the particular contribution of OMA?', in terms of drawing, I would think it was the combination of a kind of Beaux Arts tradition (brought back really by Zoe and Maddy (Madelon Vrisendorp)) combined with the insistence on the principles of the modern architectural tradition. Rem and Elia also had a unit at the AA for a while in the seventies, about three or four years maybe, and they were going to Moscow to study all these heroic buildings of the Constructivist era. This is at a time when everybody else was going to Rome or to the Veneto to look at Bernini or at Palladio. Everyone was totally absorbed with Colin Rowe, Robert Venturi, Charles Jencks. OMA were breaking ground and attracted an enormous amount of interesting, talented and creative people. The office, at that time, was a fantastic unit in itself, if you like. Well, it looked at times a little bit like a socialist youth camp because everybody—particularly in Rotterdam—were all dressing like Rem. They were basically all trying to look the same and if they had enough money, they were buying the same car as Rem!

I remember one occasion when the Rotterdam office had resorted to free lunches, as it was always a little bit uncertain whether you would or wouldn't be paid your salary, and people needed to be fed. I remember everyone jumping at the food when it arrived, like hungry animals, trying to get whatever they could get. However, despite all of this, it was just an incredibly upbeat, constructive, and interesting spirit—in London and maybe even more so in Rotterdam because the office was just larger, and they were doing more projects.

In terms of drawings, the input of Maddy and Zoe really cannot be overestimated. They were incredible with their watercolour technique. There's a lot of watercolours which were done in fine layers, taking hours and hours. On those large drawings it was always teams working on them with three or four people bending over a big board putting layer after layer after layer, under their instruction. However, the famous 'Inflagranti' scene of Rockefeller Centre in bed with the Chrysler Building, that was obviously entirely Maddy and equally the beautiful abstract compositions of the Greek island schemes (in acrylic) were entirely Zoe's work.

**Matthias Sauerbruch** (Konstanz, 1955) founded Sauerbruch Hutton together with Louisa Hutton in 1989. He has taught internationally and is a founding member of the German Sustainable Building Council (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für nachhaltiges Bauen*) and was a member of the board of KW Institute for Contemporary Art Berlin. He is an Honorary Fellow of the American Institute of Architects and RIAI (Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland), and he is a member of the Architecture Section of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

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